Public Opinion and the U.S.-Egyptian Relationship

Presentation by Shibley Telhami

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Introduction

In this presentation, I will focus on the changing public sentiments, especially in the United States on the Egyptian-American relationship, and on the consequences for policy-making. I will start with a review of the public opinion findings, especially in recent months, then make some broad conclusions. I will review public attitudes toward foreign aid broadly and toward Egypt particularly, and consider the general views of Egypt among the American public and elites as they have unfolded particularly since the start of the overthrow of Husni Mubarak. I will also present some brief thoughts on the Egyptian public’s attitudes toward the United States.

US Opinion Toward Foreign Aid and Egypt

Foreign Aid

Foreign aid spending is highly unpopular among the majority of the American public. A Pew Research Center poll in 2013\(^2\) found that while the public tends to reject cuts in government spending in most areas, 48% of those polled were in favor of decreasing aid to the world’s needy, while 28% were in favor of keeping spending at the same level and only 21% advocated increasing it. By comparison, the next highest category of spending cuts was to the State Department, with 34% of those polled choosing to decrease spending. This shows how foreign aid cuts are by far more popular than any other type of public spending cut. This opinion has also remained fairly consistent over time. Similar Pew polls conducted in 2009 and 2011 show that support for decreasing aid grew from 34% in 2009 to 45% in 2011, while the number supporting an increase in spending declined from 26% in 2009 to 21% in 2011.

According to the Pew poll, there does seem to be a partisan divide in support for foreign aid. An overwhelming amount of Republicans (70%) say foreign aid should be decreased, versus only 25% of Democrats. While only 7% of Republicans were in favor of increasing aid, 33% of Democrats supported an increase. Of the three party categories (Republican, Democrat, and Independents), Democrats were the only group to have more people in support of increasing aid instead of decreasing aid.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Independent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decrease Aid Spending</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Aid Spending</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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Foreign aid spending is also characterized by deep misunderstandings about how much the US actually spends on assistance projects. A 2010 poll by WorldPublicOpinion.org/Knowledge Networks\(^3\) found that Americans vastly overestimate foreign aid spending. When asked to estimate how much of the budget is allocated toward foreign aid, the median response was 25%. This is consistent with polls


conducted by the Program on International Program Attitudes since 1995 and a more recent poll in 2004 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which placed the median estimate at 20% of the budget. A 2013 survey by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation found that, on average, Americans made a slightly higher estimation: 28% of the budget. Furthermore, when asked how much of the budget should be allocated toward aid, the median response was 10% in both the Kaiser survey and the WPO/KN poll. The actual percentage of the budget that goes toward aid is 1%. Only 19% of those polled in the WPO/KN study accurately estimated that foreign aid is 5% of the budget or less, and the Kaiser study found that only 4% correctly estimated that foreign aid spending takes up one percent or less of the budget. It is clear that not only does the American public think the government is spending too much on aid, but their recommended spending heavily outweighs what the government actually spends.

This begs the question of whether poll results would be different if respondents were told in advance the actual amount the US government spends on foreign aid. Indeed, the Kaiser survey found that respondents are much more likely to support foreign aid spending when they are made aware of the actual percentage of the budget spent on foreign aid. When they were told the right amount, the percentage of those who thought the U.S. spends too little on foreign aid doubled from 13% to 28%, and the percentage of those who thought the U.S. spends too much dropped by half, from 61% to 30%. This implies that Americans’ perceptions of foreign aid spending are heavily influenced by external cues, such as media coverage, instead of actual knowledge of the budget. Steven Kull of PIPA suggested that “This increase may be due to Americans hearing more about aid efforts occurring in Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti over the last few years,” supporting this idea that external cues are shaping views of foreign aid spending.

Information Can Change Perceptions About Amount Spent On Foreign Aid

What if you heard that about one percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid? Would you still think that the U.S. is spending (too much/ too little/about the right amount) on foreign aid, or would you now say that the U.S. spends...

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SOURCE: Kaiser Family Foundation 2013 Survey of Americans on the U.S. Role in Global Health (conducted August 6-20, 2013)
**Egypt**

While U.S. public opinion toward Egypt has been mostly favorable in the past, it has declined heavily since 2012 after an initial increase at the end of 2011, following the overthrow of Mubarak. Arab American Institute polls from the 1990’s\(^6\) showed that U.S. attitudes towards Egypt were almost four to one favorable at that time. After the 2011 uprising, Americans seemed to associate the struggle in Egypt with their own civil rights movement and an Anwar Sadat Chair/PIPA poll in 2011\(^7\) found favorability ratings to be as high as 60% and 70% of respondents of that poll were favorable toward the “people of Egypt”. However, favorability toward Egypt declined sharply in the years following the overthrow, as it went from 58% in 2010 to just 33% in 2012. Results from the 2014 Gallup World Affairs poll\(^8\) support this uptick in unfavorability, though they show a decline in unfavorability to 45% in 2014. This could be due to the “relative calm in Egypt in recent months”.

### Egypt: Favorable/Unfavorable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Favorable</th>
<th>Unfavorable</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>51</td>
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</tr>
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<td>1997</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Arab American Institute

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\(^6\) “American Attitudes Toward Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood”. Arab American Institute. March 2013. [http://b.3cdn.net/aai/bb8329d81f05caa4c6_07m6bn93w.pdf](http://b.3cdn.net/aai/bb8329d81f05caa4c6_07m6bn93w.pdf)


The AAI report attributes some of this decline in favorability to the changing perceptions of Egypt. Respondents had given the open-ended question: “what is the first thought that comes to mind when you think of Egypt”. In the past they had given words associated with ancient Egypt, like “pyramids”, “the Sphinx”, or “King Tut”. However in the recent polls, they mostly associated words like “dangerous”, “chaos”, and “war” with Egypt. This indicates that the instability in Egypt after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak is coloring its favorability ratings.

The unfavorability toward Egypt may also be due to the election of the Muslim Brotherhood party. In 2013, only 4% of Americans polled said the election of the Muslim Brotherhood was a “positive development”, with 38% saying they were “concerned that this was a set-back for Egypt”. Even among those who are favorable toward Muslims, 34% say they are concerned and only 6% see it as a positive development.

Interestingly, Americans seemed to have similar feelings toward President Morsi as they did toward President Mubarak. When asked about their opinion toward Mubarak in 2002, his favorable/unfavorable ratio was 20% to 17%. When asked again in 2013, his ratio was 18% to 50%, while Morsi’s ratio in the same year was 14% to 51%. This indicates that Americans’ perception of Mubarak has become much more unfavorable since 2002, but they do view Mubarak and Morsi quite similarly.

When asked to compare Egypt under the leadership of Morsi and Mubarak more closely, most respondents identified Egypt as “a country with whom we can do business, but neither an ally or a friend”. Respondents seemed to associate Egypt as a “friend or an ally of the U.S.” far more under the leadership of Mubarak (29% vs 11% under Morsi). There is some change among those who a favorable toward Muslims, but Mubarak-led Egypt is still seen as a friend by more respondents (39% vs 18% under Morsi).

This reiterates the idea that Americans are distrustful of the Muslim Brotherhood, and in fact 53% of respondents disagreed that the Muslim Brotherhood is “committed to democracy”. The total number of respondents were split on whether the MB is “anti-American” (33%) or if the US can “engage with them if they are open to working with us” (36%), but there is a significant partisan divide. Among Democrats, 17% thought they are anti-American while 48% believe the US can work with them. This relationship is almost reversed among Republicans, with 51% thinking they are anti-American and only 27% thinking the US can engage with them.
At the intersection of Egypt public opinion and foreign aid, a 2012 Sadat Chair/PIPA poll found that most respondents either thought foreign aid to Egypt should be decreased (42%) or stopped altogether (29%). The Arab American Institute poll in 2013 found that 22% agreed with “American military and civilian aid to Egypt with a Muslim Brotherhood-associated government in power” while 47% disagreed with sending aid. This difference diminishes among those who are favorable toward Muslims (38% agree with aid, 39% disagree). A 2013 Pew Research Center poll found that 51% of Americans favor “[cutting] off military aid in order to pressure [the] Egyptian government” while only 26% said they would “continue military aid in order to influence what happens there”. A 2013 Huffington Post/YouGov poll showed that Republicans are more likely to support withdrawing aid to Egypt, and a combined 63% supported either cutting off aid until Egypt restores a democratic government (34%) or cutting off aid regardless of what happens (29%). Democrats were slightly less likely to support cutting off aid under any condition (49% combined; 18% cut off no matter what; 31% cut off until democratize).

The same Pew poll asked Americans “who would provide better leadership for Egypt” among the military or the Muslim Brotherhood. Forty-five percent of respondents favored the military and only 11% thought the Muslim Brotherhood should be leading.

**Recent Polling**

**Zogby Analytics Poll, July 2013**

Zogby Analytics conducted a follow-up poll in July 2013 after the initial polling of Americans on Egypt in February 2013 (results in the previous memo). This poll was conducted immediately after the overthrow of President Morsi.

Americans’ overall favorability toward Egypt fell about 10 points from February 2013 to July 2013 (from 36% favorable in Feb-2013 to 26% favorable in July-2013), indicating that the recent changes in the country were not perceived well by Americans.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


10“Public Backs Cutoff of Military Aid to Egypt”. Pew Research Center, 2013.


http://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/tabs_egypt_0815162013.pdf

12http://b.3cdn.net/aai/74925f2f14a4a3143d_ojm6i64o5.pdf
Americans’ overall impression toward the Muslim Brotherhood is also in decline, as only 11% felt favorable toward the MB, down from 15% in Feb-2013. Unfavorability increased, with 61% feeling unfavorable in July-2013 as opposed to 53% in February.

Attitudes toward the MB’s elections the previous year remained unchanged (and still negative) from February to July. In July, 36% thought it was a “setback” for Egypt, and only 5% thought it was a “positive development”.

Americans overwhelmingly want to “stay out” of the current turmoil in Egypt. Two-thirds (63%) of those polled thought the US government’s should “stay out of” MB demonstrations to reinstate Morsi. Only 7% thought the US should continue to support the government, and 16% wanted the government to support the protesters and military.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Jul-13</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continue to support gov’t</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters and Military</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay out of it</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

There seems to be a general sense of antipathy toward Egypt, as 24% said their reaction to the deposition of Morsi was that it would make “no difference”. Only 29% thought it was a positive development, and 18% thought it was a setback for Egypt.

Interestingly, Americans seem to have a very realist perspective of how US foreign policy should operate. Respondents were asked to choose between the following statements:

**Statement A** - We should support governments, whether they are elected or not, if they work closely with us to promote regional stability and protect our own interests.

**Statement B** - We should only support democratically elected governments, even if those governments might pursue policies hostile to our interests.

In both February 2013 and July 2013, the majority of respondents chose statement A, although this number declined from February to July (72% in Feb, 51% in July). Roughly the same amount of people chose Statement B in each poll (17% in Feb, 19% in July).
A Pew Research Center poll in July 2013 found that American interest in Egypt has plummeted since the initial uprisings in 2011. Compared to a February 2011 poll, the percentage of those following Egypt news fell from 39% in 2011 to only 15% in July 2013. The percentage of those following the news “not at all closely” rose from 15% in 2011 to 37% in 2013.

For many Americans, the focus seems to be shifting toward domestic issues. An overwhelming amount of respondents (78%) indicated that “Egypt is important, but bigger concerns are in U.S.”, but this number was relatively unchanged since February 2011 (73%), when interest in Egypt news was higher. Compared to 2011, roughly the same amount of respondents felt they “lack the background information to know what’s really going on” (52% in 2011, 55% in 2013). Forty-eight (48) percent of respondents in 2013 said, “it is hard to know which group could best lead the country”, and slightly more respondents in 2013 indicated that “the news is changing so quickly that I can’t keep up” (34% in 2011, 46% in 2013).
Most respondents (48%) felt the U.S. can have “some influence” on the current events in Egypt, and 23% felt it could have “a lot of influence”.

Over the years, significantly less respondents think what happens in Egypt is “very important” for U.S. interests (36% in 2013 as opposed to 46% in 2011). This is coupled with a rise in the amount of people who think the events are only “somewhat important” for the U.S. (47% in 2013, 38% in 2011). Clearly, the situation in Egypt is losing significance for Americans.
When asked whether the United States should continue to provide foreign aid to Egypt following the overthrow of Morsi, most Americans thought aid should be reduced (35% of Republicans, 32% of Democrats) or eliminated (31% Rep, 27% Dem). More Democrats than Republicans thought aid levels should stay the same (22% Dem, 12% Rep).

The majority of respondents consider the new government installed by the Egyptian military to be “something in between” a friend and an enemy to the United States (66% Rep, 72% Dem). Only 3% of Republicans and 6% of Democrats consider them a friend, and 5% of Republicans and 6% of Democrats consider them an enemy.

Similar to other polls, an overwhelming majority of respondents think the US should “stay out of” events in Egypt (77% Rep, 78% Dem). Only 16% of both Republicans and Democrats think the US “should do more to try to shape the government in Egypt and promote an end to violence”.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this poll is that there does not seem to be a partisan divide on issues relating to Egypt after Morsi’s overthrow. Regardless of political affiliation, most Americans want to stay out of the situation and are unsure of the Egyptian military.

Democrats, Republicans Agree: Less Aid to Egypt

Regardless of party affiliation, a majority of Americans agree that the United States should reduce or eliminate aid to Egypt now that a new government is in power.

**Q**: As you may know, the Egyptian leader backed by the group known as the Muslim Brotherhood was recently removed from power by Egypt’s military. Now that a new government is in power, do you think the U.S. should continue to provide Egypt with the same level of foreign aid, reduce it, or eliminate it altogether?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Provide the same level of aid</th>
<th>Reduce aid</th>
<th>Eliminate aid altogether</th>
<th>Increase aid</th>
<th>Don't know/refused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>19</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Q**: Do you consider the new government installed by the Egyptian military a friend to the United States, an enemy, or something in between?

- **Republican**
  - Friend: 3%
  - Enemy: 5%
  - Don't know/refused: 66%

- **Democrat**
  - Friend: 16%
  - Enemy: 6%
  - Don't know/refused: 66%

**Q**: Which of the following two statements better describes your opinion of how the U.S. should respond to the civil unrest in Egypt?

- The U.S. should do more to try to shape the government in Egypt and promote an end to violence.
- The U.S. should mostly stay out of events in Egypt and allow the people there to resolve their differences.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement 1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement 2</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>78%</td>
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</tbody>
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*Note: No polled Democrats said they would “ Increase aid.”
Margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points.

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<td>16%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note: No polled Democrats said they would “Increase aid.”
Margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points.
Discussion

The relevance of public opinion for policy has to always be assessed with regard to issue importance; the more important an issue is to the public, the more attention policymakers pay to public opinion.

With regard to the public’s broad opposition to foreign aid, it is not at all clear that the American public is focused so much on this issue to drive cut backs in aid. On the other hand, public attitudes make it harder to increase aid on large scale. This is one reason why every administration is reluctant to reduce aid to Egypt and other partners, even when they are unhappy with aspects of policy, as they fear it will be harder to get back given the public sentiment which is also reflect in Congressional attitudes.

Historically, the bulk of American foreign aid was strategic aid—including aid to Egypt. This aid was not generally linked to domestic affairs, or even human rights, even when tensions in the relationship emerged over these issues. Attitudes began to change a bit after the end of the Cold War, and even more so after 9/11, when the Bush administration posited democracy as a path to fighting terrorism, and thus as a national security goal, not merely as an American value. Yet, even during the Bush year, when tensions emerged with the Mubarak government over human rights issue, there was reluctance to touch American aid.

Things began changing after the uprisings that led to the overthrow of Mubarak. In part, this was because of an increased focused on Arab public opinion and a sense that more attention had to be paid to it; in part the new Obama administration included human rights advocates in high-level positions; but mostly because of sense of reduced Egyptian strategic importance at the public level and at the level of policy elites. This was more of a result of the end of the Iraq war than the Arab uprisings sweeping the region.

To be sure, national security establishment (the military, intelligence, and much of the Department of State) maintained the view (and still do) that the relationship with Egypt is strategically important. And when they think of what they get back, they think of the military and intelligence payoffs that they see almost daily; and they see Egypt still as an anchor of Arab-Israeli stability. When they think of what they get from Egypt in return for aid, they think of what they get in the security and strategic realm—unlike much of the public and many of the elites who think about influence in terms of political domestic influence.

During the Iraq war and the intense days of the war on Al-Qaeda and its allies, it was easy for the public to see the strategic relationship with Egypt as a priority. The decline of both, it has been harder for the public to see the benefits—although these remain clear to the national security establishment.

This coupled with painful events that have unfolded in Egypt that resulted in the deaths of thousands and the sentence to death of hundreds more, have made it nearly impossible for elites and publics to avoid linkage. While there are divisions on such issues within the Obama
admiration, the President had already moved back to take refuge in his instinctive realism, which he expressed clearly in his United Nations speech last September. But there is a relevant human rights constituency for administration, not only among some of Obama’s top aids, but also among the democratic elites that provide core support for the administration.

It is noteworthy that Israel issue, still very important in the relationship with Egypt, has also diminished somewhat. Certainly, the original strategic benefit for the US that drove large aid to Egypt in the first place was the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty that made the relationship really trilateral—even as Egyptian developed its own bilateral importance started with the 1991 Iraq war. Like Israel, many of its American supporters still see the Egyptian military as the anchor of peace and see it as proving that during the Mubarak era, even during Mursi’s rule, and since. Certainly, this is not a constituency that’s pushing for cutting aid to Egypt. But it’s ability and willingness to make protecting aid as a priority issue has diminished.

Still Obama’s own attitude is characterized by a degree of realism that recommends continuing aid to Egypt despite frustration on issues of democracy and human rights. But no administration likes surprises, even if it may be willing to put aside issues of the past to move forward. One example was the recent decision to remove the hold on delivering the Apache helicopters and receive Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy in a high profile visit to Washington. The sentencing of over 600 people to death by an Egyptian court made the administration’s move look to be a mistake, and undermined Fahmy’s otherwise reasonably successful mission.