

The Importance of Egypt to U.S. Regional Policy

Abstract

An enduring relationship between the U.S. and Egypt which extends beyond the military and economic sector will provide both countries with maximum opportunities for mutual gain.

It is not exaggerated to say that Egypt today is getting itself back on track and regaining its traditional voice in the region. Nor is it an exaggeration to say the United States will need Egypt's voice if the Trump administration wishes to achieve more successful policies in the Arab World. Enhancing the cooperation between the two states rests on Trump's acknowledgment of the importance of this relationship, which can begin with a successful and robust meeting between him and Sisi.

Introduction

It seems redundant to need to remind the Trump administration of the importance of a secure and stable Egypt to American security, as Egypt has always been a pioneering force and a reliable partner in the region. However, it is true that Egypt has lost much of its weight after 2011's Arab Spring unleashed disorganization, a political void, and economic crisis. Uprising fatigue coupled with confusing and incoherent in domestic and foreign policy coupled with a near economic collapse brought Egypt to the verge of state failure. In addition the changing regional power equilibrium in favor of newly emerging countries and the rising role of an ambitious Iran have weakened Egypt even further. However, when the name of the game had been inclusiveness, Egypt has always been determined to fight Islamic extremism.

Egypt has weathered these upheavals and turmoil in the aftermath of 2011, when other countries have disintegrated. As it successfully shakes off lingering instability, it becomes necessary to

conceptualize Trump's regional foreign policy with Egypt at its heart. To do so, the United States must bear in mind the importance of not simply a secure and stable Egypt, but one which thrives and can return to its historic leadership position in the region. The reasons Trump's foreign policy must emphasize Egypt cannot be overstated.

Reasons for Egypt's Importance to U.S. Regional Policy

Demographically, when Egypt is politically and economically stable, over 20% of the population of the entire Arab region is stable. Furthermore, Egypt's large youth population provides the Sisi government with both opportunities and challenges. The youth of Egypt are on average more highly educated and innovative than their parents' generation and harnessing their talents could infuse the country and region which much needed innovative thought and secular political character. However, it is also a population which is impatient for change, unconfident in the Egyptian economy, and questioning their role in the world. The current influx of migrants from the Middle East and Africa towards Europe highlights the dangers of a bulging youth population who feel their country of origin provides no opportunity for economic and political growth. As Egypt has been an important transit country for migrants attempting to access Europe, it is imperative for both European and Arab World security that Egypt's large youth population has economic opportunities at home. To not make concentrated effort to engage the youth is to risk a destabilizing mass exodus.

Furthermore, Egypt has the Arab World's largest military with nearly 500,000 active personnel and 800,000 reservists. The military has traditionally played an important role in the Egyptian political process and is held in high esteem by the majority of the populace. The highly publicized 2015 bilateral agreement between Saudi Arabia and Egypt included provisions on military cooperation between the two nations, which is illustrative of the region's perception of

the Egyptian military (while Riyadh has invested considerably in its military, it lacks the human resources to match Egypt). The Egyptian military has the legitimacy and capacity to play an integral role in the U.S.-led War on Terror, especially as it continues to wage a counterinsurgency offensive in the North Sinai. Continuing the strong military-military relationship between Egypt and the U.S. (despite the setbacks in 2013) would allow Egypt to play a leadership role in countering violent extremism in its own resistive provinces, ensure border security against a spillover from the Libyan conflict, and assist in regional operations.

Traditionally, The Arab World has turned to Egypt as its though leader both in terms of religion and political identity. Al-Azhar, Egypt's renowned Islamic institution remains a beacon of moderate Islam. Likewise, Arab states historically aligned with Egypt's popular pan-Arab and nationalist movements. Elements of its commitment to moderate Islam and national pride can be found in the curriculums of many Arab states. Egypt remains committed to addressing regional conflicts through reconciliation rather than partition to ensure that the territorial sovereignty of the Arab World remains intact and to deemphasize dangerous identity politics. With increased political and social stability, Egypt can reassume its role as a traditional regional leader with an emphasis on combatting identity politics and violent extremism and promotion of an inclusive Arab identity devoid of sectarianism.

Finally, there is regional and international consensus that current crises in the Arab World cannot be solved without the participation of a strong and stable Egypt. For the Trump regime to move forward on "solving" the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine without an Egyptian partne3r would prove not only foolhardy but also Sisyphean. Egypt shares a border with Libya and Israel in addition to sharing control over the Red Sea with Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Their participation (if not leadership) in any proposed method of conflict resolution

would be necessary to ensure success. Likewise, they remain an important actor in regards to Syria and Iraq for two main reasons. Firstly, Egypt has shown a willingness to approach the conflicts pragmatically and without an ideological lens (as shown by their willingness to vote for both the Russian and French resolutions in the UN Security Council). While Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have been accused of funding rebel groups (including those actively opposed by the U.S.), Egypt would appear as a neutral broker. In addition, Egypt has remained adamantly opposed to altering the borders of Syria or Iraq, meaning they are the most vocal Arab advocate against partition.

Potential Role of Egypt in Conflict Mediation

In Libya, Egypt has exerted enormous diplomatic efforts through the last years to bring Libyan factions closer together, which has been crowned by the recent agreement on the Egyptian-brokered roadmap. This roadmap should eventually lead to reconciliation and elections in a year's time. Egypt has made stabilizing Libya one of the major priority of its foreign policy and has hosted many meetings to bring together Libyan politicians, parliamentarians and intellectuals from the east and the west of the country.

It is also important to refer to the unique role of Egypt of non-interference in the domestic affairs of countries in the region, except for Libya which was for its own good and in support of its stability. In contrast to some regional countries which have played interfering roles, Egypt has preferred to take moral high ground and stood for values and diplomacy, mediation, preservation of the integrity of the borders of the countries in the region, et cetera. This makes Egypt a credible partner for the U.S. Egypt has tried in its policies to show restraint, moderation and support for peaceful, diplomatic solution for the regional conflicts and not intervention.

As a result of its historic relationship with Libya and noninterventionist policies, Egypt is well placed to play a leading role within in Egypt is in combatting the current instability in Libya. Egypt and Libya share a porous border, meaning instability and the Libyan government's lack of effective control over their frontiers threatens both states. The neighbors have a history of economic cooperation, with Egyptian labor as an integral part of Libya's oil market and remittances from Libya are crucial to the Egyptian economy. Though relations between the two have at times been fraught, Egypt would be well placed to address certain aspects of the conflict. Egypt's well-trained and well-equipped military could assist with frontier security (pending Libyan approval), while it could also coordinate politically with other regional and international actors to initiate capacity building and institutional restructuring.

Similarly, Egypt's ability to remain above the sectarian fray would provide it legitimacy to push for political situations in Syria and Yemen. The conflicts remain primarily symptomatic of a regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with Turkey complicating the former largely because of its proximity and shared Kurdish population. While Egypt would be an important voice in any Arab League decisions or action plans for these two conflicts, it is not well placed to act unilaterally in either country. However, Egypt's commitment to a pragmatic solution in Syria and its willingness to look beyond identity politics make it an important voice. Likewise, no military or political solution in Yemen will be maintainable without input from Egypt due to the historic ties between the countries and shared control of the Red Sea. There is tentative optimism that Egypt could leverage these positions and serve as a medium-power mediator between the Saudi Arabia and Iranians.

There is growing fears in the region that recent comments by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu signaled the death knell for a two-state solution for the Palestine-Israeli conflict. As the first Arab nation to recognize Israel and a historic champion of the Palestinian people, Egypt's voice is a necessity in any U.S. or United Nations' led attempt to settle the conflict. As the first step to any fruitful negotiations would need to be serious confidence measures to indicate the good faith of the engaged parties, the U.S. would be well advised to include Egypt from the outset. The inclusion of Egypt in a leadership role would signal to the Palestinians that the U.S. took seriously their concerns over settlement expansion and continued occupation, while indicating to the Arab World that inclusion in such negotiations is contingent on recognition of the state of Israel. Egypt has proven to be a successful interlocutor between the Palestinians and Israelis, most notably in the 2011 negotiated Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange and would assuredly serve a functional role in the mediation process. There has been increased international interest in convening negotiations under Egyptian auspice with the support of the Quartet, an arrangement of which the principle actors have signaled a tacit approval. Another option would be to reconvene the Quartet +3 compilation which successfully integrated Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia as partners in the peace process. Regardless of its role, the commitment of Egypt and its willingness to publically support and defend any peace agreement within the Arab World will be necessary if the solution is to be comprehensive and durable.

The question of the combatting violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa is another which requires Egypt's contribution. Egypt is fighting extremism and insurgencies on two fronts but has managed to mitigate the threat and ensure stability for its citizens. Its army has been engaged in a counterinsurgency campaign against domestic forces in the Northern Sinai, which was coopted by the Islamic State in 2014. It must also contend with limited jihadi control along

its western border with Libya, which lies outside the direct influence of the Egyptian armed and security forces. However, the Egypt's military strength has largely mitigated the threat of violent extremism in the country and international experts agree that it is a question of when the Egyptian military succeeds, not if. Egypt's success in fighting ISIS within its borders (a task which few if any country has accomplished) makes it incumbent upon the U.S. to recognize Egypt's centrality and weight to use Egypt as a partner.

Egypt is also determined to change the religious discourse and linkage of Islam with violence of sectarianism, and President Sisi is pushing Al Azhar overtly to play such a role. Al-Azhar's storied history and moderate stances would provide a much needed voice for peace and inclusion in the region, particularly in regards to creating an understanding among Sunnis and Shiites. However, violent extremism and regional sectarianism are longterm challenges which must be approached through a patient and comprehensive framework. Egypt will have to revamp the content and structure of its educational system, ensure the existence vibrant political opposition not linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and influence the perceptions of nationals. This approach, if achieved successfully at the domestic level with 90 million Egyptians, can then easily be transferred to other Arab countries in the region. The need for the Trump administration to partner with Egypt in combatting violent extremism not only through a military-military approach, but through institutionalized economic, political, educational cooperation is readily apparent and will prove indicative of the success of the U.S. War on Terror.

Policy Steps for Relationship Growth

Egypt's stability and its ability to assume a leadership position discussed in above hinges upon its economic reform program. It has recently sealed a loan deal with the IMF following four difficult years of negotiations. This government is determined to go through its liberal economic

reform and the people are courageously enduring the harsh austerity measures. In this context, it is worthy to refer to the role President Sisi has had in building the ‘New Egypt’ or the ‘Third Republic of Egypt’. President Sisi will meet with President Trump with a wealth of achievements at the domestic level as credit to Egypt’s position as a regional player. Its courage in counterterrorism and undertaking economic reform attest to his political will and leverage with the Egyptian people and his determination to reassert Egypt’s role in the region. President Sisi is seen by Egypt and the region as the guarantor against the MBs. This should be all the more reason for the U.S. new administration to put its trust into Egypt and help it cross its current fragile situation. The U.S. cannot afford Egypt, a core keystone country in the region, to fail. One of the pillars of Egypt-U.S. relations has been its support to Egypt’s economic situation besides its military.

In addition, there is a serious need for the United States and Egypt to continue engaging in technological and educational exchange. Efforts such as the 2015 agreement to expand scholarships to Egyptian university students and USAID’s consistent role in developing and promoting Egypt’s tourism infrastructure provide important starting points to expanding this cooperation. Likewise, capacity building and coordination among the countries’ legislative and judicial branches, civil societies, and media would institutionalize relations and provide avenues for cross cultural exchange and dialogue. While the U.S. should not abandon its traditional championing of human rights and democratization, it must adjust its approach to acknowledge the unique local context and desires of the Egyptian people. Efforts should be made to assist Cairo in regaining the peoples’ trust in the political process as opposed to imposing strict regulations on the way this is done. An enduring relationship between the U.S. and Egypt which

extends beyond the military and economic sector will provide both countries with maximum opportunities for mutual gain.

It is not exaggerated to say that Egypt today is getting itself back on track and regaining its traditional voice in the region. Nor is it an exaggeration to say the United States will need Egypt's voice if the Trump administration wishes to achieve more successful policies in the Arab World. Enhancing the cooperation between the two states rests on Trump's acknowledgment of the importance of this relationship, which can begin with a successful and robust meeting between him and Sisi this month.