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Why It Would Be a Big Mistake for the U.S. to Cut Aid to Egypt

Today, the U.S. needs Egypt's partnership more than ever.

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail



CAIRO — Echoing calls by some in the U.S. Congress, the New York Times editorial board recently published a piece arguing that American aid to Egypt should be cut as a way of punishing President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his administration. As an Egyptian-American and someone well immersed in both cultures, I believe that such

action would prompt a tipping point in the U.S.-Egypt relationship and have serious consequences for the future of the Middle East.

Some weeks ago I met with President Sisi and former President Adly Mansour, along with key officials including the prime minister, Mr. Ibrahim Mehleb. I also had a chance to speak to a gathering of university students and to meet with leading groups of independent and government-run media, including a TV interview that was watched by millions of Egyptians. Throughout the two weeks of intensive discussions, I came to understand the basis for the potential change in the relationship, and why the majority of people support Sisi.

In the period following the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, the time of my schooling in Egypt, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles sought to punish President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the U.S. decided not to support the building of the Aswan Dam and create a source of hydroelectric power considered pivotal to Egypt's industrialization. The result? Egypt's political compass swung from West to East, and the Soviet Union had a major influence in the Middle East for decades.

President Anwar Sadat reversed that direction in 1973, and for 40 years, the Middle East has witnessed peace between Israel and Egypt. The current political temperature in Cairo is similar to that of Nasser's era, and in fact an analogy is often made between Nasser's and Sisi's popularity.

Today, the U.S. needs Egypt's partnership more than ever. In addition to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, which is crucial to U.S. interests both domestically and in the Middle East, the U.S. has had and will continue to need Egypt's collaboration in the war on terrorism. The U.S. has full access to the Suez Canal, and the military joint exercises already in existence are necessary for such wars and for the free flow of oil. Last month, northern Sinai was struck by terrorists groups, killing more than 30 Army personnel and wounding tens of innocent Egyptians. The Islamic State to the country's east must be stopped from getting into the Sinai and the oil fields in Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Knowing these facts, Egyptians reject the political manipulation that often accompanies the \$1.3 billion aid. Moreover, the aid that now comes to Egypt from the Gulf States amounts to more than 10 times that from the U.S. In an interdependent world, the market for and diversity in military equipment could change Egypt's special relationship with the U.S.

With the rise of fanaticism in the region and the experience with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian population at large became fearful of the Brotherhood's return into governance, and many Egyptians see Sisi as a savior in this regard. When Mohamed Morsi was elected president of Egypt in 2012, many in the country, including me, were hopeful that he would become a democratic president for all

Egyptians — not only for the Muslim Brotherhood. Unfortunately, his presidency quickly became a proxy for the Muslim Brotherhood, and under his leadership the country was driven to the edge of civil war. Millions took to the streets on June 30, 2013, and a group of civil liberals, religious, and military leaders led by Mr. Sisi decreed, after the isolation of Dr. Morsi, a new roadmap of change involving the election of a new president and parliament and the writing of a new constitution.

"Mr. El Sisi did not want the job," Adli Mansour, the chief justice of Egypt's Supreme Court and the president who succeeded Morsi, told me. "At the end, he decided to run because the people wanted him, and I told him it was his destiny," he added.

If the election was rigged, as some politicians and editorials have asserted, why would Egyptians continue to support him even after the election?

Shortly after Sisi was elected, his administration announced cuts of "subsidies" on natural gas and energy consumption and lowered those for bread and other goods. Such action was taboo during the Mubarak and Sadat presidencies for over half a century, but Sisi was able to convince Egyptians he was taking necessary action.

In another post-election call to Egyptians, he proclaimed the inauguration of a national project — the New Suez Canal — a waterway parallel to the old one dug in 1869, and called on Egyptians to invest in the project. In eight days, the Central Bank of Egypt raised EGP 61 billion (nearly \$8.5 billion) by selling investment certificates. I visited one bank during those eight days and the lines circled several blocks. The bank stayed open late due to the unexpected huge volume of transactions.

It is true that Egypt's attempt at democracy after the 2011 revolution encountered many obstacles in governance and infrastructure. Many in the media were overzealous to then Field Marshal Sisi when he ran for the presidency after Mansour. And, since the 2013 revolution, there remain issues to address, among them the rule of law for NGOs, the cases of political prisoners awaiting trials, and the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood population into the political fabric of Egypt.

At this pivotal time, the U.S. should assist Egypt through direct dialogue and partnership. The leverage is America's soft power, access to the American market, a free trade agreement and the aid to build new educational and democratic institutions. The so-called Arab Spring has proved that the fall of a Mubarak-like presidency does not mean the immediate rise of democracy. In spite of this, I am confident that Egypt will not return to an authoritarian governing system again, and that with some time, it will achieve its democratic goals.

Egypt is facing monumental problems. Besides the issues of security to its east (the Islamic State), to its west (Libya), and in the south (Yemen), there are internal issues — economic and unemployment factors — of grave concern. But despite this, Sisi has

managed to get the majority of Egyptians behind him, taken serious steps toward reforming the ailing economy, and given hope to the country by initiating major national projects, such as the New Suez Canal and the new City of Science and Technology. He is the first president to form a Council of Advisors of scientists and engineers to aid him in solving major national problems. As the the Economist put it in a piece about Sisi's first 100 days, the president, "has brought economic and diplomatic advances as well as hope to Egyptians wearied by years of political turmoil."

Threatening Egypt with aid cuts is not in the best interest of the U.S.-Egypt relationship. The issue is no longer Sisi alone. Rather, it is "We the People" who are also deciding on future relationships, not only with the U.S., but also with Israel.

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