

United States Assistance for Egypt

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss United States assistance to Egypt. I will concentrate on the security side of the US-Egypt aid relationship in my testimony.

There is a remarkable similarity between the structure of US aid to Egypt, and the structure of the Egyptian military. Both were established decades ago, and both badly need rethinking and upgrading.

As the Congressional Research Service summed it up, “Between 1948 and 2016, the United States provided Egypt with \$77.4 billion in bilateral foreign aid (calculated in historical dollars—not adjusted for inflation), including \$1.3 billion a year in military aid from 1987 to the present.”¹ As you know, our aid to Egypt leapt upward after the Sadat visit to Jerusalem and the Camp David Accords of 1978. The assistance numbers are

¹ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy Sharp, RL33003 (2017), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

\$370 million in 1975, for example, and \$2.588 billion in 1979. Since then the average amount of aid, in total, has been around \$2 billion per year, of which 1.3 billion has been military aid since the late 1980s.

But that's thirty years ago, Mr. Chairman. The Middle East has changed, and Egypt's role in the Middle East has changed. The Egypt of decades ago was the single most influential Arab country, whose position on every issue of significance in the region was of real importance to the United States. If we wanted to achieve, or to block, something in the Arab League, it often took little more than a conversation with Egypt's president. Egypt was critical to the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process." Today, Egypt has no role of significance when it comes to the conflict in Yemen, or in Iraq, or in Syria, nor frankly does it have much of a role in mediating between Israelis and Palestinians. As an analysis by the Middle East Institute stated,

During the 1990s and afterwards, there were numerous illustrations of Egypt's diminished status in the Arab world. If Egypt played any role at all in the efforts to advance the negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors in the 1990s, it was only a marginal one. Egypt took no part in the preliminary work that was necessary in order to convene the Madrid Conference and set in motion a new Arab-Israel peace process under American sponsorship. The Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was signed behind Egypt's back, as was the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, which angered the Egyptians, who thought Jordan would reap the fruits of peace at Egypt's expense.²

Egypt's weight in the region has simply declined.

The aid we have been giving to Egypt since the late 1970s and continue to give now should have a purpose. What actually do we want for it? Why do we give it? With the passage of time, I think it is fair to say we don't need to bribe or reward Egypt for its relations with Israel. As we saw under President Morsi, even a Muslim Brotherhood government did not end diplomatic relations and security cooperation with Israel—because those relations are in Egypt's interest. So our aid should be based on our desire to help achieve a stable, secure, Egypt that can defeat the terrorist threat it faces and protect its borders, helps to stabilize the region, and remains at peace with Israel. We also want to help the Egyptian people achieve a system that is more democratic and more respectful of their human rights. I will never forget a conversation I had more than a decade ago with the late Congressman Tom Lantos, a great champion of human rights. I was an official of the George W. Bush administration and we were discussing aid to Egypt, and Tom Lantos posed a question. He said, "Tell me, really, do you think Egypt needs more tanks, or more schools?"

We should judge the overall U.S. aid program against all those goals.

² "The Middle East Institute Viewpoints: The Legacy of Camp David: 1979-2009," (Middle East Institute: Washington, DC, 2009), 31, <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Legacy-Camp-David.pdf>.

Let us look first at the Egyptian military. While our goals are above all to help it fight terrorism, the Egyptian military remains a force designed to conduct conventional war—against Israel. Major military exercises continue to presume Israel is the enemy. As an Israeli analysis put it last year, “The Egyptian military is essentially still modeled to refight the 1973 war, with a war paradigm very similar to that of 1973, yet with more advanced hardware and somewhat improved tactics. Its core competence is to move large armored and infantry formations into forward defense positions, under the cover of a mobile integrated air-defense system. Egypt’s focus is still on main battle platforms (such as tanks, frigates, jets, etc).”³ The analysis from Stratfor put it this way:

[W]hile the existential threat from conventional foreign militaries has waned in recent years, the new and unconventional dangers of insurgencies, terrorism and non-state actors have risen to take its place. Egypt's large and inflexible conventional forces, which are better suited to guard against foreign incursion, may not be as capable of addressing the country's current security issues.... While Egypt has taken some steps toward better equipping its troops for counterinsurgency campaigns, it remains overwhelmingly focused on enhancing its military's conventional fighting capabilities. This stance is especially visible in the Egyptian military's force structure. Rather than restructuring its forces into a more flexible organization geared toward counterinsurgency operations, the military has maintained a centralized hierarchy that is broken down into conventional military region, army, corps and division units of command. It has also continued to invest heavily in weaponry such as surface-to-air missile batteries, anti-ship missiles, tanks and frigates that, for the most part, are useless for addressing Egypt's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism threats.⁴

Recently, Egypt has begun exercises with Russia for the first time: a news story dated October of last year was headlined “First Russian-Egyptian military exercise on Egyptian soil.”⁵

The Egyptian military is spending huge sums on enhancing that conventional capability. The Congressional Research Service reports that

In February 2015, Egypt purchased 24 Dassault Rafale multirole fighters, a frigate, and missiles from France in a deal worth an estimated \$5.9 billion (half of which is financed by French loans). France delivered the first three planes in July 2015. In 2014, France sold Egypt four naval corvettes and a

³ Ron Tira, “The Future Middle East Strategic Balance: Conventional and Unconventional Sources of Instability,” *Proliferation Papers* 56 (2016): 35, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/prolif56_tira_oksl_v2.pdf.

⁴ “Egypt’s Conventional Military Thinking,” Stratfor, June 12, 2015, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/egypts-conventional-military-thinking>.

⁵ “First Russian-Egyptian military exercise on Egyptian soil,” Heaven TV7 Jerusalem, October 26, 2016, <http://www.tv7israelnews.com/first-russian-egyptian-military-exercise-on-egyptian-soil/>.

frigate in a deal worth \$1.35 billion. In the fall of 2015, France announced that it would sell Egypt two Mistral-class helicopter carriers (each carrier can carry 16 helicopters, four landing craft, and 13 tanks) for \$1 billion. In a separate deal with Russia, Egypt will purchase 46 Ka-52 Alligator helicopters which can operate on the Mistral-class helicopter carrier.⁶

Other Russian arms sales include Antey-2500 (S-300) anti-ballistic missile system (a \$1 billion contract) and 46 MiG-29 multirole fighters (a \$2 billion contract). How do an anti-ballistic missile system and advanced combat jets really combat terrorist groups like Islamic State? How do submarines? Yet Egypt just last week received a German-made attack submarine—the first of four it has ordered, for a total reported price of 1.4 billion Euros.⁷

There are other problems with our arms aid to Egypt. The Government Accountability Office published a report in March last year entitled “U.S. Government Should Strengthen End-Use Monitoring and Human Rights Vetting for Egypt.” That report states that we cannot account for all the aid we are giving Egypt and indeed that Egypt is hindering US efforts to track the billions of dollars in assistance. The GAO report referred to “the Egyptian government’s incomplete and slow responses to some inquiries limited U.S. efforts to verify the use and security of certain equipment, including NVDs [night vision devices] and riot-control items.”⁸

There is also a problem with human rights vetting. GAO said that

The U.S. government completed some, but not all, human rights vetting required by State policy before providing training or equipment to Egyptian security forces. State deemed GAO’s estimate of the percentage of Egyptian security forces that were not vetted to be sensitive but unclassified information, which is excluded from this public report. Moreover, State has not established specific policies and procedures for vetting Egyptian security forces receiving equipment. Although State concurred with a 2011 GAO recommendation to implement equipment vetting, it has not established a time frame for such action. State currently attests in memos that it is in compliance with the Leahy law. However, without vetting policies and procedures, the U.S. government risks providing U.S. equipment to recipients in Egypt in violation of the Leahy laws.⁹

⁶ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy Sharp, RL33003 (2017), 18, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

⁷ “First Egyptian Navy Type 209/1400 submarine arrives to Egypt,” *Naval Today*, April 19, 2017, <https://navaltoday.com/2017/04/19/first-egyptian-navy-type-2091400-arrives-to-egypt/>.

⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Security Assistance: U.S. Government Should Strengthen End-Use Monitoring and Human Rights Vetting for Egypt*, GAO-16-435 (Washington, DC, 2016), <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676503.pdf>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Egypt's approach to combating terrorism, which we are in fact supporting to the tune of \$1.3 billion per year, is not succeeding. There is a real effort in Sinai, but very recently we saw terrorism extending again from northern to southern Sinai. The Congressional Research Service report from which I quoted previously, dated March 24, 2017, noted that "Terrorists belonging to the Islamic State-affiliated Sinai Province (SP) have attacked military bases and police checkpoints, killing hundreds of Egyptian soldiers. Egypt has declared a state of emergency in northern Sinai, where most of the attacks take place."¹⁰ But the most recent Sinai attack was in southern Sinai, one week ago, Tuesday, April 17, at St Catherine's monastery.¹¹ One policeman was killed and four wounded, demonstrating sadly that Islamic State continues to be able to operate in southern Sinai. On March 24, skirmishes with insurgents produced a dozen casualties, ten soldiers and two policemen.

While no one can doubt the desire of the Egyptian government to end terrorism and defeat Islamic State in Sinai, its tactics appear to be failing. Just as the terrorist attacks have become routine, so too have heavy-handed Egyptian responses resulting in civilian casualties. Egyptian security forces continue to accidentally kill considerable numbers of civilians in counterterror operations. In one incident, a group of tourists was mistakenly bombed in 2015. In January, a drone strike caused 10 civilian deaths. On April 20, a video surfaced on Twitter "that appears to show members of the Egyptian military shooting unarmed detainees to death at point-blank range in the Sinai Peninsula and staging the killings to look as if they had happened in combat."¹² Details surrounding the incident remain unclear.

An analysis by the Carnegie Endowment concluded that "State-sanctioned violence against civilians has only increased local anger against the military...." and that Egyptian policy "has shifted some sympathy from the military to the militants, who are increasingly seen as a way to take revenge....The combination of heavy repression, numerous civilian casualties, and the increased reliance on the use of airpower and heavy weaponry has not only alienated the local population, it has proven highly ineffective."¹³

It's not just the violence that is alienating Sinai residents, but the neglect as well. An article in *Foreign Affairs* last month said this:

¹⁰ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy Sharp, RL33003 (2017), 13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

¹¹ Declan Walsh, "Gunmen Kill Police Officer Near St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt," *New York Times*, April 18, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/world/middleeast/egypt-monastery-sinai-attack-isis.html?_r=1&mc_cid=8aa4c1c91b&mc_eid=9a4f749274.

¹² Matthew Haag, "Video Appears to Show Egyptian Soldiers Killing Unarmed Men in Sinai," *New York Times*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/world/middleeast/egypt-soldiers-extrajudicial-killings-sinai-peninsula.html>.

¹³ Maged Mandour, "The Heavy Civilian Toll in Sinai," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 16, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/68296>.

Sinai residents are prohibited from joining any senior post in the state. They cannot work in the army, police, judiciary, or in diplomacy. Meanwhile, no development projects have been undertaken in North Sinai the past 40 years. The villages of Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayed have no schools or hospitals and no modern system to receive potable water. They depend on rainwater and wells, as if it were the Middle Ages.¹⁴

That is no way to win the residents away from the terrorists. The *Foreign Affairs* article warns that “the population trusts the army less by the day as it cuts off communications and services, sieges the city, bombs villages, and displaces residents.”¹⁵

The Egyptian government claims to be winning the battle against terror in Sinai, but its claims are suspect. The Carnegie report suggests that the numbers are not credible:

the number of casualties during counterterrorism operations far exceeds the estimated number of Wilayat Sinai fighters. Since the start of the large counterterrorism “Operation Martyr’s Right” in September 2015, the Egyptian military has reported that 2,529 militants were killed and 2,481 others arrested as of December 2016. However, foreign intelligence agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Israel Defense Forces, estimated in mid-2016 that the size of Wilayat Sinai ranges from several hundred to a thousand militants, far below the numbers of reported killings. This disconnect can be explained by faulty intelligence or by inflating of the number of militants killed to include civilian deaths among militant deaths. The Egyptian government has a history of attacking civilians mistaken for militants. Local sources in Sinai back up the existence of such incidents, including an invented attack on a police station in Sheikh Zuweid that was used to justify the deaths of civilians in September 2013.¹⁶

Sinai is a particularly dangerous area but the battle against terrorism is a difficult one throughout Egypt. The Department of State issued a travel warning in December that begins “The U.S. Department of State warns U.S. citizens of threats from terrorist groups in Egypt and to consider the risks of travel to the country.”¹⁷ Same for Canada, which tells citizens “Global Affairs Canada advises against non-essential travel to Egypt due to the unpredictable security situation. This advisory does not apply to the Red Sea coastal resorts of Hurghada (and its surroundings) and Sharm el-Sheikh, nor to the area from Luxor to Aswan along the upper Nile, where you should exercise a high degree of caution...The security situation in Egypt is

¹⁴ Maged Atef, “Sinai’s Suffering,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2017-03-13/sinai-s-suffering>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mandour, “The Heavy Civilian Toll in Sinai.”

¹⁷ “Egypt Travel Warning,” U.S. Department of State, December 23, 2016, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/egypt-travel-warning.html>.

unpredictable. There is a significant risk of terrorist attacks throughout the country. Attacks can be indiscriminate and occur with no warning, including in Cairo.”¹⁸

I would suggest that in our general battle against terrorism, Mr. Chairman, Egypt is acting in ways that will in fact make it not an asset but a liability—indeed will make it a jihadi factory. It is estimated that there are 60,000 political prisoners in Egypt today—meaning individuals who did not commit crimes of violence. If you take thousands of young men, toss them into prison, beat and torture them, incarcerate them for lengthy periods with actual jihadis, what comes out at the end of the process is in fact more jihadis.

There can be little debate about prison conditions and about the maltreatment of prisoners. But there can also be little debate about what this produces. Here is part of a *New York Times* article about prisoners in Egypt:

Ayman said that many of the prisoners he met were from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist political organization that briefly held power after Mubarak. The group formally renounced violence in the early 1970s, but Ayman watched his cellmates grow hardened in prison. “The torture and unjust imprisonment for long periods without clear charges or trial dates created human bombs,” he said. “Each one of them was just waiting to get out. They are so thirsty for revenge.”¹⁹

Last year an NPR story reminded us that “Egypt has a history of breeding militancy in its jails. Prominent jihadists including al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri were radicalized during their abuse and humiliation in prison. Now it appears to be continuing, possibly on a wider scale to match a broad crackdown on rights in Egypt.”²⁰ The story quotes one journalist who was jailed, Hossam el-Deen:

In jail, they become ISIS. And this is very horrible. Many people — not one or two or three, many....And I saw even members of Muslim [Brotherhood] become ISIS now. Some of them spent three years now without any real accusation in this very hard condition — so they become thinking that violence is the solution.²¹

The story then recounts a communication with someone still in prison:

Today he sleeps on the floor, with no mattress, in a cell with 10 other people.

¹⁸ “Egypt,” Government of Canada, April 12, 2017, <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/egypt>.

¹⁹ Joshua Hammer, “How Egypt’s Activists Became ‘Generation Jail,’” *New York Times*, March 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html?_r=0.

²⁰ Leila Fadel, “As Egypt’s Jails Fill, Growing Fears of a Rise in Radicalization,” NPR, August 24, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/08/24/491170122/as-egypts-jails-fill-growing-fears-of-a-rise-in-radicalization>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

He told me that ISIS members imprisoned with him try to recruit him frequently. He says there are more than 100 ISIS members inside, and they openly sing Islamic State chants together at night. They bring him food. They talk to him about his father, who was killed in 2013 along with nearly 1,000 others, when the government crushed two sit-ins in Cairo. They tell him he should take revenge.²²

Ahmed Maher, a leader of the movement that peacefully overthrew Hosni Mubarak, and who is now under house arrest in Egypt after being imprisoned for his opposition to the government, gave us all another warning:

Prison has really become a breeding ground for extremists. It has become a school for crime and terrorism, since there are hundreds of young men piled on top of each other in narrow confines, jihadists next to Muslim Brotherhood members next to revolutionaries next to sympathizers. There are also a large number of young people who were also arrested by mistake and who don't belong to any school of thought.

Everyone is suffering oppression and punishment inside the prisons. Everyone is accused of being either a terrorist or a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is turning the people arrested by mistake who don't belong to any movement into jihadists. Moreover, Muslim Brotherhood members are gradually becoming radicalized, since they suffer from inhumane treatment in the prisons. The authorities treat the prisoners like slaves, and this inspires a thirst for revenge, not to mention the undignified treatment that the families face when they visit.

ISIS has exploited the situation.²³

So I believe that the current policies of the government of Egypt almost guarantee that terrorism will continue and may indeed expand.

Our military assistance program is pretty much irrelevant to the effort to combat terror in Egypt. The Egyptian military has, as I've noted, wanted to spend vast sums on submarines and frigates and high-performance combat jets, all of which are useless in fighting terror and waste scarce resources. I believe we should all be reviewing our own aid to see how it can be made far more useful to the achievement of our own goals: to repeat what I said earlier, to help achieve a stable, secure Egypt that can defeat the terrorist threat it

²² Ibid.

²³ "In Translation: April 6's Ahmed Maher on Egypt under Sisi," *Arabist*, August 17, 2015, https://arabist.net/blog/2015/8/17/in-translation-april-6s-ahmed-maher-on-egypt-under-sisi?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%252AMideast%20Brief.

faces and protect its borders, help to stabilize the region, remain at peace with Israel, and protect the freedom and human rights of Egyptians.

Stratfor suggests some changes that would be useful: “Such an effort would require heavy investment into rapid reaction forces equipped with sophisticated infantry weapons, optics and communication gear. These forces would need to be backed by enhanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms. In order to transport them, Egypt would also need numerous modern aviation assets.”²⁴ By the latter I assume they mean things like transport capabilities that would permit getting well-trained counter-terror forces to where they are needed very quickly.

We need to discuss the mix of weaponry now being given to Egypt to see how it matches with our objectives. As you know this has been an American goal at least since 2015—to align FMF with shared security interests. This is a matter of equipment, but also of training and doctrine. And all of the aid, and the advice and training we give, of course exists in a context—in this case, the context of growing terrorist activity in Egypt combined with a repressive government policy that seems most likely to increase rather than diminish the ability of terrorists to recruit.

We remain too much on automatic pilot, continuing an aid program that reflects a Middle East and an Egypt of thirty or forty years ago. That’s why this hearing and the Committee’s work to review that program and rethink the aid relationship with Egypt is of such great value.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Committee.

²⁴ “Egypt’s Conventional Military Thinking,” Stratfor, June 12, 2015, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/egypts-conventional-military-thinking>.