

Obama-Era Missteps in Egypt and Their Effects on International Relations

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May, 2021

In 2011, as the popular mobilizations that would come to constitute the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, the United States watched—and fretted. Espousing idealistic, inspirational rhetoric that amplified the global struggle for democracy and committed to advocacy for fundamental rights, the administration of President Barack Obama had promised to promote new efforts for reform and democratic transition [1]. As dissension over this approach festered within the ranks of Obama’s closest national security advisors, Egypt’s prolonged demonstrations against longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak posed an early, dramatic challenge to those ideals. Reflecting on the administration’s response to years of Egyptian uprisings reveals a grim picture of how its foreign policy, plagued by hesitancy and vacillation, ultimately contributed to the reconfiguration of international influence within Egypt. With an unstructured diplomatic approach that highlighted the disconnect between acting on ideals and responding to reality, the U.S. dialed back its historical ties with Egypt, opening the door for Russia and China to exert influence.

The U.S.–Egypt relationship has long been diplomatically essential for both countries. In recent years, the average annual total of U.S. military aid provided to Egypt hovers around \$1.3 billion [2]. Egypt is thus incentivized to act as an arbiter in the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict.

The partnership between the two countries was tested beginning on January 25, 2011, when thousands of demonstrators marched in Cairo to demand Mubarak’s resignation. Despite its rhetoric supporting the rights of democracy advocates worldwide, the Obama Administration’s initial response was ambivalent and hesitant as it considered regional strategic interests [3]. A number of lukewarm statements calling for the regime to reform from within attempted to reconcile the emotional tenor on the ground with a reluctance to abandon a longtime ally who had supported key U.S. initiatives throughout his rule [4]. The first wave of upheaval found many in the administration confident that Mubarak could and would withstand the surrounding chaos. That belief eventually faded: by the second week of February Obama had publicly urged Mubarak to step aside and carefully signaled his backing of the demonstrators [5].

As in the cases of Tunisia and Yemen, the U.S. stood by a familiar regime only until momentum clearly tilted in favor of the revolution, at which point the administration fell back on its initial pro-democracy stance and flipped its support to the protesters, working with them to ensure that power structures serving U.S. energy and security interests would not collapse alongside the government [4]. The ambivalent messaging of the U.S. response constituted an attempt to strike a delicate balance between ideals and reality, but the administration’s flipflopping was viewed as weakness and widely panned. Observers criticized the lack of assertive leadership [6] by a nation that has seemingly always shaped conversations around international relations. Research that quantitatively analyzed the nature of the U.S. reaction affirmed this view, finding that relative to other world leaders, Obama did not play the type of leading role in marshalling international response that might be expected of a U.S. president [7].

Similar concerns were raised in the summer of 2013 when Egyptians again took to the streets to demand the resignation of Mohamed Morsi, the president elected to succeed Mubarak. General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi led a military takeover of the Egyptian government, and once more the Obama Administration scrambled to formulate a response. The nature of Morsi’s deposition forced Obama into a semantical conundrum with severe political ramifications: either declare el-Sisi’s power grab a ‘coup’—triggering a legal obligation to cut off \$1.5 billion in military aid to an important regional ally—or signal, tacitly or not, U.S. support for a military takeover [8]. Obama was bitterly lobbied by factions of advisors warring over the path forward—whether to prioritize the stabilization of Egypt or the rights of its people—and how to urge el-Sisi to relinquish his power in favor of democratic elections. The administration artfully avoided using the term ‘coup’ for weeks, until

August 14, when members of the el-Sisi regime massacred over 1,000 Morsi supporters at a peaceful sit-in [1].

By October, joint U.S.–Egypt military exercises had been cancelled and the billions of dollars in aid frozen, infuriating the el-Sisi regime [9]. The decision was reached, however, only after continued Washington infighting [1] and dithering reminiscent of 2011. In the two months preceding the decision to freeze the aid, the U.S. signed \$300 million worth of arms delivery contracts with Egypt [10]. Eventually, the administration relented and released the aid, reversing course once more in a meandering path of capitulation [1].

The in-house dissension and vacillation of that period precipitated a withdrawal of U.S. influence in Egypt. The resulting power vacuum was filled by Russia, which immediately sought to exploit the weak U.S. position in 2013 by pledging support for a number of regime-sponsored infrastructure projects in manufacturing and electricity generation [10]. Even with the restoration of U.S. funding to the el-Sisi regime, Russia has made up ground in Egypt, filling the financial void by backing a billion-dollar arms deal in 2017 [9].

Due to its own economic limitations, Russia cannot serve as a viable long-term patron with the potential to fully displace U.S. influence in Egypt. China, however, can and has increasingly asserted itself in that role. With Obama-era fallout engendering a curtailment of U.S.–Egypt relations, China has pumped millions into Egypt’s economy [11]. It is Egypt’s foremost trading partner since 2012, pledging tens of billions of dollars of investment in state projects, including the construction of a light rail system and the ambitious relocation of the capital to a desert area east of Cairo [9]. The Suez Canal, Egypt’s economic engine, is a linchpin of China’s Belt & Road and Maritime Silk Road projects, strategic and economic initiatives designed to develop infrastructure and Chinese geopolitical influence across Asia and the world [9].

Increased Chinese aggression in the Egyptian arena would likely be met with intervention from the U.S. and other trade partners. Though the space has widened to include more players, the U.S. remains a staunch and crucial Egyptian ally. The events of the Arab Spring, however, and the wavering missteps that it provoked from the Obama Administration have fundamentally altered power dynamics within Egypt. El-Sisi’s rule has only become more brutal with time—so brutal that Mubarak’s 2020 death had some Egyptians pining for their pre-2011 state of affairs [12]. El-Sisi promotes balanced relations with global powers and a flexible, nationalistic approach to international engagement [13], a stance that appears unlikely to change. He and other Egyptian leaders are still beholden to the United States, but the question looms: For how long?

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