From Foes to Friends: Evolution of the US-Egypt Bilateral Ties since the 1950s

Murad Ali & Mairaj Ul Hamid

Abstract

Nothing is permanent in the foreign policies of states except their respective interests. Multifaceted foreign policy goals determine the nature of bilateral relationships between countries. This paper examines the trajectory of bilateral ties between the United States of America (US) and Egypt in order to understand the evolution of this relationship from indifference or mild hostility to a close alliance. In the initial years of the Republic of Egypt in the 1950s, President Gamal Abdel Nasser forged strong economic and political ties with the erstwhile Soviet Union as the country was firmly placed in the Soviet camp. After its devastating defeat in the Arab-Israel war in 1967, Gamal Abdel Nasser completely cut off relations with the US and became further closer to the Soviets. In the 1970s, President Sadat transformed the country's domestic and foreign policies by moving towards the US bloc. Following the signing of the Camp David Peace accords with Israel in 1979 under the US patronage, Egypt was firmly lodged in the US camp when it severed ties with the Soviet Union. As a result, the country emerged one of the largest recipients of the US economic and military assistance. The US-Egypt bilateral relations have generally remained consistent since then, and overall, the US has provided a total of over US\$ 57 billion in economic aid and more than US\$ 68 billion in military assistance to Egypt. For achieving its foreign policy objectives in the volatile Middle East, the US has allocated substantial foreign aid to Egypt during the last several decades while turning a blind eye to the its violation of democracy and its human rights abuses.

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Introduction

With a population of approximately 105 million, Egypt is the most populous country in the Arabic-speaking world. Indeed, next to Nigeria and Ethiopia, Egypt is the third most populous country in Africa. For various reasons including its history, demography, and geography, Egypt has played an important role in international politics, particularly in the politics and affairs of the Middle East and, at times, the larger Muslim world. Al Azhar University, one of the oldest seats of learning in Egypt, has a unique symbolic role and inspiration for Muslim scholars across the globe. Cairo, the capital city of the country headquarters the Arab League, which is an influential multilateral organization of the 22-member Arab countries. In addition, Egypt controls and manages the Suez Canal, which is one of the world's vital seafaring chokepoints that connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. Due to all these factors. the country has remained on the US policymakers' radar and an important ally for decades. It has been rightly argued that "Egypt has been an important country for U.S. national security interests based on its geography, demography, and diplomatic posture" (Sharp 2020, i).

However, the US-Egypt relations have not always remained consistent. This paper, therefore, analyses the evolution of US-Egypt ties since the 1950s to explore the factors that redefined relations over the years. The first section of the paper reviews US-Egypt relations during the Nasser regime, that mostly remained tense and turbulent. Particularly, after the 1967 Arab-Israel War, bilateral ties were cut off and remained suspended till the regime of President Sadat. The second section offers an analysis of the bilateral ties between the two countries in the era of Sadat and how his tenure transformed the country's domestic and foreign policies. The third section critically analyses the ties between the two countries during the long tenure of Hosni Mubarak, which also contributed to a shift in relations that has remained a consistent pattern since then. Ties

somehow remained tense during the Arab Spring when there were popular uprisings in the Arab world against dictators and monarchs. Barring a year of Morsi presidency, relationships are back on track since the arrival of Alsisi in 2014. The paper concludes that for accomplishing its foreign policy objectives including security and strategic goals in the region, the US has consistently provided generous foreign aid to Egypt, while, at the same time, ignoring its otherwise championed ideals of democracy and respect for human rights.

The Preliminary Years of US-Egypt Relations

Egypt was an important Eastern province during the Ottoman Empire. It was in 1952 that in a military coup Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farook which was the end of kingdom in this very important country of the Middle East. Shirbiny (2005) has aptly stated that since that military coup in 1952, the military establishment has emerged as a vital actor in the national policymaking and that since then Egyptian political landscape has been dominated by men from the military background. Subsequent to the 1952 military upheaval that overthrew the king, Egypt has been ruled by a handful of leaders, primarily from the country's strong security apparatus. The regime of Mohamed Naguib (1953-1954) was brief, but subsequent leaders ruled till they were forced out of the office by force majeure or by the popular uprising as in the case of the Mubarak regime following the Arab Spring. All three rulers including Gamal Abdel Nasser who was in office from 1954 to 1970, Anwar Sadat who ruled from 1970 to 1981, and Hosni Mubarak whose regime lasted from 1981 to 2011, were from the military. Mohamed Morsi's reign from June 2012 to July 2013 was a brief hiatus of democracy which was overthrown by General Sisi in 2014. Five of these rulers were from the military background, which is a dominant actor in the country's politics. The only exception was the short tenure of Muhammad Morsi, who was associated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that compelled the military to force the resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 following the popular uprising. Given the dominant role of the military in the country's politics, Kassem (2004) states that "personal authoritarian rule in Egypt survives and has been maintained for more than five decades" (1). Anderson (2001) asserts that the West and particularly the US have not only always turned a blind eye to antidemocratic movements but have also consistently supported autocratic regimes friendly to Washington to get their foreign policy goals accomplished. The author argues that "this is particularly true of the Middle East, where access to oil and the security of Israel have trumped the desire for human rights and democracy" (Anderson 2001, 56).

Table I: US Economic and Military Aid to Egypt (US\$ Millions)

Year	Economic aid	Military aid	Year	Economic aid	Military aid
1952	8	0	1986	2225	2143
1953	87	0	1987	1702	2182
1954	27	0	1988	1420	2115
1955	436	0	1989	1515	2036
1956	214	0	1990	1649	1955
1957	6	0	1991	1451	1893
1958	4	0	1992	1324	1846
1959	265	0	1993	1,044	1806
1960	385	0	1994	835	1801
1961	423	0	1995	1,297	1782
1962	1141	0	1996	1,075	1792
1963	824	0	1997	1,040	1673
1964	530	0	1998	1,055	1651

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1965	533	0	1999	1,077	1690
1966	148	0	2000	909	1634
1967	65	0	2001	498	1556
1968	0	0	2002	1,058	1528
1969	0	0	2003	474	1501
1970	0	0	2004	745	1451
1971	0	0	2005	296	1403
1972	6	0	2006	524	1355
1973	3	0	2007	687	1332
1974	78	0	2008	201	1290
1975	1235	0	2009	688	1,301
1976	1445	0	2010	301	1,301
1976TQ	1667	0	2011	240	1,298
1977	2628	0	2012	90	1,302
1978	2558	1	2013	330	1,239
1979	2732	3767	2014	179	300
1980	2692	1166	2015	222	1,345
1981	2376	1158	2016	133	1,105
1982	2095	1775	2017	173	1,302
1983	1894	2500	2018	233	1,306
1984	2007	2484	2019	112	1,306
1985	2274	2071	2020	125	1,300
Total	<u>I</u>	57,722	68,742		
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Source: USAID. US Overseas Loans and Grants (Greenbook). (2021). http://gbk.eads.usaidallnet.gov/query/do

The era of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970) and US-Egypt Estrangement

In the 1950s, the US was busy making alliances with strategically important countries in various regions. Newly decolonized nations who were willing to join the US-led camp and participate in the US-carved alliances were eligible to receive generous US economic and military aid. In the Middle East, one such alliance was the Baghdad Pact, which was an attempt to expand the US policy of containment to the Arab monarchs by using old British influence in the region. Key countries included in the Baghdad Pact were Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and Britain, who signed an interdependent series of agreements during 1954 and 1955. President Nasser vehemently declined to be part of such an alliance. He called it an extension of imperialism aimed at keeping Arab nations in the Western bloc for their geostrategic and security interests. President Nasser not only refused to join the pact but also launched a mission to prevent other Arab governments from doing so. It was because of his campaign against the Baghdad Pact that persuaded the governments of Jordan and Syria not to join the Britain-led alliance. Due to President Nasser's overt anti-West stance and his firm belief in Arab nationalism, the US did not commit any military assistance to his government despite providing reasonable economic aid.

The 1967 Arab-Israel War: A Cold Phase in the US-Egypt Relations

The 1967 war was a watershed moment that transformed the region in many ways. Israel's overwhelming victory over its Arab opponents earned huge diplomatic dividends for the Jewish State as now the US started to provide it unprecedented economic and security assistance. At the same time, Cairo's abject defeat in the war forced it to announce the termination of diplomatic ties with the US. Hence, ties between Cairo and Washington continued to be suspended till 1974 (Meital 1998). As data in Table I illustrates, no economic or military aid was

provided to Egypt during these years. It is due to these reasons that Stauffer (2003) has aptly remarked that "the history of U.S. aid to Egypt is complex and tortuous; at times it was suspended when Cairo was flirting too blatantly with Moscow" (64). President Nasser wanted to reap the harvest of allying his country with Kremlin during most of his regime.

After emerging triumphant in the war by capturing substantial chunks of enemies' territory, Israel was now in an advantaged political, diplomatic, and strategic position. The success of Israel was deemed "an American gain as well, since both Egypt and Syria were close allies of the Soviet Union and their defeat was considered a major blow to Kremlin's prestige in the region" (Gilboa 1987, 49). The conflict was "a disaster of great proportions for Moscow, and a commensurate gain for the United States" at the height of the Cold War (Luttwak 1997, 200). How Israel overwhelmingly defeated its Arab opponents can be summed up in the following words:

At 7:10 on the morning of Monday 5 June 1967, Israel Air Force planes took off for their targets deep in Egyptian territory. The June 1967 War began with a first strike on Egyptian military airfields (Operation Moked), whose success meant that Israel had rendered most of its main enemy's air power useless for the rest of the war. Within half an hour, only Israeli planes were operating in Egyptian skies. The Egyptians, in shock, refused to believe that the operation had been carried out by Israel alone. (Blanga 2015, 303)

Egypt and its allies not only surrendered huge chunks of territory, but they also faced huge casualties in the battlefield. Although the Arabs enjoyed much strength as compared with the Israelis, they were no match for the well-trained and well-equipped Israeli defense forces. According to Cleveland and Bunton (2009), "Egypt lost 12,000 men and 80 percent of its air force and armor, Syrian losses were 2,500 killed, and the Jordanian army was temporarily put out of action as a fighting unit" (Ali 8. June 2022). These authors assert that the Arab regimes who had vowed to liberate Palestinians from the

clutches of the Jewish State had lost prestige; their ego was bruised; and their bargaining power was lost.

In the geo-political landscape that emerged after the war, the US administration came up with key policy choices. First, the US started to deliver huge financial and political support to Israel. Second, the US began to convince Israel to use seized areas located in the Sinai, West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights as "bargaining chips to exchange for peace, recognition and security from the Arab neighbours" (Ali 8. June 2022). In his memoir, Henry Kissinger (1979) asserts that "the new territory seized was three times the size of Israel itself" (344). This is clear evidence, demonstrating the scale of Israel's success against its Arab rivals.

During the war, several countries of the region cut off diplomatic ties with the US in solidarity with Egypt and its Arab allies. These included, besides Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, and Syria. While the Egypt-Soviet ties were already flourishing, defeat at the hands of Israel, a key American ally in the region, further increased strategic cooperation between the two countries. To help the military forces of Egypt and to enhance their war abilities, "the Soviets increased their military mission in Egypt to several thousand advisers, making Egypt completely dependent on the Soviet Union for its military survival" (Cleveland & Bunton 2009, 342). Given these developments, Cairo firmly moved to the Soviet camp as US-Egypt bilateral ties remained suspended.

President Sadat and the Era of Transformation in US-Egypt Ties: Camp David Accords and the US Aid to Egypt

As discussed earlier, if the 1967 war put Israel in command, it proved disastrous for Egypt. It lost the rich oil field of Sinai and transit fees from the Suez Canal to Israel. According to Meital (1998), the October war of 1973 between the two arch rivals, Egypt and Israel, brought dramatic transformations to the region. After the 1973 war with Israel, Egypt's foreign policy witnessed unprecedented upheavals. Cairo's cordial relationship with Moscow lost appeal and warmth soon after

President Nasser died in 1970. With the arrival of the new President, Anwar Sadat, Cairo witnessed some drastic changes in its domestic as well as foreign policies. Although Sadat's Egypt signed an agreement of friendship with the Soviet Union on May 27, 1971, bilateral ties were constantly on the descending trajectory, particularly after the 1973 Arab-Israel War. In the Yom Kippur War fought in 1973 between Egypt and Israel, the Soviet Union provided ample financial and military support to its Arab ally. The Soviet leadership openly backed Cairo as Brezhnev did not hesitate threatening intervention on behalf of Egypt if the Jewish State committed ceasefire violation. In contrast to their friendly ties during the war, Egypt-Soviet relations lost their cordiality after the war. In March 1976, Egypt repealed the friendship treaty, and relations between the two countries were severely dented.

This re-orientation in Egypt's foreign relations with the two superpowers was also triggered by the country's domestic economic and fiscal issues (Meital 1998). Hence, Cairo's domestic financial challenges forced it to give peace overtures to Israel, with the US as a mediator. This culminated in President Sadat's unprecedented voyage to Israel and eventually the ratification of the Camp David accords signed between the two countries in 1979. As a result, as data in Table I shows, the US started the provision of substantial economic and security assistance to Cairo, as Israel was already one of the largest US aid recipients (Burns 1985). In contrast to prewar years, relationship between Cairo and Washington steadily expanded while Egypt's bilateral ties with the Soviets deteriorated in the post-war years. President Sadat accused Moscow of interfering in Egypt's internal matters and of destabilizing his regime to prevent the normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel under the US patronage. Hence, diplomatic relations with Moscow were suspended in 1981. These were re-established in 1984 after President Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981 who made an effort to strike a balance in the country's relations with two superpowers of the time.

Regarding President Sadat's policies, Zetter and Hamza (1998) argue that the regime's open door policy or 'Infitah' marked a major reversal of the previous regime's policy by opening the economy to foreign imports and investment; downgrading the public sector; and increasing the role of the private sector. Taher (2001) points out that Sadat's regime's (1970-81) policies of peace with Israel and open door economic policies led to substantial US economic and military assistance to Egypt. Due to these factors, American aid accounted for nearly half of Egypt's foreign aid with more than US\$ 7.6 billion in loans and grants obligated between 1975 and 1982 (Zetter & Hamza 1998). Meital (1998) argues that after agreeing to peace with Israel. US congressional negotiations committed to the provision of \$1 billion per year to Cairo; the USAID in Egypt is required to ensure that the allocated volume of aid has been utilised before the start of the next financial year so that new allocations are authorised by the Congress. Between the years 1975 and 1984, Egypt received more than \$10 billion from America (Weinbaum 1986). Similarly, Mitchell (1995) claims that during the period 1974-1989, the US allocated a total of US\$ 15 billion in aid, half of which, US\$ 7.7 billion, was in the form of security aid. Two-thirds of the total aid Egypt received during this period was provided by the US. Looking at the USAID data in Table I, there are stark contrasts between the US aid to Egypt in the late 1960s and early 1970s and in the period following the mid-1970s.

US and Egypt in the Mubarak Regime: Consistency and Continuity in Relations

The trajectory of bilateral ties remained upwards during most of the Mubarak period. The region witnessed several upheavals, but the US-Egypt ties remained steadfast. During Husni Mubarak's era, the Middle East saw disruptions in the form of aggression and wars. Iraq attacked Iran and the war continued for almost nine years, followed by Iraq's attack on Kuwait, thus the Persian Gulf crisis continued into the 1980s. Then, in 1991, the demise of USSR marked a new level of relations between Egypt and US as the US arch-rival, the USSR was no more a threat, and the world was moving towards a unilateral

superpower structure under the hegemony of the US. In this scenario, Egypt was a credible friend of the US that helped pursue its national interests in the Arabian Peninsula.

In all these years, Egypt's foreign policy and its relations with the US have mostly remained steadfast from the mid-1970s till the last decade of the twentieth century. As a result, as USAID data given in the table above shows, the US economic and military aid has also remained uninterrupted during these years. Butter (1989) claims that since 1984, most of the US official aid has been in the form of grants. After the Camp David accords, a peace dividend of different kinds has continued to flow in the form of a massive long-term US aid program to Egypt equaling US\$ 2 billion each year (Momani 2003; Sherbiny 2005). Alterman (2005) claims that "since that time, Egypt has drawn more than US \$60 billion in direct US assistance alone" (362). According to Said (2004), between 1979 and 2003, the US has provided Egypt an aggregate of US\$ 60 billion in aid, half of which, US\$ 30 billion, has been in civilian assistance and another half in the form of security aid. The US has been allocating massive aid, both civilian and non-civilian since the mid-1970s not primarily because of moral or humanitarian compulsions but largely due to the fact that it has significant geo-strategic and security considerations (Clarke 1997; Galal & Lawrence, 2003; Momani 2003; Safty 1991; Sullivan 1996). According to Anderson (1995), there is no doubt that the US has provided substantial aid to Egypt, but it has not benefitted the common people; rather, it has prolonged and emboldened despotic regimes. Taher (2001) argues that the overarching dynamics behind Washington's foreign aid policy towards Cairo remain largely similar today as they were during the 1970s and that the American aid "to Egypt has remained politicised as ever before" (75). It all happened during Husni Mubarak's period as a despot who was easy for the US to deal with.

Bilateral Ties During the First Gulf War

The Gulf crisis in the 1990s enhanced the strategic worth of Egypt in this volatile region. Meital (1998) has pointed out that the Gulf war was a testing time for the US-Egypt friendly ties

because Cairo had to play a central part in the war involving two nightriding Arab nations. Alterman (2005) asserts that prior to the buildup of the war, President Bush held consultations with his Egyptian counterpart. As a result, President Mubarak not only provided full-pledged political, logistic, and military support to the US, but he also facilitated the latter in the formation of a broad-based coalition of several regional Arab countries who unanimously opposed the Saddam-led Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In addition to facilitating coalitions over flights and sea transits via Egypt's airspace and waters during the Gulf military campaign, Cairo also provided the second largest military contingents comprising 30,000 troops to defend the Gulf states against a possible Iraqi retaliation (Aly & Pelletreau 2001; Said 2006). Thus, being an influential actor in this existential crisis in the Middle East theatre, Egypt played a pivotal role to maintain political order. As a result, the US provided massive aid in the form of direct economic and military assistance as well as US\$ 15 billion in debt relief (Alterman 2005). Cook (2000) asserts that due to Egypt's frontline role during the Gulf war, the US and its allies offered Cairo a generous debt-relief package. It helped the country's economy as its aggregate external debt decreased from US\$ 50 billion to US\$ 25 billion due to debt amnesty of both the US and the Paris Club. It is clear from the data given in Table I that the US foreign aid to Egypt has remained steady and consistent during these years.

Egypt and the US in the 'war on terror' era

In the post-9/11 era, when the US waged a global war on terror, American foreign aid policies also underwent some dramatic changes. Looking at Table I, the total US aid to Egypt remained more or less the same as in the previous years. However, economic aid has slightly decreased during these years while military assistance has gone up. It seems that the above events did not bring many changes in the US aid policies towards Egypt. In this era, Cairo came up with appealing slogans and pretended that the country was on a reformative course to shun authoritative tendencies. However, the reality remained different as a "genuine change with regard to the country's

personal authoritarian system of rule" proved to be a distant dream (Kassem 2004, 1). It has been argued that Hosni Mubarak always pretended to show to his foreign audience that Egypt was gradually inching towards a genuine democracy. However, the reality was that there was unabated disillusionment as Egyptians themselves wondered when it would arrive (Dunne 2003, 115). Until he was ousted in 2011 through an unprecedented popular uprising in the form of the Arab Spring that had engulfed most of the region, Mubarak repeatedly violated his own pledge that he had made to Egyptians and the international community in 1984 that the future presidents of the country would be limited two terms in office. He had assured the public that he himself would become the first Egyptian leader to limit himself to only two terms. Despite this blatant violation of pledges aimed at restoring democratic norms, the US always turned a blind eye to the despotic political situation in Egypt and continued backing this vital Arab country in the form of political and material support. However, at the twilight of his power, even the US was no longer willing to further support the regime of Mubarak as there was mounting pressure from people out in the streets. It was, perhaps, for the first time that the US was also in favour of the popular support rather than backing a ruler who had been discredited by his own people.

The Arab Spring and the Election of Muhammad Morsi

The overthrow of Hosni Mubarak's regime following the Arab Spring provided a new wave of optimism to the democracy-starved people of the region. Following the ouster of Mubarak in 2011, elections were held in 2012. International observers agreed that these were the first genuine polls in the country's history. Around 13 candidates vied in the preliminary phase, in which four contestants had a tough clash. Among these, Muhammad Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood was declared successful after he obtained over 50 percent of the votes polled in the presidential elections. Although democratically elected by the Egyptians, Mursi was unacceptable to the US as he was a hard-core Islamist. His policies and amendments to the constitution manifested an anti-US stance. Thus, after one and a

half years, his democratic reign was suspended following a military coup orchestrated by General Sisi, army chief of the country's strong military. There is now a broad consensus that the Arab Spring has proved to be an Arab Autumn as there is a new surge of authoritarian rule in some Arab countries which initially underwent unprecedented upheavals. This is particularly true in the case of Egypt which is again under the clutches of a long despotic regime of Abbul Fatah Al-Sisi.

While the US had remained somehow neutral during the Arab Spring, it did not react strongly at the ouster of the democratically elected President Morsi. While the US has traditionally remained averse towards Islamists, Morsi-led Egypt was more willing to maintain good ties with the US and not to threaten the US foreign policy objectives in the region concerning primarily "political economy; relations with Israel; the War on Terror; and issues related to identity, especially in the case of minorities" (Gerges 2013, 189). However, the US suspended the delivery of some military hardware, and US-Egypt bilateral ties suffered following the ouster of Mubarak.

Sisi and the End of Democracy: US-Egypt Ties in a New Era

The Sisi-led coup was only the second time that the military took control of the country. The Egyptians witnessed the first military coup in 1952 when King Farouk was deposed by Nasser. Since then, the military dominated internal affairs as well as the foreign policy of the country. While successive leaders maintained a democratic face, the reality was that Egyptian politics remained "largely a one-man show, akin to the god-king of ancient times" (Sherbiny 2005, 838). After assuming power following the removal of President Morsi, Sisi significantly augmented his own power. After completing his first term in office, Sisi successfully amended the constitution to prolong the tenure of the president from 4 to 6 years that enabled him to extend his existing tenure to 2024 and grant him permission to contest for the third term and thus retain his power until 2030.

During his rule, Egypt's foreign policy has recalibrated and besides other matters, relations with the US have been restored to the previous status. One clear indicator of this is the provision of the US security aid to Egypt. It is visible from the USAID data in Table I that after an abrupt and considerable reduction in military aid in the year 2014, US security assistance has resumed the previous levels.

Conclusion

As rational actors in international politics, states' relations are guided by their respective national interests. Likewise, as the above data shows, in the case of Egypt and the United States, bilateral ties have been significantly shaped by historical and contemporary events in the two countries and their respective national interests. In so doing, the paper has provided an analysis of how Egypt, a near pariah state for the US during the 1950s and 60s, became one of the largest US aid recipients over the years. Data shows that Egypt has received over US\$ 57 billion in economic assistance and another US\$ 68 billion in security aid until 2020. The data also indicates that there is a sharp difference between the amount of foreign aid that the US allocated to Egypt following the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords with the Jewish State of Israel. The paper has examined the ebbs and flows of this relationship and concludes that there has been a remarkable consistency in US-Egypt bilateral ties despite geostrategic shifts and political upheavals in the Middle East and elsewhere in recent years.

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