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## **What's Happening with Suspended Military Aid for Egypt? Part I: The Apaches et al. One Year On**

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Last October, the Obama administration [announced](#) it was holding back [four large-scale weapons systems](#) purchased for Egypt, including 125 M1-A1 battle tank kits, twenty F-16 fighter jets, twenty Harpoon cruise missiles, and ten Apache attack helicopters. It made their delivery contingent upon “credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections.” This was a significant move, the first time a US administration had ever suspended any of the annual \$1.3 billion military aid package. The administration lifted its hold on the Apaches, [which are now on their way to Egypt](#), but the other weapons remain in storage in the United States, more than a year later.

The new aid policy, along with restrictions on military assistance enacted by Congress, sought to alter the bargain with Egypt from weapons in exchange for peace with Israel, to weapons in exchange for peace *and* democratic progress. This has of course angered Egypt, used to a steady flow of American weapons since the 1979 Peace Treaty regardless of its human rights record. On his first trip to the United States as president last month, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi complained about the suspension in a [Charlie Rose interview](#). The Peace Treaty remains secure, but the policy has not advanced stated US democracy goals. During the past year, Egypt has [slid back into authoritarian rule](#), experiencing one of the worst periods of repression in its modern history. This article discusses why the suspension has not been an effective democracy promotion lever; a forthcoming article will cover the status of the military aid on which Congress has imposed democracy conditions.

### **The Suspension Decision**

The decision to suspend these weapons came reluctantly, several months after the Egyptian military's July 3, 2013, ouster of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Fearing a rupture with the military that would jeopardize US security interests, the US administration did not take any punitive action immediately after Morsi's overthrow.

Instead it adopted a cautious, wait-and-see approach, hoping, along with many Egyptians, that the coup would set the country quickly on a more democratic path.

The security forces' bloody dispersal of pro-Morsi sit-ins in Cairo's Raba'a and Nahda squares last August 14 shattered the administration's wishful thinking and threatened to unleash a destabilizing cycle of violence. The sheer scale of the state violence by a US ally—Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) that a minimum of 900 protestors were killed that day—cried out for a response. The following morning, President Barack Obama [declared](#) that “while we want to sustain our relationship with Egypt, our traditional cooperation cannot continue as usual when civilians are being killed in the streets and rights are being rolled back.”

It was not until nearly two months later, however, that the administration announced what the no-business-as-usual policy would mean in practice. This was a partial aid suspension, designed to express strong displeasure to Cairo and to demonstrate, especially to US domestic critics, the administration's commitment to human rights, but without upending bilateral ties or having to terminate US defense contracts (the weapons had been paid for, just not delivered).

### **Challenges and Opportunities for US Influence**

There are several reasons why the suspension has not had results as a democracy promotion tool. Heavy factors in Egypt have been stacked against such external influence. The post-coup government has felt itself in a battle of survival against the ousted Brotherhood. It has enjoyed strong support from many Egyptians as well as from its Gulf donors to crush the group, clamp down other dissent, and restore “stability.” In such circumstances the preferences of an outside power immediately are diminished. In addition, Egypt's new leadership needs to legitimize itself and one obvious way to do so is to thumb its nose at Egypt's former patron, the United States. Furthermore there is no vocal constituency inside Egypt to amplify US messages on democracy. Association with the unpopular United States on such sensitive matters is dangerous and the US administration has done little to build trust among those Egyptians who do oppose a return to autocratic rule.

But it is also true that the United States is not without leverage that it could have applied, especially early on. It could have maximized the opportunity of timing and taken much stronger action, closely coordinated with Europe, right after Morsi's ouster and Raba'a—when the eyes of the world were on Egypt and the new government's international legitimacy was the most vulnerable. The administration could have withheld other military aid, as a more serious incentive for a course correction. The Egypt military can live without the suspended weapons for a while—it already has 220 F-16s, thirty-four Apaches (though not all are operable), and more than 1,100 M1-A1 tanks. Suspending maintenance for Egypt's existing stock of US-origin weapons, more important for its day-to-day operations, would have been a much tougher signal. The United States quietly could have frozen some of Egypt's privileges, such as cash flow financing or the ability to use the interest accrued from its special Foreign Military Financing (FMF) account to procure additional US arms beyond the \$1.3 billion annual package. The administration could have put a moratorium on high-level visits. Rather, Secretary of State John Kerry went to Cairo a few weeks after the aid suspension.

The administration was averse to playing hard ball for many reasons. Fundamentally it has been ambivalent about how much a democratic Egypt really matters to core US interests. Thus it has not felt an imperative to take stronger measures that could provoke a backlash and lead Egypt to withdraw vital security cooperation. At the heart of the hesitancy seems to be a perception that in the dynamic of the post-Mubarak era, Cairo holds more cards than Washington.

### **Private Pressure, Public Praise**

Instead, the administration has employed relatively soft tactics with the aid suspension. The centerpiece of the approach has been Secretary Kerry's frequent private diplomacy, trying to encourage Egypt's leadership to pursue a more democratic path. (Obama has mostly kept his distance.) The focus, quite appropriately, has been on the need to uphold [freedom of association and assembly](#) and protect human rights, more than on holding elections per Sisi's "[road map](#)." Kerry reportedly has pressed for revisions to the harsh protest law and for improvements to the NGO law, as well as for the [release](#) of certain imprisoned activists and journalists. (Accountability for the bloodshed at Raba'a, the original trigger for the suspension, does not appear to have been a major part of the agenda.)

None of this has borne fruit so far. Mixed and inconsistent US messages from the outset have sapped US influence, weakened its standing, and drained the policy of value even simply as a firm moral and political stance against repression. US officials [insist](#) that Kerry delivers tough messages in private. On a few occasions, after especially troubling events such as the handing down of death sentences against hundreds of Morsi supporters in March, he has issued [sharply critical statements](#). But otherwise Kerry has shied away from public censure, leaving this role to State Department spokespeople. Instead he mainly has conveyed a positive message of Egypt's enduring importance, the government's commitment to democracy, and the US commitment to the country, seemingly without much regard to its worsening human rights situation. "We will work hard to augment what is a longstanding and deep partnership between the United States and Egypt," [he said in June](#), noting he detected a "serious sense of purpose and commitment" by Egypt's leadership to meet popular demands for "dignity, justice." On a visit last weekend, Kerry [expressed](#) "our strong support for Egypt as it undertakes significant reforms." Kerry has suggested that the "transition" is succeeding but needs just a bit more progress before the United States can offer its full endorsement. He has minimized the significance of the aid suspension, [calling it](#) "not a punishment" and "a very small issue."

Presumably the hope has been that avoiding direct public criticism will make Egyptian officials more responsive, but this has not worked. Egypt has pocketed Kerry's praise, rebuffed his private entreaties (such as when a court sentenced Al Jazeera journalists to prison the day after his visit in June, over his exhortations), argued strenuously that Egypt is on the path to democracy, and continued the crackdown. Recently, as the United States has moved to [strengthen ties with Sisi](#) and expand counter-terrorism cooperation, fatigue over pressing Egypt on human rights seems to be setting in and the suspension has hardly been mentioned.

### **The Story of the Apaches**

Because the suspension was an executive branch decision, not a congressional requirement, the administration can adjust its policy and change course at any time. This is exactly what happened with the Apaches. Initially the administration held firm as Egypt argued that it needed more Apaches for its campaign against a jihadist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. A senior Department of Defense official [testified to Congress last October](#) that the hold on the Apaches was “not affecting [Egypt’s] operational effectiveness in the Sinai at all.” In the subsequent months, Kerry tried to convince Egypt to make modest human rights gestures to justify releasing the helicopters, without success. By last spring, the administration changed its mind, in the face of growing worries over the extremist threat in the Sinai (as well as lobbying from Egypt, its Gulf supporters, and Israel). On April 22, before a high-level Egyptian visit to Washington, the administration [announced](#) that it was sending the Apaches for use in Sinai counter-terrorism.

Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Chairman of the Senate subcommittee that oversees foreign assistance, quickly blocked the move. Leahy, a congressional human rights champion and a strong advocate of linking military aid to Egypt’s democratic progress, was [highly disturbed by the mass death sentences](#). Another [concern](#) was that the United States didn’t have enough visibility about whether the Apaches were being used in attacks on noncombatants in the Sinai. Leahy set tough conditions, including releasing certain political prisoners and allowing access for journalists and NGOs to the Sinai.

Over the months, Kerry tried to convince his former Senate colleague to set aside his concerns. On August 29, the State Department [announced](#) that the Apaches would be on their way for the Sinai campaign. Several factors may have contributed to Leahy’s change of heart. A major one is the new US preoccupation with the rise of the Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham (ISIS), which gives more urgency to Egypt’s Sinai campaign. Another is congressional dynamics: although some members of the Appropriations Committee share Leahy’s human rights concerns, none were willing to join him in this case. Finally, perhaps Leahy concluded that holding the Apaches was not having any effect. He and other lawmakers may be gearing for a harder stance on a separate bucket of aid, \$728 million in new FMF, some of which will require Kerry to make democracy certifications to Congress.

### **What Happens Next?**

The tanks, F-16s, and missiles suspended last October are still on hold. If the administration doesn’t want to take action any time soon, the weapons could sit in storage for a while longer. Ultimately, the United States could decide to redirect them to other uses, although such a step would be rare. There is a constituency inside the administration and Congress, however, that wants to phase out the traditional big-ticket weapons and focus the FMF program more on counter-terrorism and capacity-building. The suspension has chipped away at a longstanding argument against such a change—that the uninterrupted flow of these weapons is required to protect US security interests. Over the past year, Egypt has continued to provide expedited approval for overflights of its territory, head-of-the-line privileges for US Navy warships to traverse the Suez Canal (the special surcharge paid by the United States surely helps), and counter-terrorism cooperation. Egypt’s relations with Israel are the best in recent

memory. Thus, this experience could nudge open the door to a long-overdue, politically arduous restructuring of the aid package.

Given the pattern of US-Egypt relations since 2011, in which the United States has at times taken a stand on democracy and human rights only to back down in the face of intense Egyptian pushback, the administration probably will relent and release the other three weapons systems, in order to start a fresh chapter with Sisi. If Egypt continues on an authoritarian trajectory, the administration would have to credit Sisi with false democratic progress to justify such a decision. Or, it could assert that the other weapons (tanks?) are now essential for counter-terrorism. Either move would meet some resistance in Congress and further erode US democracy credibility, but the administration may view these as tolerable costs.

### **Conclusion**

The administration is unlikely to adopt a tougher democracy stance anytime soon, especially after the frustrating experience with the aid suspension. To many in Washington, Sisi's strongman state is preferable to the violent fracturing of Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The hard questions that few seem to be asking, however, are whether repression can ever create lasting stability in Egypt and whether Sisi's oppressive rule will worsen the very problem of regional terrorism the United States seeks to combat.