

## Unconditional US assistance to Egypt is not the way to go



Elissa Miller

**E**gyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry recently visited Washington for the first time since the election of US President Donald Trump. During the visit, Shoukry met with several US officials, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and national security adviser H. R. McMaster, to reaffirm strong US-Egypt ties and prepare for an upcoming visit by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Some have predicted the Trump administration would herald a revitalised US-Egypt relationship, citing Trump's praise of Sisi and the Egyptian government as proof. Indeed, during their meetings with Shoukry, Tillerson promised additional assistance for Cairo's counterterrorism efforts and McMaster emphasised Trump's determination to expand bilateral cooperation. Days before Shoukry's visit, US Army General Joseph Votel, the head of US Central Command, met with Sisi in Egypt and described Egypt as "one of our most important partners in the region".

Those trumpeting this vision of a renewed US-Egypt relationship view it as a reversal of Obama-era policy, which was marked by a year-and-a-half partial freeze on the delivery of major weapons systems to Egypt.

Even after military equipment started to be released to Egypt, the Obama administration ended the preferential practice of cash-flow financing that allowed Egypt to sign contracts for military equipment on credit. US Representative Dana Rohrabacher, R-California, has introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives that would reverse Barack Obama's decision to end cash-flow financing as of 2018.

The privilege essentially enables authorised recipients of US foreign military aid – only Egypt and Israel currently benefit from it – to pay for US defence items in instalments over years rather than all at once. This allows Egypt to sign large contracts for military equipment on credit, which obligates future US military aid appropriations to those purchases.

Egypt has been authorised to use cash-flow financing since 1979. This is viewed as US recogni-



**New mood.** US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (R) meets with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in Washington, on February 27th.

(Reuters)

tion of the importance of bilateral ties. Some argue that by announcing that cash-flow financing would end for Egypt from 2018, the Obama administration signalled that it was questioning the United States' special relationship with Egypt. Indeed, Rohrabacher's resolution called Obama's decision "a departure from long-standing United States policy". It also said that the extension of cash-flow financing would strengthen relations between the two countries.

From Egypt's perspective, the reinstatement of the preferential financing system is a priority. During his meeting with Sisi, Votel expressed interest in resuming the Bright Star military exercise with Egypt that Obama cancelled in 2013. While its resumption would be in tune with the mood music about a renewed relationship, for Egypt, it is the financing mechanism that remains a higher goal.

This was apparent from Shoukry's discussions in Washington with officials, including US Representative Kay Granger, R-Texas, chairwoman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee. Shoukry repeat-

edly made connections between the security challenges facing the United States and Egypt.

Cairo may be hoping that by framing counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East as both US and Egyptian national security interests, the Trump administration will remove holdover conditions Obama placed on assistance to Egypt. These would include the financing system.

However, the new administration should resist pressure to reinstate the financing privilege to Egypt. Suspending it is in line with Trump's overall foreign policy rhetoric about US alliances, especially in critical areas such as the Middle East and North Africa. The removal of this special aid mechanism makes US assistance to Egypt more flexible. It becomes less like a blank cheque, in the phrase used by many on Capitol Hill.

Suspending the financing would allow the United States to better tailor its military assistance to Egypt as threats emerge in the region. It would also not have to obligate funds years in advance.

This would not mean the abandonment of the US-Egypt

relationship. Rather, it presents the administration with an opportunity to maximise US assistance while making it clear that it cannot be taken for granted.

Rhetoric that promotes unconditional assistance for fear of losing influence in Egypt or angering a critical US ally presents a false choice. US influence in the Middle East has, in fact, changed over the past seven years as conflict and turbulence have spread.

It would be a mistake to continue the special financing mechanism for Egypt for the sake of maintaining influence. Moreover, it is possible to fit assistance policies to the new realities without calling into question the fundamental importance of the bilateral partnership.

Sisi's visit to Washington, expected in early April, will be an opportunity for the Trump administration to affirm its commitment to the relationship but that does not mean unconditional assistance.

**Elissa Miller** is an assistant director at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East.

**The removal of special aid mechanism makes US assistance to Egypt more flexible.**

## Trump and Russia's growing role in Libya



Joe Macaron

**A**s the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov was returning to Russia in January from Syria through the Mediterranean, it made an unlikely stop off the Libyan coast near Tobruk. A Russian helicopter flew in self-proclaimed Libyan National Army commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who was received on board in an official military ceremony.

Less than two months later, the Western-backed Libyan Prime Minister Fayed al-Sarraj went to Moscow, urging for Russian mediation to compel Haftar to concede. He returned empty-handed.

Moscow's consequential moves since last year are yielding high returns for a low-risk investment, steadily transforming Russia into a potent player in southern Europe's backyard. Now that the Islamic State (ISIS) has been nearly eradicated from Libya, US President Donald Trump's administration will have to assess if a Russian foothold in the south of the Mediterranean poses a threat to US national security.

Libyan rivals have been enticing Moscow to intervene, in particular after its military campaign in Syria. The Government of National Accord Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed

Maiteeq went to Moscow in May 2016 to enlist Russian support in the fight against terrorist groups in Libya. The United States ended up providing airpower to the forces led by the Government of National Accord (GNA) and helped liberate Sirte from ISIS last December.

In the case of Haftar, the gateway to Russia has been the warming of relations between Moscow and Cairo since Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Egypt in February 2015. Haftar went to Moscow twice last year while his troops were defeating the Petroleum Facilities Guard led by Ibrahim Jathran, a close ally of the GNA, and seizing control of oil terminals in Ras Lanuf, Al-Sidra, Zueitina and Brega. Haftar handed the seized oil crescent terminals to Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC), which promptly resumed oil exports from eastern Libya.

On February 20th, the NOC signed an agreement with Russia's Rosneft to jointly evaluate opportunities for oil exploration and production. The White House's executive order in January banning travel from Libya among seven countries led to the postponement of a major February 16th conference by the National Council for US-Libyan Relations that was meant to promote investment opportunities for US firms in the Libyan energy and infrastructure sectors.

No doubt Haftar is gaining the upper hand. Sarraj has failed to extend his control over the western part of Libya and is struggling to exert influence on forces in Misrata and Tripoli.

While the GNA looks for international support across the board, Haftar's dealings with foreign powers have been more tactical. He managed to militarily shape a Libyan *status quo* in which no long-term or comprehensive solution can be reached without his consent.

International efforts to integrate him in the institutions that emanated from the Libyan political agreement have failed. Sarraj's only hope is for Haftar to accept an official role that legitimises the GNA but the Libyan military leader is in no rush to concede.

For the European Union, the predominant concern remains curbing the flow of migrants across the central Mediterranean via Libya, hence Brussels has been eager to engage Haftar. However, British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said at February's Munich Security Conference that Russia was testing NATO in Libya and that "we don't need the bear sticking his paws in".

Libya is increasingly becoming one of the many issues in which the Trump administration and the Europeans do not see eye to eye. Two key policy questions will

define the US approach to Libya: What to do with Haftar and how to react to Russia's involvement. The Emirati, Russian and Egyptian support will likely ensure that the Trump administration does not challenge Haftar.

The Libyan field marshal made it clear what he hopes to happen. "If Russia and the United States come together to stamp out terrorism, that can help us. We are going to shake their hands. We will align with them," he said on February 5th to France's *Journal du Dimanche*. Such an improbable US-Russian deal in Libya would significantly weaken European influence in North Africa.

Indeed, what will happen in Libya in 2017 largely depends on what steps Haftar takes and on how the Trump administration shapes its relations with Moscow. The most plausible scenario is for Washington to intermittently focus on ISIS while remaining neutral on Libya, which will allow Haftar's influence to grow on its own.

Ultimately, Putin will have yet another bargaining chip with the Europeans. Moscow is increasingly becoming the go-to place for Libya and the United States seems fine with that as long as ISIS is subdued.

**Joe Macaron** is a Middle East analyst at the Arab Center of Washington DC.

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