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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*



**Opinion**

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## The decision to cut aid to Egypt was historic. Now the hard work begins.

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In April, President Trump showered praise on Egyptian strongman Abdel Fatah al-Sissi in a state visit highlighted by the observation that Sissi has “done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation.” Trump acknowledged the two countries had “a few things” on which they disagreed, but omitted mention that since assuming power in a coup, Sissi had overseen an unprecedented crackdown on domestic dissent, killing hundreds and imprisoning thousands of others. Meanwhile, since the Camp David Accords in 1978, Egypt has with little variation received \$1.3 billion annually in military assistance and, in recent years, \$150 million in economic assistance.

So the announcement this week that the United States will cut \$95.7 million in aid to Egypt and delay another \$195 million because it had failed to make progress on respecting human rights and democratic norms was stunning. If the United States now acts to enforce these conditions against Egypt over time, the Trump administration would be making an extraordinary statement in defense of what the United States stands for — and on the need for both allies and adversaries to face meaningful consequences if they refuse to address legitimate U.S. concerns.

It took a lot for Sissi to provoke this response. A wide array of concerns came together in a perfect storm to convince the Trump administration that made maintaining Egypt’s aid package difficult this year.

First, Egypt was using U.S.-provided attack helicopters and rockets in its fight against Islamist militants in the Sinai Peninsula. But there have been widespread reports of gross abuses committed by Egyptian forces there and serious questions raised about Egypt strategy to address the insurgency. Contrary to U.S. law, Sissi has patently refused to allow U.S. government officials, rights groups and media to have access to the conflict zone, making the monitoring of the use of U.S. weaponry impossible.

Second, Sissi faced a firestorm of criticism after signing a draconian law regulating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The new law restricts groups to only performing development work needed by the Egyptian government, heavily restricts cooperation with international organizations and even subjects those found to be violating the law to up to five years in prison.

And third, in the pretext of fighting terrorism, Sissi has overseen a dramatic escalation of rights abuses against political opponents, civil society leaders and journalists. Estimates suggest there could be as many as 60,000 political prisoners in Egypt's jails. Egypt's prisons are reportedly at triple capacity and the government has built 16 more prisons. Those under investigation can be detained for up to two years without charge or trial, and Amnesty International estimates more than 1,400 people have been held beyond that two-year limit. Moreover, the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Egypt as the third-worst country in the world for detaining journalists, preceded by only China and Turkey. While these are shocking statistics, Sissi has also provoked U.S. ire by wrongly imprisoning a series of American citizens for years, such as nonviolent protester Mohamed Soltan and American aid worker Aya Hijazi, whose release Trump secured in April.

In light of the impunity with which Sissi had been operating, Trump's decision on U.S. aid sends a powerful signal. While the Egyptian government has long seen this aid as an entitlement, for the first time it is under threat. Unsurprisingly, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry reacted angrily, calling it a "misjudgment of the nature of the strategic relations that have bound the two countries for decades." But just hours after the announcement, Sissi met White House adviser Jared Kushner in Cairo, with both men smiling for a photo.

From here, however, it is critical that the White House maintain this principled position. There is an easy way to do that. In a provision of U.S. law authored by Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the United States can withhold up to 15 percent of its military aid to Egypt if it fails to take effective steps to advance democracy and human rights; implement reforms to protect freedom of speech, association and assembly; release political prisoners and provide detainees with due process of law; hold Egyptian security forces accountable for human rights abuses; and allow access for U.S. officials to monitor the use of military aid.

Unfortunately, both Republican and Democratic presidents have used their ability to waive the application of this provision and prior versions of it. The Trump administration, too, has issued a waiver on the \$195 million in aid that has been delayed, which prevents the funding from expiring in September and sets new terms that are more loosely tied to human rights.

While this is dramatically better than what has been done before, the simple solution is to give the Leahy provision full force and effect. From here, and in consultation with the Congress and civil society groups, the Trump administration should develop specific and measurable benchmarks by which to determine whether each of these specific conditions have been met. These benchmarks can then be presented to Sissi. If he fails to meet them, then the aid should be withheld. And if he remains intransigent and refuses to even try to meet those conditions, then Congress should consider amending the law to increase the percentage of aid that can be withheld.

Trump's decision to cut Egypt's aid was an important and long overdue step. Now the hard work begins.