

INNOCENT & BOUASRIA: End U.S. aid to Egypt

Put America back on the side of democracy

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A majority of Americans say they favor cutting U.S. foreign aid. So they should, especially for Egypt. The former president, Hosni Mubarak, left behind a political structure molded in his image. In fact, the soft transfer of power from Mr. Mubarak to the armed forces revealed Egypt's inability to break free from the repressive features of military rule. The result: post-Mubarak Egypt has morphed into a dictatorless tyranny.

Sadly, in Egypt's case, a freely elected civilian government may prove powerless in the face of the deeply entrenched and well-organized military. Ending America's ample generosity to Egypt's military, however, could produce the domestic political shake-up that country desperately needs.

The military continues to exert vast power in post-Mubarak Egypt. In mid-April, a military tribunal sentenced political activist Maikel Nabil to three years in prison for insulting the military. Four days before his arrest, security forces in Cairo fatally shot two protesters and detained dozens more for violating the national curfew and a ban on demonstrations.

This resulting "neo-praetorian" system, as we call it, borrows its name from Rome's Praetorian Guard, which in ancient times served as an elite imperial unit attached directly to the emperor. Under praetorianism, as the late political scientist Amos Perlmutter explained, a military's superior organizational capacity replaces that of a dysfunctional civilian leadership. In some cases, like Kemalist Turkey, the army guarded the constitution and eventually handed the leadership of the country to a civilian regime. In Egypt, its army appears reluctant to return to the barracks.

The tragic result of Washington's lavish material support - about \$1.5 billion annually, of which more than half must be spent on American hardware - are glaring. It supports a regime that maintains its authority through the denial of free speech, arbitrary imprisonment, savage repression and routine torture. It diminishes incentives for essential reforms, as members of the military's senior officer corps assume that American aid is sufficient to perpetuate their grip on power. It also breeds dependency, rampant corruption and decline of the civil state.

Opponents of cutting U.S. aid to Egypt argue that such a move would undermine Egyptian-Israeli peace, U.S. naval access to the Suez Canal, and U.S.-Egypt intelligence cooperation. The reality, however, is both far more complex and far less dire.

Despite all the talk of shared goals, Egyptian-Israeli relations remain problematic. Unsurprisingly, a U.S. diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks found that the Egyptian military continues to view Israel as an enemy and is seeking military parity with the Jewish state. While many Egyptians may have disagreed with Mr. Mubarak's strategic partnership with Israel, it would also appear that the Egyptian army has little interest in initiating a war. In addition to economic stagnation and widespread poverty, the country has an ongoing civil war on its western border with Libya; its southern neighbor, Sudan, threatens Nile water security; and the army must now keep the peace domestically by managing the impending political transition. Cairo has many reasons not to embark on a foolish military adventure against Israel; withdrawing America's military largesse would make that reality even starker.

In addition, ending U.S. aid would not automatically lead to Egypt's closure of Suez. Given past experience - the 1956 Suez Crisis - Egyptian officials know full well that closing that important strategic and economic waterway is a provocative action. More importantly, they know that the regional and international response would be inevitable, swift and devastating.

The massive public protests that swept Mr. Mubarak from power serve as an inspiration to people the world over. Within the country, Egypt's powerful military is not - and cannot be - an agent of revolution. Phasing out America's extensive and highly visible military assistance to Egypt would tear down a key obstacle to indigenous reform. It would also help to enhance America's credibility as a spokesperson for genuine democracy and economic liberty across the Muslim world.

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