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Egyptians to the US: “We Hate You, but We Still Want Your Money” –

Public Opinion on the Egyptian Social Networks

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On October 9, 2013, the White House announced a partial suspension of military aid to Egypt, and stated that a resumption of aid was contingent on “credible progress toward an inclusive democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections.” This article outlines various trends in Egyptian public opinion reflected in the extensive discourse on the social networks in Egypt following the United States announcement. The article questions whether this development in US-Egyptian relations constitutes, as the White House called it, “recalibrating our assistance to Egypt to best advance our interests,” or whether a more profound strategic change is involved. Furthermore, at a time when civil society in Egypt is becoming more powerful, will national sentiments overcome economic needs?

Between pragmatism and sentiments: “Don’t underestimate the dignity of the Egyptians.” The anticipated suspension of United States aid stimulated a widespread discussion on the social networks in Egypt, and once the announcement was actually issued, it drew a host of responses. Some expressed outrage, others anger. One of the well-known activists and bloggers summarized the common sentiment of many Egyptians toward the US as follows: “We hate you, but we still want your money.”

This retort reflects the pragmatic attitude characteristic of the political elites in Egypt – from the economic, media, security, and intellectual sectors – toward relations with the US. Social media discourse, along with the traditional media, has emphasized that under the current circumstances in the Middle East and internationally, Egypt has no real substitute for a strategic partnership with the US. Egypt does not make light of the partnership that was established and has intensified over the past 40 years, and has provided very important benefits to both sides. Furthermore, given the social and political turmoil in Egypt that have sparked two revolutions in three years, Egypt now needs American aid no less than in the past, and perhaps even more.

At the same time, the palpable public antagonism is significant. Following the White House announcement the social networks were rife with anti-American rhetoric of a scope and harshness not heard since the outbreak of the revolution on January 25, 2011, marked by forceful expressions of both humiliation and pride. The vast majority of Egyptians see the nation as a "mother" whose dignity should not be sullied. Any political measure perceived as damaging is considered an insult, and makes it difficult for decision makers to pursue a pragmatic policy. The networks resound with sentiments such as: "Any Egyptian politician, perceived as bowing to US pressure or demands, risks losing credibility with many Egyptians. This will be the last thing any politician wants." Furthermore, many consider any attempt to undermine the national army as damaging to Egyptian nationalism and prestige, and any support for such an affront is therefore considered anti-patriotic.

Although US and Egyptian leaders do not wish to escalate the situation, and seek to act responsibly and pragmatically, public pressure on Egyptian leaders to issue unequivocal statements against the US is evident. General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, the de facto ruler of Egypt since the June 30 coup, stated explicitly, "Threats involving aid will not work because Egypt has friendships with neighboring countries and is able to overcome its financial crisis." Egyptian Coptic business tycoon Naguib Sawiris called the American move "arrogant," and tweeted, "Don't underestimate the dignity of the Egyptians." These statements show that when the discussion focuses on sentiments, those managing the crisis on both sides may find it hard to defuse it by resorting to flexibility or maneuvering.

The US is losing its influence over Egypt: Many on the social media believe the US administration erred in its assessment that economic support for Egypt, or alternatively, economic sanctions in the form of an announcement that aid was suspended, could influence Egyptian domestic affairs. Common belief on the social media was that the US should not interfere in internal Egyptian politics, and that an attempt to influence the internal dynamic in Egypt would cross a red line. To many, the American effort to dictate behavior to the Egyptian public by preaching democracy and liberal values, as well as American aid to one side or another of the Egyptian political spectrum, is an expression of hypocrisy, and therefore arouses criticism and protest.

Ironically, the American attempts to help promote democratic and liberal values, which were the basis for the demands of the revolution, are now causing a drastic anti-American response among many Egyptians. When the US tries to pressure the military, it evokes the opposite response. Revolutionary groups objecting to "military trials," Sisi's presidential candidacy, and the clauses in the constitution involving the military's authority have in effect expressed support for the army by severely criticizing the US

demands. During a period of “ultra-nationalistic fascism,” it was said, anyone perceived as opposing the army will be regarded as a traitor. It therefore follows that whenever the US tries to intervene publicly and directly in the internal affairs of Egypt, it will not only arouse anti-American feelings, but also weaken the forces in Egypt that are promoting the same values.

As the US and Egypt drift apart, Israel and Egypt are getting closer: A common assumption was that one of the key pillars of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt was US aid – military and civilian (about \$1.5 billion) – and that if the aid were jeopardized, relations between Egypt and Israel would be affected. It has become clear, however, that the announcement of a partial suspension of military aid (estimated at \$260 million) and a “recalibrating” of relations between Egypt and the US has not affected the agreement between Egypt and Israel.

Not one Egyptian public opinion maker on the social networks in Egypt (about 18 million Egyptians, constituting approximately 20 percent of the population, are active users of social media) spoke against the agreement with Israel as a result of the change in American policy. On the contrary, since Israel did not support the American measure, and especially given statements by senior Israeli officials defining the American policy toward Egypt as a “strategic error,” a distinction is made between Israel and the US to the effect that Israel and Egypt are on the same side against the US policy. Israel and the US are no longer considered as having the same agenda vis-à-vis Egypt.

In addition, Egypt’s national security requires it to fight against Islamic terrorism, both in cities within Egypt and in Sinai, which necessitates close cooperation with Israel. Not only does the public tacitly accept this cooperation; it sometimes supports it, and even calls for closer cooperation. Consequently, the US halt/suspension announcement did not affect security cooperation between the two countries; rather, it highlighted the bilateral interdependence.

Conclusion

The American levers of influence – both aid and sanctions – have thus far proved ineffective in influencing internal policy in Egypt. Furthermore, it appears that relations between Israel and Egypt are not dependent on American money to the extent that might have been assumed prior to the recent tension between Washington and Cairo. Israel’s response to the tougher American stance towards Egypt, combined with the disagreements between Israel and the US on the question of dealing with the Iranian nuclear challenge and Syria, have succeeded in highlighting the security base on which the Israeli-Egyptian strategic partnership rests.

At the same time, it is necessary to find another basis for the partnership between Israel and Egypt that will also prevail in periods of quiet on the security front. The fact is that Egypt is in a period of domestic political struggles; the status of the Egyptian army in internal politics is not yet firmly entrenched; and the support of Egyptian public opinion as reflected in the social networks, is not sufficiently stable. Consequently, even if relations between Egypt and Israel appear strong and stable in the short term, it would be a mistake to rely solely on defined security interests for the long term.

