

## Two Decades of Strategic Shifts the Future and Challenge of Egyptian-American Relations

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### Abstract

*Egypt has been a cornerstone for U.S. national security interests and key a strategic ally of the United States in the Middle East since 1970s. However, throughout the last decade two decades the Egyptian American relations witnessed unprecedented deterioration. This paper is an attempt to answer four interconnected questions. First, why Egyptian-American relations has deteriorated despite of their deep-rooted strategic relations since 1970s. Second, why the United States build strategic cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) after the downfall of Mubarak (1981-2011). Third, why Obama (2009-2017) administration rejected building strategic cooperation with Sisi despite the fact that both Morsi (2012-2013) and Sisi received power as a result of the military intervention to oust the incumbent. Fourth, what the prospect of Egyptian-American relations. This paper argues that the Egyptian-American relations needs comprehensive reconsideration and reestablishment that taken into its account the new realities and threats of the region and the mutual strategic interests of the two countries. It argues that economic cooperation and sharing the fruits of development, instead of military and aid-related cooperation is the more relative persistent strategic cooperation between the two countries.*

**Keywords:** Mubarak, Obama, Bush's freedom agenda, National security strategy, Military relations, The Muslim Brotherhood

### Introduction

Egypt has been a cornerstone for U.S. national security interests and key a strategic ally of the United States in the Middle East since 1970s. In fact, Military relations are the backbone in Egypt-US relations, which centered on Egypt's geostrategic position as a leading regional power affiliated with multiple regional security systems in the Middle East, South Mediterranean and North Africa (El Zayat, 11). Egypt thus is an integral part of US's Middle East strategy: security of Israel; combating terrorism; securing the oil wells in the Gulf region, containing Iran nuclear threat, pursuing the Middle East peace process, and maintain regional security and stability. In order to protect these strategic interests, the United States enhance the military capabilities of Egypt, through military cooperation and aid - including the Foreign Military Financing (FMF), the Economic Support Fund (ESF), and the International Military Education and Training program (IMET) - which takes three forms: arms sales, military technology transfer, and joint military exercises (El Zayat, 1). In this context, between 1948 and 2015, the United States provided Egypt with \$76 billion in bilateral foreign aid, including \$1.3 billion a year in military aid from 1987 (Sharp, 2016, 13). In fact, since 1979, Egypt was the second largest recipient, after Israel, of U.S. aid (El Zayat, 1).

In return, Egypt since the late 1970s had provided the United States with some logistic privileges, including, "over-flight rights and expedited transit through the Suez Canal, for U.S. military aircraft and naval ships, respectively" (Aftandilian, 2012, 9). Additionally, Egyptian military officers have benefited from the IMET different programs. The current president of Egypt, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, graduated from U.S. Army War College, in 2006, after attending USAWC Strategy Research Project in the college and presented a paper on "Democracy in the Middle East" (El-Sisi, 2006). Joint military training and exercises are one of the key defense cooperation between Egypt and the United States. Since 1994, the Egyptian army and the U.S. Army have been participating together in the "Bright Star" military exercise that is held every two years, but have been suspended since 2008. These military exercises helped the U.S. Army train to fight in desert conditions in the Middle East (El Zayat, 11). Similarly, the two countries also conducted in 2008 joint naval exercises called "Eagle Salute." "With these exercises, the two countries seek to address maritime piracy and secure geostrategic straits" (El Zayat, 11). Economic relations with the United States are significant as well. There are more than 200 American companies working in Egypt, in areas ranging from energy to manufacturing to services (Alterman, 2016, 11). Bilateral trade has stood at more than \$5 billion for a decade, and the United States has enjoyed a healthy surplus in each of those years (Alterman, 2016, 11). Overall, the United States represents Egypt's seventh-largest export market and its second-largest source of imports, trailing only China (Alterman, 2016, 11). Egypt benefited from the role of the United States in the global economy in boosting the Egyptian trade globally, encouraging foreign investments, and supporting economic reform programs endorsed by the World Bank (WB) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to the extent that prior to the January revolution Egypt was being touted as an "emerging success story" by the IMF (Khan, 2012, 1). Accordingly, Egypt economic growth had increased from 4.5 percent in 2004 to 7.2 percent in 2008 (Sarihan, 2012, 76-77). The United States soft power in Egypt is significant as well. For instance, "of the 35 ministers and ministers of state in the current government of Egypt, 16 have either studied or worked in the United States or worked for a company or international organization with close U.S. ties" (Alterman, 2016, 8). Nevertheless, throughout the last two decades, specifically in 2005 and 2012-2016, the Egyptian American relations witnessed unprecedented tensions, especially when the United States cut part of the military aid to Egypt in 2013.

This paper is an attempt to answer four interconnected questions. First, why Egyptian-American relations has deteriorated despite of their deep-rooted strategic relations since 1970s. Second, why the United States had built strategic cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) after the downfall of Mubarak (1981-2011), despite the fact that the MB is anti-democracy group and despite the dangerous of the group on United States national security and security and stability of the Middle according to some US policymakers (Rosso, 2013, 9-10). Third, why Obama (2009-2017) Administration rejected building strategic cooperation with Sisi despite the fact that both Morsi (2012-2013) and Sisi received power as a result of the military intervention to oust the incumbent. Fourth, what the prospect of Egyptian-American relations and what are the new strategic foundations that enable both countries to reestablish their relations on a more constant interests that enable them to face the contingencies of the future and changing regional security environment.

This paper argues that six interlinked variables affected American-Egyptian relations almost throughout the last two decades. First, the shift that Obama Administration made in the United States foreign policy by replacing Bush Administration 'freedom agenda' with strategic and security cooperation with the authoritarian leaders of the region, including President Mubarak and thereafter President Mohamed Morsi. Second, the shift that Obama made in the United States National Security Strategy, specifically those of the 2010 and 2015 American National Security Strategy that prioritized the United States interests in the Pacific or what is so-called "Asia pivot" over its traditional Middle East interests. Third, the unexpected eruption of the Arab spring and the prompt changes in Egypt internal dynamics and in Egypt key political actors: the military, then the MB, and finally the military. Fourth, the centrality and the dominancy of the military aid in the Egyptian-American relationships. Fifth, the mistrust between the two countries that resulted from the rapprochement between the MB and Obama Administration, which help spreading anti-Americanism and push the military to suspect the American approach under the ground that the United States is going to replace the military with the MB as Egypt's kingmakers. Sixth, the big shift carried out by President Donald Trump in the American foreign policy, by replacing Obama human rights-oriented foreign policy with maintaining status quo and regional security. Importantly, Trump cordially behavior towards Egypt counterterrorism campaign and the mutual chemistry he shares with Sisi of Egypt.

This paper argues that Egyptian-American relations need comprehensive reconsideration and reestablishment based on the new realities and threats of the region and the two countries mutual strategic interests. It argues that economic cooperation and sharing the fruits of development, instead of military aid-related cooperation is the more relative constant strategic cooperation between the two countries. This does not mean suspending the military relations, but rather to suspend gradually the military aid, not military and defense cooperation, and replaced it with economic cooperation. However, rebuilding Egyptian-American relations on the economic bases and reformulating the military aid requires determining economic areas that the United States could provide Egypt with the required support and redefining the military and political areas, at least for the next decade, that both countries can support each other to maintain their strategic cooperation and justify their economic cooperation.

## **2. From Bush “Freedom Agenda” to Obama “status-quo Agenda”**

Since coming to power in 1981, Mubarak had been a key strategic ally for the United States in the Middle East. He served American interest of maintaining regional peace and stability. At that time, the American Administration finds the Arab autocratic and authoritarian leaders strong allies for maintaining strategic interests in the Middle East. However, after the atrocity and barbaric attack of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush (2001-2009) reorienting the United States policy towards Middle East. Bush finds that authoritarianism produced terrorism and fighting terrorism required promoting democracy in the Middle East, ruled by his close allies. Bush came to see that the United States policy of maintaining status quo by the alliance with authoritarian leaders of the Middle East damaged the wider American interest and national security. These ideas has been crystalized thereafter in what is so-called Bush's “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East” (Alessandri, 2015, 3). Bush's 'freedom agenda' was aimed at promoting democracy in the Middle East authoritarian regimes. Mubarak resisted therefore Bush freedom agenda and his call for political reform in Egypt (Arafat, 2009, 87). Since then, Egyptian-American relations have deteriorated as a result of the pressure made by Bush on Mubarak to conduct political reform and as result of the dialogue Bush Administration made with the MB. Nevertheless, Egypt democratic reform process benefited from Bush's freedom agenda. During its peak years (2004-2006), For instance, Egypt conducted its first multi-candidates presidential elections in 2005, instead of yes-or-no referendum to endorse the president. It witnessed also holding the 2005 parliamentary elections in which the MB won about 20% of the seats (Arafat, 2009, 120). It witnessed also holding dialogue between the United States and the MB (Maged, 2011), despite the concerns of US western allies of the risky of supporting the MB (Johnson, 2011). However, the electoral victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections sent a clear signal that promoting democracy would bring Islamists to power and thus forced the United States to made significant shift in the Bush freedom agenda by replacing its “democracy promotion” and “regime change” with a long-term strategy of political reform and maintaining the old status-quo policy. In fact, Bush administration shift also laid foundations for what the Obama Administration has come to call “the long game”, which emphasizes “partnerships” and “sustainability” in its efforts to create the long-term conditions for freedom, peace and prosperity (Alessandri, 2015, 4).

## **3. Obama Middle East Policy**

When President Barak Obama entered office in 2009, issue of promoting democracy inside Egypt and “freedom agenda” in the broader Middle East was on the shelf. The Obama Administration had in fact terminated the Freedom Agenda and returned to the old status quo policy. For Obama democratization is "a sort of "status quo policy with reforms." (Aftandilian, 2012, 4). Thus, in his Cairo speech in June 2009, democracy promotion was not at the top of his agenda (Aftandilian, 2012, 4). To empathize his policy, President Obama states that, "I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other." (Alessandri, 2015, 12). In fact, Obama Middle East policy (2009-2016) was motivated by the shift he made in the United States National Security Strategy, specifically those of the 2010 and 2015 National Security Strategy, by reorienting the United States interests from the Middle East to the Pacific or what is so-called “Asia pivot”. In this context, Obama draws his attention from democracy promotion in Middle East into human rights issues, maintaining regional security, including security of Israel, and containing Iran nuclear threat. To quote the 2010 National Security Strategy, "we...will not seek to impose these [universal] values through force.

Instead, we are working to strengthen international norms on behalf of human rights...We are supporting ...integrating human rights as a part of our dialogue with repressive governments, and supporting the spread of technologies that facilitate the freedom to access information"( The White House, 2010, 5).

"We recognize economic opportunity as a human right, and are promoting the dignity of all men and women through our support for global health, food security, and cooperatives responses to humanitarian crises," it adds (The White House, 2010, 5).As for the Greater Middle East, the strategy focused on the United States security commitments to its allies, Iranian threat - including nuclear weapons, support for terrorism, and threats against its neighbors - nonproliferation; counterterrorism cooperation, access to energy, and integration of the region into global markets and supporting the aspirations of the people of the region for justice, education, and opportunity. ( The White House, 2010, 24-25).Importantly, the strategy ensured that the security cooperation is the key factor in the Egyptian-American relations (The White House, 2010, 45).The 2015 National Security Strategy reiterated the same policy orientations of the 2010 strategy but in a more explicitly. It argues that "Our rebalance to Asia and the Pacific is yielding deeper ties with a more diverse set of allies and partners. When complete, the Trans-Pacific Partnership will generate trade and investment opportunities—and create high-quality jobs at home—across a region that represents more than 40 percent of global trade."(The White House, 2015, 1). However, it reiterated the same US policy towards Egypt, security cooperation. It ensures that "we will maintain strategic cooperation with Egypt to enable it to respond to shared security threats, while broadening our partnership and encouraging progress toward restoration of democratic institutions."(The White House, 2015, 26). This strategic shift reflects itself in the American position towards the 2011 revolution, the 2013 revolution, its relations with Morsi and the MB, its relations with Sisi regime.

### **3.1 USA and the 2011 Revolution**

Influenced by the Tunisian revolution and the downfall of Ben Ali regime, Egyptian activists, using social media, called Egyptian people to protest against Mubarak on January 25, 2011. In an attempt to anticipate the events but to not anger American longstanding ally, Mubarak, Secretary of State Clinton stated publicly on January 24, 2011, one day before the 2011 revolution, "our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people." (Aftandilian, 2012, 6). The statement finds no positive reactions because no one in Egypt dares to think that January 25, 2011, would be an exceptional day. The statement itself says nothing about the American position towards democracy promotion in Egypt. However, the American positions towards the 2011 revolution was a reaction to Egypt internal dynamics and the changing of the relative weights of the political actors on the ground, the protesters, the military, Mubarak and his security forces. Thus, after the spread of the demonstrations, the Obama Administration made balance between security interests, including maintaining Peace Treaty with Israel, and advocating human rights, not democratization. Two statements had been issued on January 28, after several days of protests and police violence against the demonstrators, exemplified both Obama new Middle East policy and his position towards the 2011 revolution. The first, issued by President Obama in which he expressed his desire to work with the Mubarak government for a more just and a more free Egypt and urged the Egypt government to respect the people's universal rights. The second, issued by the White House press spokesman, "called on Egypt's security forces to refrain from violence and put Egypt on notice that U.S. security assistance would be reviewed based on developments on the ground." (Aftandilian, 2012, 9).However, many protesters in Tahrir Square ignored these two statements. As one protesters put it, "they [the United States] had betrayed Egypt democratic movement since 2007 when Bush retreated on his democracy promotion agenda. They can easily betray us [protesters] and ally with Mubarak against us(author personal communication, Cairo, January 29, 2011).

However, as a result of spreading the protesters and when it has become clear that Mubarak is about to fall after the military turned against the president, Obama urged Mubarak regime to begin the transition "now." (Aftandilian, 2012, 7-9). Obama statement had no effect on the Tahrir Square protesters other than it was a signal that Obama turn against his Egypt's ally, Mubarak. To quote one protesters, "now Uncle Sam abandoned his strongman in Cairo." (Author personal communication, Cairo, February 2, 2011). Less than ten days later, Mubarak resigned formally from power, on February 11, and transformed the leadership to Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which becomes Egypt de facto president from February 11, 2011 to June 30 2012. Despite the fact that the American stance which avoid from any initiative, it reflects a tension in the Egyptian-American relations.

However, after the downfall of Mubarak, Obama made a balance between its rhetoric of protecting human rights and its strategic interests with the Egyptian regime (Celso, 2014, 1). Obama thus had tried to build relations with all contradictory political actors in Egypt, specifically the MB and the SCAF. In a consistent with the 2010 national security strategy, Obama restricted his relations with Egypt into two interconnected areas: regional security, especially Egypt eastern borders with Israel, for which Obama provided Egypt with \$1.55 billion to be used for "border security programs and activities in the Sinai" (Sharp, 2014, 19-20). Second, building strategic dialogue and rapprochement with the MB in order to receive assurance of the intention of the group, especially in terms of security of Israel, including peace treaty, and human rights. Thus, after the MB won a majority of seats in the first post-Mubarak parliament, Obama Administration accepted the ascendancy of the MB as a new political reality and expressed its desire to work with the MB if they played by the rules of the political game. Even Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, have visited leaders of the Brothers (Gerges, 2013, 419). In return, the Brotherhood Deputy Supreme Guide Kheirat El-Shater, declared during the MB's team visit to Washington, "his commitments to human rights, women's rights, and maintaining peace with Israel." (Gerges, 2013, 419). In fact, the MB with its pragmatic vision understands that any move against Egypt's peace treaty with Israel would endanger its relations with the United States. (Martini, et al. 2012, 62-63). Actually, the United States' rapprochement with the MB is a sign that the American came to see the Brothers "as more of a political power than a security threat." (El-Anani, 2011). To quote State Department spokesman Mark Toner, "talking to the Muslim Brotherhood would be in the best interest of the US." (El-Anani, 2011). In fact, Obama Administration strategic approach with the MB came despite the warnings of the dangers of the MB on the American national security and Israel issued by high-ranking US security experts such as Former U.S. Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey. To quote Woolsey, "If the White House or anybody else lets the Muslim Brotherhood participate in the transitional or formation of constitutional amendments for Egypt, I'm very worried we will have a very strong influence in a future Egyptian government," he said. "And that means a very bad situation for the Middle East, for Israel, and us and everybody else." (Rosso, 2013, 9-10). Two years later Woolsey prediction came true. Mohamed Morsi become Egypt post-Mubarak president and proved after just one year the inability of the MB to rule Egypt and its danger on the regional security.

### **3.1.1 Obama and Morsi**

Two years before the elections of Mohamed Morsi and few months after Obama has issued the 2010 National Security Strategy, the newly elected Supreme Guide of the MB, Mohamed Badi'a, called for Jihad against America. (Rosso, 2013, 9). Nevertheless, after the election of Morsi, Obama Administration engaged the new president affiliated from a group that does not believe in democracy or human rights.<sup>1</sup> The Administration took this path despite the opposition to and fear of the Brotherhood within the U.S. Congress (Rosso, 2013, 9), and amongst long-standing U.S. strategic partners in the region such as Saudi Arabia (Alessandri, 2015, 19). To clarify how "the Administration would deal with an Islamist head of the Egyptian state, U.S. officials stated at the time that they would "judge by actions, not words." (Sharp, 2014, 16-17). However, it seems that both the MB and Obama Administration are concurred on the principles of the American-Egyptian relations: security cooperation, including the security of Israel. It is not surprisingly therefore that Morsi has repeatedly asserted after his election his respect to the peace treaty with Israel and his government's intentions to expand the scope of economic treaties to include Israel (El Houdaiby, 2013, 1). Thus, with its ideological influence on Hamas, the MB and Morsi helped broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas (one of the MB offshoots) militants in Gaza in November 2012 (Azzam, 2013, 167-168). Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "I want to thank President Morsi for his personal leadership to de-escalate the situation in Gaza and end the violence" (Sharp, 2014, 16-17). One day after the Gaza ceasefire, Morsi issued his power-grabbing constitutional declaration, and rammed through a new Islamist constitution shortly thereafter (Trager, 2013, 5-6). Morsi November declaration triggered unprecedented protests that could not be calmed until Morsi was deposed. Several of Morsi's advisors and Ministers were either not consulted or totally ignorant of the Declaration before Morsi issued it and some consequently resigned (Blair, et al., 2013). This led to the establishment of the National Salvation Front (NSF) and *Tamarod* (Arabic for rebellion).

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<sup>1</sup>The Brotherhood's early views on democracy and political participation were defined by Al-Banna who rejected politics, and stated that "pluralism and parties were divisive and harmful." In fact, the MB's main goal was the creation of an Islamic state, yet "democracy, freedom, justice, human rights, and common citizenship for members of religious minorities" were substituted as main goals from the 1980s. See Meijer, Roel, 2009, 9-10, Devine, Erica, 2011, 14-15.

*Tamarod*s aimed to collect millions of signatures on a petition calling for President Morsi to step down and organize early presidential elections. *Tamarod* claimed to have collected 22 million signatures on the petition, which was much more than the 13 million votes that Morsi obtained on the second round of elections. On June 26, *Tamarod* proposed a roadmap to manage a post-Morsi Egypt, which included holding early presidential elections and appointing an interim president. The success of the *Tamarod* campaign coincided with the decline of the MB's popularity and the stellar rise of the military's.<sup>2</sup> With these prompt changes in Egypt internal dynamics, the United States finds itself in a difficult position. The United States, according to U.S. ambassador to Cairo, Anne Patterson, opted to oppose "street action" and worked to persuade various groups to stay out of the demonstrations (Thiessen, 2013). However, as a result of a nationwide popular revolution in June 30, 2013, in which Egyptians protesters were in greater numbers than they did against Mubarak (Thiessen, 2013), the military intervened in July 3 to oust Morsi from power. Obama Administration condemned the military, but the president notably did not refer to the military's takeover as a coup — a phrase that would have implications for the \$1.3 billion a year in American military aid to Egypt (the New York Times, July 3, 2013).

However, behind the scenes, the Obama Administration pushed hard to force the military to compromise with the MB by releasing Morsi from detention. However, "America's calls have fallen on deaf ears and Egyptian generals have appeared to be immune to American pressure." (Gerges, 2014). Despite the fact that Obama pressured the Egyptian government to release Morsi and the MB high-ranking members, "the U.S. government has avoided any direct confrontation with the new military regime." (Celso, 2014, 2). Nevertheless, the United States has been attacked by all sides of this internal conflict, simultaneously accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and engineering their removal of power (Sharp, 2014, 16-18). The MB and its supporters blamed the United States for the coup despite the fact that the American ambassador to Egypt, Anne Patterson, "broke the news to Morsi aides that the army was kicking them out" (Smith, 2013). Many Egyptians, especially non-Islamists, accused the United States and then-U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson of favoring the Morsi Administration (Sharp, 2014, 15-17). Once again, Tahrir Square was awash in anti-U.S. signs: "Obama and Patterson support terrorism" read one. Another said: "Wake Up America, Obama Backs Up a Fascist Regime in Egypt." Another showed Patterson shaking hands with the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (Thiessen, 2013). In fact, Egyptian after the downfall of Morsi are divided over many issues, however, one thing they are all united on: US Ambassador Anne Patterson must leave, and American "interference" in Egypt has had a negative impact (Sabry, 2013). A recent poll suggests, two-thirds of all Egyptians feel that the United States was too supportive of President Morsi. And more than 8 in 10 feel that "Egypt was harmed by the U.S. policy of support for Morsi." (Zogby, 2013, 4). Nevertheless, as a result of the American position, which interpreted by many Egyptians as supporter of the MB and Morsi, the American Administration and Obama himself lost the popularity in Egypt. According to a Zogby poll conducted in July, President Obama, who had earned high marks among Egyptians following his "Address to the Muslim World" delivered at the University of Cairo in 2009, has now dropped to a 3% positive rating. At the same time, confidence in the United States is at 1%. (Zogby, 2013, 4).

In fact, since the downfall of Morsi, Obama Administration is focused on human right issues in Egypt, restrictions on opposition parties, specifically, the MB, civil society organizations, and used military aid as a political tool. For instance, "in order to demonstrate its disapproval of the Egyptian military's reassertion of power without cutting all military-to-military ties, the Administration announced in October 2013 that it would withhold the delivery of certain large-scale military systems (such as F-16s, Apache helicopters, Harpoon missiles, and M1A1 tanks) to the Egyptian government." (Sharp, 2014, 12). Despite these punitive measures, which were withdrawn one year later in June 2014, "the military-led government in Cairo acted independently and showed no sign of retreat." (Gerges, 2014). Additionally, the American government downplayed the punitive action against Egypt. During his November 2013 visit to Cairo, Secretary of State John Kerry remarked: "So this aid issue is a very small issue between us, and the Government of Egypt, I think, has handled it very thoughtfully and sensitively." (Sharp, 2014, 18). In fact, US punitive action has achieved few tangible results and sent a confused message to Egypt and the region (Hanna, 2013, 3), specifically the United States close allies: Israel and the Arab Gulf States, which have criticized the U.S. for taking punitive action against Egypt.

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<sup>2</sup> The armed forces boast an approval rating of 94 percent, according to a Zogby poll conducted from April to May. By contrast, support for Morsi had been in steep decline, falling from 57% to 28%. See for more details, Springborg, 2013a and 2013 b.

To balance the withholding of the American aid to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates rushed to promise financial packages worth an estimated \$12 billion (Sharp, 2014, 36, Alterman, 2016, 16-18, and Shokr, 2013).

However, it became clear since November 2013 that Obama Administration accepted the military's *fait accompli* while simultaneously shifting focus to regional security issues, such as Sinai stability and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Sharp, 2014, 16-18). In justifying the President's goals for the region, National Security Advisor Susan Rice remarked, "We can't just be consumed 24/7 by one region, important as it is....He thought it was a good time to step back and reassess, in a very critical and kind of no-holds-barred way, how we conceive [of] the region." (Sharp, 2014, 18). Obama accordingly focused his policy throughout the last two years of his second term on security issues and the violation of human rights in Egypt. For instance, on December 23, the U.S. State Department criticized the Egyptian interim government for protest law (Dunne, 2015, 83) and for its violations for the human rights and described the law as it "sends a chilling message to civil society at large. (Sharp, 2014, 7). To conclude, since the downfall of Mubarak, the United States was in an unprecedented position. If the United States support the military, it will be condemned by the Islamists. And, if it supports the Islamists, it will be condemned by military, liberal forces, and mainstream Egyptians.

### **3.1.1.1 El-Sisi and Obama Administration**

There is no doubt that the election of Sisi in 2014 has created new tensions with the U.S. In fact, with the election of Sisi and the return of the authoritarianism, the divergence in Egyptian-American relation became more widened which demonstrate itself in Obama position towards Sisi's government. In this context, while Egypt faced attacks of the MB supporters on military establishments<sup>3</sup>; Coptic churches;<sup>4</sup> and the declaration of *AnsarByat al-Maqdes* ('Supporters of Jerusalem') - militant group allied with the MB – the Islamic State of Sinai; Obama urged Sisi to exert more effort in political inclusion and respecting human rights (Smith, 2016). On the other hand, the government of Egypt considered, right or wrong, Obama position as naïve and as an intervention in Egypt's internal politics and as a sign that the United States underestimate the nature of threat that Egypt faced in fighting terrorism. Only to quote some examples, in June 2015, the State Department released its *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, in which it contained a list of the human rights violations for which it held the Egyptian government responsible (Sharp, 2016, 3). In August 2015, the U.S. State Department condemned the anti-terrorism law issued by the Egyptian government (The Atlantic Council, 2015). As a reaction, Sisi escalates tensions with Obama, specifically weapons suspension, claiming in an interview that it sent a "negative indication to the public opinion that the United States is not standing by the Egyptians." (Sharp, 2016, 12).

Furthermore, he began expanding Egypt defense ties with other countries as well. The Egyptian military signed new arms agreements with Russia (S-300) and France (Rafale Fighters). (Sharp, 2016, 12). Meanwhile, senior Egyptian government officials do little to hide their belief that the United States has a peculiar and counterproductive bias against the current Egyptian government and the will of the Egyptian people. As one senior official complained, "I fail to understand why the United States doesn't support a viable and strong Egypt. A strong, stable, and secure Egypt is in the U.S. interest, no?" (Alterman, 2016, 11). Additionally, with a tactic support from the government, op-eds in the state-owned newspapers, independent ones, and Egyptian television talk shows, "insisted over and over again that the United States entered into a conspiracy to put the Muslim Brotherhood in power and that the Egyptian public's uprising against U.S. designs has humiliated the United States and saved Egypt." (Alterman, 2016, 16). Thus, after one year of the election of Sisi, Egyptian-American relations were in an unprecedented deterioration and tensions became more flagrant.

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<sup>3</sup>Addressing the continued violence in Sinai, Brotherhood leader *Mohamed El-Beltagi* stated that the attacks would "immediately stop if Sisi returned power to Morsi," implicitly admitting their involvement. Additionally, much of the Sinai militant action was thought to be funded by *Al-Shater* and the construction company *Baraq*, which operates in Gaza. See for more details Nawara, Wael, *Egypt's crowd democracy*, Al-Montior, 2013, and Eleiba, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>According to Human Rights First, "Over 130 Coptic churches and Christian religious structures, homes and businesses were attacked in the weeks after August 14. Around 45 churches and religious structures came under simultaneous attack in the immediate aftermath of the violent dispersals of the pro-Morsi protests." see for more details Human Rights First, 2013, 6-7.

Despite the fact that the suspension of the military aid was ended in March 2015, Obama Administration announced that future military assistance to Egypt would be largely reformulated by the beginning of 2018 fiscal year, to four categories –"counterterrorism, border security, Sinai security, and maritime security –and for sustainment of weapons systems already in Egypt's arsenal."(Smith, 2016 and Sharp, 2016, 12-13). It was a clear signal that the United States policymakers start rethinking the military aid to Egypt. It was clear also that tension in the Egyptian-American relations become hardly to mend.

#### ***4. New Prospective and challenges of the Egyptian American Relations***

The American contradictory and sometimes unclear position towards Egypt internal conflict (2011-2016) reflects a clear tension in the Egyptian-American relations, shocked the core of the Egyptian-American relations and even divided Egyptians on the issue of how important for their country to have good relations with United States, with 48% saying it is important and 51% saying it is not important (Zogby, 2013, 4). It is not surprisingly therefore that most Egyptians believed that the United States has no understanding of Egypt and its people. According to Zogby's poll, only 36% agree that the United States has some understanding, while 62% say that the United States has little or no understanding of Egypt and its people. (Zogby, 2013, 4). The tension in the Egyptian American relations proved that the foundations of their strategic relations are unable to respond effectively to the changing regional environment and the contingencies of the future. It is appropriate therefore for both countries to rethink their relationship, specifically the military aid, especially in the light of the Trump Administration's plan to cut the overall state department budget by 28.7 percent (Dune, 2017)and the ineffective punitive role of the military aid in the Egyptian-American relations. (Zogby, 2013, 3-4). In this respect, Sisi himself threatened, "to break off military relations if Washington does not stop threatening to withhold the annual 1.3 billion dollars of aid the US gives to Egypt, a development that suggests tension in US-Egypt relations." (Jadaliyya, 2013).In fact, the military aid is the unavoidable challenge that would face the future of the Egyptian-American relations.

Both countries should be ready to the inevitability of cutting the military aid by engineering non-aid strategic relations and redesigning new more sustainable relationships. A parallel-interconnected mechanism of a short and long-term strategy is appropriate to redesigning new foundations for more sustainable and viable strategic relationships. The short-term strategy is aimed at upgrading the capability of the Egyptian army with the support of the United States in order to abandoning the US military aid to Egypt gradually and resuming Egypt regional role, which help restoring balance of powers in the region. Upgrading the capability of the Egyptian army and reactivating Egypt regional role will lessen the defence spend of the United States in the Middle East in the near future. Of course, Egypt currently could not play a major role in the entire Middle East regional crises. Thus, determining the regional crises that Egypt can play a key role and determining the areas that Egypt can play supportive role to the United States is significant. Importantly, determining what the United States can provide Egypt to upgrade its military capabilities is important as well. The short-term strategy required designing a new military-relations formula: constant strategic dialogue between the Egypt and United States, joint military exercises, and reformulating the US military aid to Egypt into economic cooperation. The new military-relation formula would last throughout the short-term strategy and would become a part of the long-term strategy. Second, a long-term strategy: an economic cooperation or sharing the fruits of the economic relations. In fact, redesigning Egyptian-American relations on the economic cooperation basis, rather than security, maintaining the status quo, aid-related relations would ensure the sustainability and viability of their mutual relationships.

#### **4.1 The New Military-Relation Formula:**

##### **Egypt Future Regional Role**

Despite the fact that Egypt has lost its key regional role even before the Arab spring, which demonstrated itself in its limited role in the Syrian and the Iraqi crisis, the negotiation that led to the nuclear agreement with Iran, it has resumed gradually its key regional role, especially after the downfall of the MB. Importantly, Sisi foreign policy is corresponding to some extent with Donald Trump Middle East policy, which centered basically on: fighting terrorist networks, especially (Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, ISIS); maintaining regional security, including resuming peace process between Israel and Palestinian factions; and decreasing the Iranian influence in the region (Ibrahim, 2016). As for fighting terrorist networks, Egypt played already a major role in two battlefields (Libya, and Sinai of Egypt) out of the five battlefields that include terrorism networks: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Sinai of Egypt. However, Egypt could play supportive role in the other three: Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. As for Libyan crisis, Egypt has played already effective role and enjoyed influential role in Libya's key actors.



Egypt is a strong backer of General Khalifa Haftar, the current leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA) who in 2014 led armed campaign dubbed “Operation Dignity” to evict Islamist militia groups from eastern Libya (Sharp, 2016, 8). Egypt military also carried out airstrikes against terrorist groups in Derna in February 2015 (The Guardian, February 17, 2015). It also combats weapons flowing out of chaotic Libya into other terrorist battlefields, specifically West Africa, Sinai, or Egypt western desert.

But, Egypt army needs some heavy-weapons and anti-terrorism weaponry to build a “buffer zone” between Egypt's western desert and Benghazi to prevent infiltration of the terrorist militants from Libya, which required financial and technical support from the United States. On the other hand, Egypt has successful campaign in fighting terrorism groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda in Sinai. However, the Egyptian army needs more effort to complete its mission and to create a “buffer zone” between Sinai and Gaza, which required financial and technical support from the United States. Additionally, to play more influential role, Egypt needs to amend some articles of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel to allow a better deployment for the Egyptian army. Denial the deployment of the Egyptian army and disarms some areas of Sinai allowed terrorist groups allied with Hamas to spread in Sinai and threat Egypt national security. The United States with its influence on both side can ensure cordially negotiation to find solution for some disputed articles.

As for Yemeni crisis, despite the fact that Egypt did not participate with ground troops in the Saudi-led coalition, known as Operation Decisive Storm, against Houthi Rebels, Shia militant group allied with Iran, in 2015, it sends instead naval vessels keep the Bab al Mandeb Strait open to international shipping (Sharp, 2016, 9). Egypt is already fighting the infiltration of terrorists to West Africa and other Gulf States via its naval vessels at the Bab al Mandeb Strait. But, Egypt needs more smarter maritime defence systems to play a more effective role, not only in the Yemeni crisis, but also in the security of the Red Sea. With non-sectarian leaning, Egypt's government can play more effective role in the future peaceful settlement of Yemeni crisis. As for Syrian crisis, Egypt could not play a major role either. But, of course, it might play a diplomatic role, especially in the would-be negotiation regarding the post-Assad Syria.

Finally, as for regional security, including resuming peace treaty between Palestinian factions and Israel and Iranian threat to the Middle East regional security, Egypt can do major regional role if the United States espouse such unconventional strategy to deal with these sensitive issues, specifically for the Iranian threat. For instance, as for resuming peace process between Palestinian factions and Israel, it is difficult for Egypt to play the broker role it had played since 1990s, not only because of its differences with Hamas, but also because of the unreadability of the international community to initiate such process at the moment. Besides, no cohesive initiatives whichever surfaced since the Arab Peace Initiative, also known as the "Saudi Initiative", presented by prince *Abdullah* of Saudi Arabia in 2002.<sup>5</sup> Besides, Hamas-Fatah conflict has crippled any serious effort to resume peace process. To be fair, both Egypt and the United States, and even the international community, could not pursue peace process at least for the next five years due to their involvements in other urgent issues such as fighting ISIS, the Iranian threat, and the preoccupation of the Egyptian regime with its internal affairs, specifically its ailing economy.

As for containing Iranian threat, Egypt has already supported the United States effort to contain Iranian threat to both the regional security and to its Gulf States' neighbors. In fact, spreading the Iranian threat is linked to its role in Syrian, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Gaza. Thus, containing the spread of the Iranian threat required new unconventional strategy: "a victory without war", through drying the Iran's terrorist financial and logistic resources and disconnecting the umbilical cord between Tehran and its militant groups.

In this context, Iran political and military arms, including Hezbollah, Houthi militants, and Hamas, should be contained via cutting its financial and logistics resources from Tehran. Imposed economic sanctions on Tehran and connects the achievement of US nuclear agreement with Iran on disarming and withdrawing their militants in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq is decisive in this respect. But, to ensure its credibility, the United States should ask Saudi Arabia, which represents the same threat to the regional security as that of Iran, to stop financing Sunni militants in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Lebanon. Furthermore, Syrian borders should be controlled to prevent smuggling arms to the Iranian militant groups. The United States should play more tangible role in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, to suffocate the Iranian threat.

To counterweight Iranian role, the United States should provide Egypt with a more influential role in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. Perhaps, an agreement on the post-Assad Syria with Russia, Turkey, United States

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<sup>5</sup>See for the full text of Arab Peace Initiative, The Guardian, March 28, 2002.

and the United Nations would isolate Iran in Syria. In brief, drying financial resources and cutting smuggling arms to the armed militants allied with Iran would allow the United States to contain spreading the Iranian threat to the region and enable the United States to have a victory without war. Of course, Egypt can play a role in such strategy, specifically with Hamas and in supporting the United States diplomatic effort to disarm militant groups allied with Iran.

#### **4.1.1 The United States and Egypt Regional Role**

To play efficiency and effective regional security role, Egyptian army needs technical and logistical support of United States. Egypt of course does not have the most advanced weaponry, besides its military has been exhausted after five years war against terrorism in Sinai. Thus, Egypt needs more sophisticated weaponry to reorient its military toward unconventional war. According to one assessment, the Egyptian military needs, “heavy investment into rapid reaction forces equipped with sophisticated infantry weapons, optics and communication gear...backed by enhanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms. In order to transport them, Egypt would also need numerous modern aviation assets” (Sharp, 2016, 16). Egyptian military needs as well some sophisticated weapons to secure the country’s borders such as sensing technology, boundary reinforcement, and aerial surveillance (Alterman, 2016, 7). Egypt needs also some sophisticated weaponry to its Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) created by Sisi in March 2014 to enhance the ability to respond to security threats abroad (smith, 2016, 11). The RDF needs to be equipped with sophisticated infantry weapons, optics and communication gear from the United States. The RED could be developed into multinational forces to fight terrorism, but it still needs regional cooperation, international support, proposed members and funds. If it established, it would help decrease the American troops in the Middle East gradually.

##### **4.1.1.1 Redefinition of the Military Aid**

Reconsideration the military aid became unavoidable challenge, especially after it has lost its effectiveness role as a political tool.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the military aid will last, at least for a short term, not only because of strategic but also commercial interests<sup>7</sup> and financial cost if Egypt decides to take punitive actions against the United States as a reaction for cutting military aid<sup>8</sup>, both ally should reconsider the inevitability of cutting the military aid sooner or later. An indication of the possibility of cutting or at least decreasing the amount of the military aid in the future is the Trump Administration’s plan to cut the overall state department budget by 28.7 percent, the budget, which used for foreign assistance, including Egypt military aid. To meet abruptly cutting of the military aid, both countries should rethink from now to engineer Egyptian-American relationships on relative constant foundations. Sharing the fruits of the economic relations may be help building the future of the Egyptian-American relationships on relative constant strategic foundations. It allows the United States to suspend gradually its aid to Egypt without the angry of the Egyptian government. It will ensure economic prosperity and growth for Egypt to the extent that it may allow the government to afford its defence cost bill. This does not mean to suspend the military aid all together, but rather to be ready to the inevitability reality of the future by transforming amount of the military aid into economic aid, supporting military and naval exercises; and supporting Egyptian-American strategic dialogue.

## **5. A Long-Term Strategy**

### **Sharing the Fruits of the Economic Relations**

The most constant strategic mutual relations between the two countries that this paper proposed is the economic development and cooperation. If the United States supports real economic reform in Egypt and used its influence on the international organizations such as the IMF and the WB to encourage Egypt's economic liberalization

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<sup>6</sup>According to the poll conducted by Zogby, most Egyptians has become disinterested by the suspension of the American aid. 18% of those polled respond that “it makes me happy,” 24% say “it makes me angry,” but 56% say they “don’t care, because Egypt doesn’t need U.S. aid.” See for more details Zogby 2013, 4.

<sup>7</sup>US’s arms firms would lose contracts and joint ventures financed by US\$1.3 billion in annual assistance. See for more details Latek, 2013, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup>According to Robert Springborg, a professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., If Egypt were to deny the US some logistic privileges concerning the expedited passage through the Suez Canal, “it would have to substantially increase defense outlays to cover vastly larger logistical costs, or downsize forces in the Gulf. See for more details Sharp, 2014, 13.

programs. Egypt could be able to afford the burden of its security cost and can play major regional role it had played before. In return, the United States would be able to decrease Defence spend in the Middle East. In fact, an overview of the Egyptian economy would explain that the Egyptian economy has been in dire straits since the 2011 revolution. Its GDP growth rate dropped from 5.1% in 2010, to an estimated 1.8% in 2013 (Dyer, 2014, 36).

Egypt's unemployment rate rose from 9% in 2010, to an estimated 12.5% in mid-2016 (the World Bank, 2017 a). Poverty rates have increased significantly, from 21.6% in 2009 prior to the revolution to 26.3% in 2013 to 28% in 2015 and remains particularly high among women (25%), the youth (42%) (GSI and IISD, 2014), and rural Upper Egypt. (The World Bank, 2017 a). Government debt is 89.2% of GDP and overall debt is more than 100% of GDP (Cook, 2014). In 2013, the deficit has reached nearly \$3.2 billion per month (Sharp, 2014, 4), and it is estimated to at least 10% of GDP since 2010/11. (Smith, 2016, 17). Gulf States have helped fund budget deficit. But, their aids have decreased since 2016 which helped aggravated the difficulties of the Egyptian economy.<sup>9</sup> Inflation reached as high as 12.9% in July 2013 (Cook, 2014) and increased to an estimated 13.8% in 2016 (The World Bank, 2017 a), and reached to its highest recorded level, 30.2% in February 2017 (The World Bank, 2017 b). It is not surprisingly therefore that in May 2016, Standard & Poor's revised its future outlook of the Egyptian economy from stable to negative, but kept its credit rating unchanged at B-. (Egypt Daily News Egypt, May 20, 2016). Additionally, according to the recent report of the World Bank, issued in April 2017, the Egyptian economy would face unavoidable difficulties throughout the next two year (The World Bank, 2017 b).

In fact, the United States could support Egypt to move out from its economic crisis, but Egypt itself should provide the United States and international community with the reasonable justification to provide such support. One method of reforming the Egyptian economy is to improve the investment environment by undertaking legislative reform. It is true that Egypt carried out substantial amendments to the Investment Law in May 2015, along with changes to the Companies Law, the Sales Tax Law and the Income Tax Law (Salah, 2015); however, these laws are still required additional amendments to offer improved incentives and guarantees, removed obstacles, and streamlined procedures to encourage foreign investments. Additionally, Egypt needs to enact new laws for fighting corruption and improving transparency.<sup>10</sup> In addition to legislative reform, administrative reform is also essential to make it more production-friendly. This would also involve a significant reduction in the bureaucracy's size.<sup>11</sup> Egypt should reform subsidy-related issues. In the budget for 2012-13, the transitional government proposed reducing fuel subsidies (mostly for commercial enterprises) by 25% and increasing food subsidies by 8% (Khan, 2012, 3-4). However, despite the recent cuts, Egypt's 2014-2015 Budget, reveals an increase of 1% in spending on subsidies and social benefits (Rollins, 2014). Importantly, the agreement with the IMF and the fund of \$ 12 billion loan package Egypt received from the IMF in 2016, which aimed to stave off economic collapse in Egypt "as it grapples with a plunging currency, soaring inflation and shortages of staple foods" (Hadid, 2016), was good step in the right direction of the real economic reform. Accordingly, Egypt embarked on a major economic reform program, including the liberalization of the exchange rate, fiscal consolidation measures and reforms to the business environment. The liberalization of the exchange rate is a required step to restore the competitiveness of the economy and boosting private sector activity. (The World Bank, 2017 b). However, these reforms have faced currently social pressures, especially after the inflation reached to 30.2%. Thus, Egypt thus needs the support of the United States in that respect.

The United States can pressure the Egyptian regime to not retreat on the painful steps of the economic reform. They can also provide Egypt with the technical expertise required for economic reform programs. The United States can provide Egypt with long-term loans to rebalance its ailing economy. It also can increase its direct investments in Egypt. It also can transform part of the military aid into an economic aid.

With its influence on the wealthy GCC, the United States can encourage them to provide Egypt with long-term loans and direct investments. It can encourage as well its western allies to increase their direct foreign investments to Egypt. The United States can support Egypt counterterrorism campaign in the international organizations such the United Nations, which would help returning security and increased direct foreign investments in Egypt and

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<sup>9</sup>Gulf economic support for Egypt exceeded \$29 billion during 2013–2015, and may even have exceeded \$50 billion. See for more details Alterman, 2016, 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> Corruption is pervasive at all levels of government, with Egypt ranking 114 out of 177 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index. See for more details Freedom House, 2014.

<sup>11</sup>By 2012, the number of public employees was almost six million. See for more details Aly, 2014, 4.

help flourishing its ailed economy. An international campaign backed by the United States to support and return the trust of the Egyptian economy is significant as well. What Egypt needs is economic partner in development, not a military partner.

### **Conclusion**

In fact, Egyptian-American relations need comprehensive reconsideration and reestablishment based on the new realities and threats of the region, the two countries mutual strategic interests, and the challenge faced their future strategic relations: the military aid. Thus both countries should be ready to the inevitability of cutting the military aid by engineering non-aid strategic relations and redesigning new more sustainable relationships. To meet abruptly cut of the military aid, both countries should rethink from now to engineer Egyptian-American relationships on relative constant foundations. Sharing the fruits of the economic relations may be help building the future of the Egyptian-American relationships on relative constant strategic foundations. It allows the United States to suspend gradually its aid to Egypt without raising the angry of the Egyptian government. It will ensure economic prosperity and growth for Egypt to the extent that it may allow the government to afford its defence cost bill and play major regional role it had played before and allow the united states to decrease the Middle East defence spend. This does not mean to suspend the military aid all together, but rather to be ready to the inevitability reality of the future by transforming part of the military aid into economic aid, supporting military and naval exercises; and supporting Egyptian-American strategic dialogue. In this context, the United States can pressure the Egyptian regime to not retreat on the painful steps of the economic reform. They can also provide Egypt with the technical expertise required for economic reform programs, long-term loans, direct investments, and transform part of the military aid into an economic aid. It can encourages its allies and friends in the GCC and Western Europe to provide Egypt with long-term loans, direct investments, economic aids.

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