



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Case Analysis | 11 January 2021

The Biden Administration and Egypt: A New Course or Business as Usual?

Karim Mezran and Emadeddin Badi

The Biden Administration and Egypt: A New Course or Business as Usual

Series: **Case Analysis**

11 January 2021

Karim Mezran and Emadeddin Badi

Karim Mezran is director of the North Africa Initiative and resident senior fellow with the Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council.

Emadeddin Badi is a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Middle East Program.

Copyright © 2021 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Strategic Relationship with Sporadic Tensions	1
Cairo's Reaction to Biden's Victory: Anxiety and Apprehension	2
Misplaced Optimism	3
Is There No Hope?	4



Since the announcement of Joe Biden's victory in the US election, a state of anxiety and unease has gripped Egypt. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi will now lose a reliable friend in Washington, President Donald Trump, who famously **referred to him** as his "favorite dictator." Egypt's concern is rooted not only in Sisi's loss of an important ally in the White House but also in the incoming administration's overt criticism of the status of democracy and human rights in Egypt. The key question now is whether the US-Egyptian relationship will undergo significant changes under the Biden Administration or remain as it was during the past four decades.

Strategic Relationship with Sporadic Tensions

Since the late 1970s, Egypt has been one of the most important strategic partners of the United States in the Middle East. As the most populous Arab country with great political and cultural clout across the region, Egypt remains a key player with which any American administration would be keen to maintain a strong relationship. Egypt also controls the Suez Canal, the important global shipping route connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. Furthermore, the relationship between Cairo and Washington was strengthened after Egypt signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979; indeed, the bulk of the **over \$84 billion** in aid the United States has provided to Egypt since 1946 was allocated since 1979, and most of that in the form of military assistance. In 2021, Egypt is set to receive \$1.4 billion in US aid. Such aid contributed to keeping President Hosni Mubarak's regime in power until he was overthrown after the January 25, 2011 uprising, and it is now essential for maintaining the Sisi regime.

Strategic cooperation between Egypt and the United States cuts across multiple domains, but it is especially prominent in the areas of security, defense, intelligence, and counterterrorism. Perhaps Egypt's position as a key US partner in these areas of strategic importance is what accounts for its importance to Washington as a regional ally. This is also what explains the persistent American concern for Egypt's stability.

The relationship between Egypt and Israel also plays an important role in strengthening the alliance with Washington. As the two countries have not witnessed any wars since they signed the peace accord in 1979, Washington considers the Egypt-Israel relationship as an important achievement that cannot be sacrificed. Egypt also has a critical function in ensuring Israel's security, especially on its western border with Gaza, which has been controlled by Hamas since 2007. On numerous occasions, Egypt has played a mediating role between Israel and Hamas, helping to maintain a shaky ceasefire and preventing military tensions from flaring up between the two parties. Meanwhile, Cairo and Tel Aviv have also developed strong security and economic ties during recent decades, especially in the field of oil and natural gas, which reinforces Egypt's position as an important regional partner for the United States.

Despite this unique relationship, the American-Egyptian relationship saw tensions in recent times, especially with regard to issues of democracy, civil liberties, and human rights. Under the



administration of President George W. Bush, the United States pressured Mubarak to respect human rights and make political reforms. President Barack Obama's administration also urged the Egyptian government to free political activists and suspend limitations on civil society organizations. In response to protests that broke out in January 2011, the Obama Administration called on Mubarak to respond to protesters' demands and allow for a transfer of power. When he refused to do so, Obama abandoned him and this contributed to Mubarak's downfall. Although the Obama Administration failed to condemn the July 2013 coup d'état that brought Sisi to power, it **partially suspended** its provision of military equipment to the Egyptian army in October of that year. The decision was taken in response to the regime's brutal suppression of peaceful protests and aimed to push Egypt toward establishing a civilian, democratically elected government through open and fair elections, especially following the Rabaa al-Adawiya **massacre**. In March 2015, these limitations on Egypt's procurement of military equipment **were lifted** under the pretext of the country's counterterrorism needs.

During the era of President Trump, relations between Cairo and Washington reached an unprecedented degree of harmony and cooperation. Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was the first foreign president to **congratulate Trump** on winning the 2016 election. The two leaders were known to share a strong personal relationship, one that was further strengthened by Sisi's crucial role in facilitating Trump's so-called **peace plan** between Israelis and Palestinians—even though the plan's aims included normalizing relations between Israel and Arab countries at the expense of Palestinian rights. These factors encouraged the Trump Administration's deliberate disregard of the **horrific human rights violations** committed by the Sisi regime against Egypt's political opposition. Sisi also faced no criticism for his dictatorial policies toward political activists, journalists, and civil society organizations. Over the course of the Trump presidency, the United States has even provided direct political, military, and economic support for the Sisi regime.

Cairo's Reaction to Biden's Victory: Anxiety and Apprehension

Anyone following the Egyptian press will have noticed the extent of the Egyptian regime's anxiety and confusion following the announcement of Trump's electoral defeat. It is noteworthy that Sisi was the first Arab president to **congratulate Joe Biden** on his victory. Cairo also **signed a contract** worth \$65,000 per month with a US-based lobbying firm in order to enhance communication and develop ties with the Biden Administration's transition team. In taking these steps, the Sisi regime is motivated by a deep fear of a return to Obama-era policies that paid attention to the promotion of human rights and the protection of personal freedoms and civil society.

These fears are further amplified by concerns that Biden would succumb to pressure from some members of the US Congress who are dedicated to human rights—such as Senator Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) and Representative Tom Malinowski (D-New Jersey)—to introduce conditions on delivering military aid to Egypt in order to spur improvements in the country's human rights record. The Sisi regime also fears that the Biden Administration will open a dialogue with the Egyptian



opposition abroad, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, and press for their integration into political life. Even though such a possibility is unlikely, it remains one of Sisi's concerns about the new US administration. At the same time, Biden's victory could have the opposite effect and contribute to hardening the regime's stance against the opposition, if Sisi wishes to prove that he is not submitting to American pressure. Perhaps this is what happened in mid-November when **Egyptian security forces arrested** many political activists and human rights defenders such as Gasser Abdel-Razek, the executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

Misplaced Optimism

Egypt is living under one of the worst dictatorships in the Arab world at present. Over the past six years, Sisi has stifled opposition—whether Islamist or secular—and, instead of extending liberties and freedoms, he has built more prisons to confine dissidents, political activists, and journalists and imposed tighter restrictions on civil society. Egypt has now transitioned into a system of one-man rule where power is fully centralized in Sisi's hands. He is backed by the military establishment, which controls the political, economic, and security spheres. The situation in the country has only worsened after Trump assumed the US presidency in 2016.

Perhaps ironically, there is a stark similarity between Sisi's authoritarianism and Trump's authoritarian tendencies, which have come into view during his tenure as president. Thus, Trump's departure from the White House has come as a breath of fresh air to the Egyptian opposition, raising hopes that Biden will open a way for them to gain some influence and will put an end to Sisi's appalling human rights violations. However, it seems that members of the Egyptian opposition, especially those in exile, may be far too optimistic in their expectations of a Biden presidency and its ability to change the situation in Egypt. Washington's willingness to exert real pressure on Sisi to bring about change in his authoritarian policies is questionable at best.

First, Biden is not likely to risk the strategic relationship that Washington has historically had with Cairo for the cause of democracy and human rights. American strategic interests constitute the priority for any US administration, whether Democratic or Republican, even if this entails collaboration with authoritarian regimes. Second, Biden was not enthusiastic about **ousting the former Egyptian dictator**, Hosni Mubarak, after the January 2011 uprising; in fact, he maintained good relations with Mubarak due to concerns over the destabilizing transformations that the uprising sought to spur in Egypt. Third, it is important to remember that the coup on July 3, 2013, as well as the unprecedented repression and bloody events that followed it—particularly the Rabaa al-Adawiya massacre—occurred while Biden was serving as vice president to Barack Obama. In sum, it is difficult to imagine that Biden would take harsh action if these violations were to occur again.

Finally, the Sisi regime has room to maneuver in the event that the Biden Administration criticizes its democracy and human rights record. Most importantly, it could turn eastward to Russia and China in



order to exert pressure on the United States. In fact, Sisi **pursued this path** during the last two years of the Obama Administration and strengthened his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, concluding several military, commercial, and economic deals with the country. Similarly, during the Trump Administration, the Egyptian army has **conducted** several joint military activities with its Russian counterpart. President Sisi also bolstered his country's **relationship with China**, particularly in trade and financial and economic issues, raising the volume of trade and investment between the two countries to unprecedented levels. Therefore, the Biden Administration will walk a fine line between preserving its strategic interests with Egypt and drawing attention to the country's appalling track record of democracy and human rights violations.

Is There No Hope?

The Biden Administration will most likely avoid making radical or dramatic changes to the US relationship with Egypt. The strategic ties between the two countries go back decades and the United States has remained eager to preserve this relationship despite occasional tensions. The two countries' cooperation in security, defense, intelligence, and military affairs is expected to continue without undergoing major shifts. This is especially true since the US Department of Defense and National Security Agency have a greater responsibility for managing and running these relationships than the White House.

Changes in the American approach might remain rhetorical and will not constitute real policy change. The Biden Administration is expected to direct some degree of criticism toward the Egyptian government's crackdown on opposition figures and political activists, as Biden has **openly criticized** the Sisi regime's human rights violations during his election campaign and even noted that he would not give "a blank check to Trump's favorite dictator." Perhaps this is what worries the Egyptian regime most. In addition, the Biden Administration will likely not stand in the way of legislation Congress may pass concerning respect for human rights and democracy in Egypt. It is also doubtful that Biden would welcome President Sisi to the White House, at least not during his first two years in office. Finally, if a popular uprising occurs in Egypt in the coming years, the Biden Administration might potentially abandon Sisi, as Obama did with Mubarak a decade ago.

Despite the hopes pervading Biden's presidential victory, particularly after Trump's dreadful policies since 2017, genuine changes in American foreign policy—particularly toward authoritarian countries such as Egypt—will put such optimism to a real test in the coming four years.

