

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## President Trump's Opportunity to Reset the U.S.–Egyptian Alliance

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After a prolonged period of strained relations during the Obama Administration, Egyptian–American relations are rebounding under President Donald Trump. To consolidate better ties with Washington, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is scheduled to visit the White House on April 3. President Trump should use Sisi's visit as an opportunity to restore close strategic cooperation with Egypt and cement a good personal relationship with one of the key leaders of the Arab world.

### **A Focus on Security Cooperation**

Since the 1978 Camp David Accords, Egypt has been an important U.S. ally helping to stabilize a highly volatile region. It played a vital role in facilitating peace negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, in addition to a valuable role in combatting Islamist terrorism. Egypt has granted U.S. naval vessels priority access to the Suez Canal. The Egyptian armed forces, one of the Middle East's largest, could play a key role in the Trump Administration's reported plans to assemble an Arab military coalition to safeguard regional stability.

This is Sisi's first visit to the White House since being elected president in 2014, after coming to power in a 2013 military coup. The Obama Admin-

istration criticized and shunned President Sisi, in part because he had led the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader who had won the support of the naive Obama White House.

The Obama Administration painted the anti-Morsi coup as a blow against democracy, glossing over the fact that Morsi was not a democrat but an Islamist ideologue determined to impose his authoritarian agenda on all Egyptians. Morsi's heavy-handed rule made him more unpopular after one year in power than former President Hosni Mubarak was after three decades. On June 30, 2013, more than 15 million Egyptians protested Morsi's misrule and demanded his resignation.<sup>1</sup>

The Egyptian army ousted Morsi in July 2013, just as it ousted Mubarak in February 2011, to prevent growing civil disorder from cascading into a civil war that could transform Egypt into a failed state. Massive popular demonstrations supporting the coup demonstrated that the army's intervention had strong public backing. Instead of ostracizing Sisi's government, the Obama White House should have been thankful that it saved Egypt from the same fate as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which plunged into anarchy amid brutal civil wars.

President Sisi was the first world leader to congratulate Trump after his election. At the President-elect's request, Sisi's government postponed a vote on a U.N. Security Council resolution criticizing Israel for building settlements in the West Bank. President Trump returned the favor by calling Sisi on January 23, his first working day in the Oval Office, and invited him to meet at the White House.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4676>

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To repair bilateral relations with Egypt and advance common interests, President Trump should:

■ **Reinvigorate counterterrorism cooperation.**

Egypt is a valued partner in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, a broad U.S.-led international coalition assembled to defeat ISIS and its affiliates. ISIS has flourished in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, where it has spearheaded an insurgency since the 2013 overthrow of President Morsi's Islamist government. Although ISIS has not grown as strong in Egypt as in Iraq, Syria, or Libya, it remains a potent terrorist threat that targets Egyptian security forces and launches missiles at Israel.

Washington should help Egypt's army and security forces to conduct a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign against ISIS and its supporters, rather than the narrowly focused and militarized counterterrorism efforts that Cairo currently maintains. Part of the strategy should be enhanced political outreach to disaffected Bedouin tribes in the Sinai, which have chafed against what they regarded as discrimination and neglect by Egypt's central government.

Washington should also provide technical assistance in finding and destroying tunnels burrowed under the Egyptian-Gazan border by Hamas and other Islamist terrorist groups. These tunnels are used to smuggle arms, terrorists, and contraband into and out of Gaza. President Trump should also propose closer counterterrorism, intelligence, and military cooperation to combat ISIS in neighboring Libya.

■ **Secure Egyptian support for an Arab defense alliance.**

The Trump Administration is consulting with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates about forming a NATO-style collective defense alliance that would share intelligence about Iranian and terrorist threats with the United States and Israel, although neither country would formally join the coalition. Egypt, which fields the largest armed forces in

the Middle East, would be an indispensable member of such an alliance.

President Sisi proposed a similar Arab defense initiative in 2015 and would be a good choice for playing a leading role in such an alliance. Egypt is a strong regional power that could form the nucleus of an Arab coalition to contain, roll back, and deter Iranian threats, and act as a counterweight to offset growing Russian-Iranian strategic cooperation, a major concern of Sunni Arab states.

The Reagan Administration sought to foster a "strategic consensus" among the nations of the Middle East in 1981 against the Soviet Union—an effort that ultimately failed because of a lack of consensus on the Arab-Israeli conflict. For most Arab states, the Soviet threat was not a concern that could override their hostility to Israel. To pave the way for an effective military alliance against Iran, Washington must seek to reduce Arab-Israeli tensions. Sisi's Egypt could play an important role in defusing such tensions.

■ **Enlist Egypt as a moderating influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict.**

President Sisi is likely to stress Egypt's support for the Arab Peace Initiative and the need to resolve the Palestinian issue before Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations are normalized. President Trump should ask him to assist in facilitating quiet, step-by-step negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and between Israel and other Arab states, as part of the Administration's "outside-in" diplomatic strategy. Sisi's Egypt would also be an effective ally in isolating, undermining, and defeating Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups based in Gaza.

■ **Recalibrate U.S. military aid to Egypt.**

Egypt is the second-largest recipient of U.S. military aid after Israel, receiving \$1.3 billion of military assistance last year. The Obama Administration signaled its disapproval of Sisi by cancelling joint military exercises, withdrawing preferential financing arrangements for U.S. arms sales

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1. James Jay Carafano and James Phillips, "Egypt: A Way Forward After a Step Back," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2824, July 9, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/07/egypt-a-way-forward-after-a-step-back>.

to Egypt, and suspending the delivery of F-16 warplanes and Apache helicopters. The Trump Administration should formally announce that Egypt has regained its status as a trusted ally, and restore close military ties with Cairo.

Military assistance should be retailored to address Egypt's chief security threat: the proliferation of Islamist militant groups, particularly in the Sinai and Libya, which seek to overthrow Egypt's government and threaten to provoke a crisis with Israel by launching cross-border terrorist attacks. Washington should provide military equipment useful for counterterrorism operations and intelligence-gathering systems for tracking and monitoring militant groups. Instead of providing F-16 warplanes that have limited utility against ISIS, Washington should provide helicopter gunships, light armored vehicles, night vision devices, and other equipment useful for mounting special forces operations against terrorists who have carved out a sanctuary in the Sinai. Washington also should provide technical assistance for improving border security and surveillance capabilities to prevent ISIS and other terrorist groups from smuggling arms and fighters across Egypt's borders with Libya, Sudan, and Gaza.

### **Restoring Ties with an Essential Ally**

President Trump should use his meeting with President Sisi to restore Egypt's status as a key ally against ISIS and other Islamist terrorist groups. Egypt is a heavyweight Arab power that can serve as an effective partner in advancing regional efforts to fight terrorism, contain Iran, and stabilize the explosive Middle East.

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