Rethinking Ties with Egypt
by Jon B. Alterman

It’s a heck of a way to treat an ally. After more than 30 years of intimate relations, U.S.-Egyptian ties are, in the words of Egypt’s foreign minister, “unsettled.” Charges fly back and forth, and thoughtful voices in Cairo and Washington wonder just how much of the relationship can be salvaged.

Many see a rising crisis in U.S.-Egypt relations. It is more correct, however, to see conditions as a rising opportunity.

Even in good times, the relationship has struggled. A few short years after Camp David established a multi-billion dollar aid tie, each side began to feel taken for granted by the other. The Egyptian military, a cornerstone of the relationship, grew increasingly frustrated that U.S.-Egyptian ties were an outgrowth of U.S.-Israeli ties, and a poor cousin to them at that. Constituencies for a strong relationship remained narrow. In the last decade, public approval ratings for the United States among Egyptians consistently have been below 15 percent, except for a brief uptick after President Obama’s 2009 speech at Cairo University.

The core of the problem is that this relationship has been too reliable. Having originated as a bold stroke that shook up Middle East alliances, gave the West a victory in the Cold War, and recast the Arab-Israeli conflict, the U.S. aid relationship to Egypt became pedestrian. Egyptians came to treat U.S. aid as an entitlement, and Americans complained that Egyptians made the aid process cumbersome and inefficient. The Egyptian government took credit for what it did with U.S. funds, often with U.S. advice and guidance. Egyptians began to complain that all of the U.S. assistance money went to U.S. implementers and vendors and argued that it was more like welfare for U.S. companies than assistance for Egypt. Meanwhile, the swarm of U.S. contractors created a constant churn of visitors with little continuity. Aid became a commodity.

The funding discussion every year was not about what new activities the two countries could do together or how to broaden the partnership, but instead a constant negotiation of how much Egypt could wrangle out of the United States for a fixed amount, and how much Egypt would have to do in return. Egyptians

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came to feel they were doing too much for too little, and Americans came to believe they were getting too little for too much, but neither side dared revisit the terms of the relationship.

The change in government in July in Egypt, and the subsequent decision to restrict some forms of U.S. assistance, offers an opportunity to escape this trap. The rigid aid levels that governed U.S. assistance to Egypt have been shattered. So, too, has the notion that aid is and must be the cornerstone of the countries’ strategic relationship, and the assumption that neither side had any alternative to a relationship with the other. The interruption in the aid relationship has injected an opportunity for creativity, and it is an opportunity each side should take.

Most fundamentally, each side needs to decide what kind of relationship it wants with the other, and just how central it wants to make the other to its strategy. While Egypt provides many benefits to the United States, it is essential to only a small subset of them. Many of the benefits can be obtained from elsewhere, albeit at higher cost and with more difficulty. The reverse is true as well. Weighing options is healthy, not harmful, and it stands to reinforce the logic of a close relationship after all.

In addition, the benefits to each side of a close bilateral relationship too often have been hidden from the public. As each government considers its options, more public discussion in both countries provides an opportunity to build a stronger foundation for the overall relationship.

For both sides, a new relationship also offers an opportunity to strike a new tone. The aid relationship made Egyptians hyper-sensitive to U.S. criticism, out of fear they would look subservient to U.S. dictats. Unfortunately, the announcement of the decision to suspend some aspects of U.S. aid reinforced that sensitivity. Ideally, the announcement would have been a joint effort that suggested this was a decision two allies agreed on together. Instead, the unilateral announcement (which came, adding insult to injury, in the short interregnum between Egyptian Armed Forces Day and the Eid al-Adha holiday) came across as overbearing.

For their own part, Egyptians seem to have made a national sport of vilifying U.S. ambassadors. There is not one at the moment, and the Egyptian press went apoplectic over Robert Ford, an accomplished diplomat whose name was floated informally but not accepted by the Egyptian government. Egypt is weakened by the absence of a U.S. ambassador, and the nation demeans itself when it treats honorable officials in this manner.

A new tone does not mean that the United States should stop speaking out, however, and may even mean it should speak out more directly. In particular, many in the United States— and some in Egypt—believe that the political vision espoused by many of Egypt’s interim leaders is incompatible with their economic vision. That is to say, the only way to have a vibrant economy that draws foreign investment (and retains domestic investment) is to embrace politics that are inclusive and encourage moderation among political extremes. American officials should not be afraid to say so directly. At the same time, carefully calibrating conditions on U.S. assistance to progress on democratization or other measures of governance seems a sure recipe for ineffectiveness, since these conditions essentially dare Egyptian decisionmakers to defy U.S. will. As we have seen in the last two years, that is an easy political calculation for Egyptians to make, and it rarely goes in the United States’ favor.

For all of its importance to the United States and Egypt alike, the U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relationship is badly frayed. The current moment of tension gives an opportunity to repair and renew it. To do so, however, requires a conviction on both sides that doing so is valuable and a common understanding of what the two sides are building toward. Without that understanding, the relationship will deteriorate. ■ 11/14/2013

Links of Interest

CSIS’s Global Forecast 2014 report featured articles by Jon Alterman on “What Should the Middle East Expect from the United States and its Allies?” and by Haim Malka on “Can We Stop Violent Extremism from Going Mainstream in North Africa?”

Abdullah al-Shayji spoke about GCC states’ skepticism and concerns toward U.S.-Iran rapprochement at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable entitled “The Charms of Iran: A GCC Perspective.”

Haim Malka recently authored an analysis paper on “Morocco’s African Future.”

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in “U.S. Quietly Observes Coup Law on Egypt Aid, But Shuns Term.”

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