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Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations

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Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations

Historically, Egypt has been an important country for U.S. national security interests based on its geography, demography, and diplomatic posture. Egypt controls the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869 and is one of the world’s most critical maritime chokepoints, linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

Egypt’s population of more than 106 million people makes it by far the most populous Arabic-speaking country. Although today it may play a smaller political or military role in the Arab world than it has in the past, Egypt may retain some “soft power” by virtue of its history, media, and culture. Cairo hosts both the 22-member Arab League and Al Azhar University, which claims to be the oldest continuously operating university in the world and has symbolic importance as a leading source of Islamic scholarship.

Additionally, Egypt’s 1979 peace treaty with Israel stands as one of the most significant diplomatic achievements for the promotion of Arab-Israeli peace. While people-to-people relations remain limited, the Israeli and Egyptian governments have increased their cooperation against Islamist militants and instability in the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip. As cease-fire negotiations over Gaza continue, Egypt has insisted that any post-conflict security arrangement that might keep Israel Defense Forces personnel in Gaza adheres to the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty and its subsequent protocols, which limit the presence and activities of military forces and equipment.

Since taking office, President Joseph Biden has balanced various considerations in his approach to U.S.-Egyptian relations, praising Egyptian diplomacy while signaling U.S. displeasure with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi’s continued domestic crackdown. However, the ongoing war in Gaza has made Egypt an important interlocutor between the United States, Israel, and Hamas, as Egypt continues to serve as an intermediary in cease-fire negotiations.

In addition to Gaza, the Egyptian government is facing other foreign policy challenges. Egypt has had to contend with a politically divided Libya on its western border and a civil war in Sudan on its southern border. In addition to insecurity on Egypt’s land borders, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea from Yemen have redirected commercial shipping away from the Suez Canal, depriving Egypt of hard currency revenues.

Since 1946, the United States has provided Egypt with nearly \$90 billion in bilateral foreign aid (calculated in historical dollars—not adjusted for inflation), with military and economic assistance increasing significantly after 1979. Annual appropriations legislation includes several conditions governing the release of these funds. Successive U.S. Administrations have justified aid to Egypt as an investment in regional stability, built primarily on long-running cooperation with the Egyptian military and on sustaining the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. All U.S. military aid to Egypt finances the procurement of weapons systems and services from U.S. defense contractors.

For FY2025, the Biden Administration has requested \$1.4 billion in bilateral assistance for Egypt, the same amount Congress appropriated the previous year. Nearly all of the U.S. funds for Egypt come from the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) account. For over a decade, Congress has conditioned a portion of FMF aid to Egypt on various human rights criteria. For fiscal years 2020-2022, the Biden Administration and Congress have reprogrammed or withheld a total of \$655 million in FMF originally designated for Egypt based on relevant provisions in appropriations law. On September 11, 2024, pursuant to Section 7041 (a)(3)(B) of P.L. 117-328, the FY2023 Omnibus Appropriations Act, Secretary Blinken waived the democracy and human rights certification requirement on \$225 million in FMF for Egypt; he also reported to Congress that the government of Egypt is making progress in releasing political prisoners, thereby releasing an additional \$95 million in FMF. The Secretary’s actions marked the first time under the Biden Administration that U.S. officials did not reprogram any FMF for Egypt.

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Overview and U.S. Relations

In 2024, the Egyptian government is facing multiple foreign policy challenges. The war in neighboring Gaza is straining Egypt's decades-long peaceful relationship with Israel. Before Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, Egypt already had to contend with a politically divided Libya on its western border and a civil war in Sudan on its southern border. In addition to insecurity on Egypt's land borders, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea from Yemen have redirected commercial shipping away from the Suez Canal, depriving Egypt of hard currency revenues. According to a July report by the Suez Canal Authority, the number of ships transiting through the canal fell by 22% over the past year; revenues generated by the Canal also are down \$2.2 billion compared to the previous financial year.¹

To better coordinate with Egypt and facilitate the delivery of international humanitarian aid to Gaza, President Joe Biden initially appointed Ambassador David Satterfield as Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues in October 2023. When Satterfield stepped down in April 2024, President Biden appointed Lise Grande to replace him. Grande most recently served as President and CEO of the U.S. Institute of Peace and worked for years in leadership positions at the United Nations on humanitarian issues.

In addition, President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have talked and met multiple times with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi; in August 2024, President Biden thanked President Sisi for "his determined leadership in the facilitation of [cease-fire] negotiations that have now reached a final stage."²

In March 2024, Congress passed annual State and Foreign Operations Appropriations (SFOPs) for Egypt in P.L. 118-47, the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024. That Act provides "not less than" \$1.45 billion in total aid to Egypt, of which \$1.3 billion consists of Foreign Military Financing (FMF). The Act would withhold \$320 million in FMF subject to various democracy-related certifications, though Congress included waiver authority on national security grounds. For over a decade, Congress has conditioned a portion of FMF to Egypt on various human rights criteria. The global democracy watchdog organization Freedom House perennially ranks Egypt as "not free."³ Additionally, the emergency supplemental legislation Congress enacted for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan (P.L. 118-50) provides \$10 million in Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) for U.S. contributions to the Multinational Force and Observers mission in the Sinai.

For FY2025, House and Senate foreign assistance legislation pertaining to Egypt contains significant differences. In the House-passed SFOPs bill (H.R. 8771), lawmakers would provide, for the first time since 1979, FMF exceeding \$1.3 billion. H.R. 8771 would provide \$75 million above this amount and contains no withholding requirement. S. 4797, the Senate committee-reported SFOPs bill, would carry over the main provisions from FY2024, providing a total of \$1.3 billion in FMF to Egypt, of which \$320 million would be withheld subject to various democracy-related certifications (can be waived). It also, for the first time, would require that interest payments earned from Egypt's FMF account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York be transferred to funds appropriated by the bill for assistance for "democracy programs, economic growth, and humanitarian assistance."

¹ "Suez Canal revenue drops as some shippers shun Red Sea," Reuters, July 18, 2024.

² The White House, "Readout of President Biden's Call with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt," August 6, 2024.

³ See, Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023*, March 2023.

Figure I. Map of Egypt



Source: CRS Graphics, CIA World Factbook.

Historical Background

Since 1952, when a cabal of Egyptian Army officers, known as the Free Officers Movement, ousted the British-backed king, Egypt's military has produced four Presidents: Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970), Anwar Sadat (1970-1981), Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), and Abdel Fattah al Sisi (2013-present). These four men have ruled Egypt with strong backing from the country's security establishment almost continually. The one exception has been the brief period of rule by Muhammad Morsi, who was affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (**see below**). That organization has opposed single party military-backed rule and advocated for a state governed by a vaguely articulated combination of civil and *sharia* (Islamic) law. In general, the Muslim Brotherhood has been the most significant and abiding opposition during the decades of military-backed rule.

The one departure from Egypt's decades of military rule, the brief period in which Morsi ruled, took place between 2011 and 2013. Popular demonstrations dubbed the "Arab Spring," which had started in neighboring Tunisia, spurred the military to force the resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. During this period, Egypt experienced tremendous political tumult, culminating in Morsi's one-year presidency. When Morsi took office on June 30, 2012, after winning Egypt's first truly competitive presidential election, his ascension to the presidency was expected to mark the end of a rocky 16-month transition period.⁴ Proposed timelines for elections, the constitutional drafting process, and the military's relinquishing of power to a civilian government had been repeatedly changed, contested, and sometimes even overruled by the courts. Instead of consolidating democratic or civilian rule, Morsi's rule exposed the deep

⁴ David Kirkpatrick, "Named Egypt's Winner, Islamist Makes History," *New York Times*, June 24, 2012.

divisions in Egyptian politics, pitting a broad cross-section of Egypt's public and private sectors, the Coptic Church, and the military against the Brotherhood and its Islamist supporters.

The atmosphere of mutual distrust, political gridlock, and public dissatisfaction that permeated Morsi's presidency provided Egypt's military, led by then-Defense Minister Sisi, with an opportunity to reassert political control. On July 3, 2013, following several days of mass public demonstrations against Morsi's rule, the military unilaterally dissolved Morsi's government, suspended the constitution that had been passed during his rule, and installed an interim president. The Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters declared the military's actions a coup d'état and protested in the streets. Weeks later, Egypt's military and national police launched a violent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood, resulting in police and army soldiers firing live ammunition against demonstrators encamped in several public squares and the killing of at least 1,150 demonstrators. The Egyptian military justified these actions by decrying the encampments as a threat to national security.⁵

Since 2013, the power of President Abdel Fattah al Sisi has gone mostly unchallenged. President Sisi assumed office formally in June 2014 after winning a May 2014 election with 96% of the vote. In 2018, he was reelected for a second term, receiving 97% of all valid votes cast. In 2023, Sisi was reelected for a third term, receiving 89.6% of the vote, though critics decried the election as a foregone conclusion.⁶

Issues for Congress

Egypt and the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza

The Egyptian government's approach to the war in Gaza has been multi-faceted,⁷ to include:

- attempting to mediate (along with Qatar) a cease-fire/hostage release/prisoner release between Israel and Hamas;
- facilitating humanitarian aid delivery from El Arish International Airport in the Sinai Peninsula to the Egyptian military-controlled Rafah border crossing with Gaza (before its closure in May 2024) or through the Egypt-Israel border to an Israel-Gaza border crossing;
- insisting that Israel not forcibly displace Palestinians into Egyptian territory;

⁵ "Egyptian Cabinet Vows to Disperse Pro-Morsi Protest Camps," *The Guardian* (UK), July 31, 2013.

⁶ "Egypt's Sisi sweeps to third term as president with 89.6% of vote," Reuters, December 18, 2023.

⁷ International Crisis Group, "Helping Egypt Weather the Gaza War's Impact," January 30, 2024.

- permitting the transit⁸ of foreign nationals, dual nationals, select wounded Palestinians, and others through the Rafah border crossing⁹ (again, before its May closure¹⁰); and
- asserting that any post-conflict security arrangement that might keep Israel Defense Forces personnel in Gaza adheres to the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty and its subsequent protocols, which limit the presence and activities of military forces and equipment.

As of September 5, 2024, Egypt and Qatar continue to mediate cease-fire negotiations over a three-phase proposal, including: a six-week cease-fire with a limited hostage-prisoner exchange (Phase 1); a “permanent cessation of hostilities” and a hostage-prisoner exchange for all remaining living hostages and Israeli military withdrawal from Gaza (Phase 2); and a major Gaza reconstruction plan and the return of the remains of deceased hostages (Phase 3). On August 8, the United States, Egypt, and Qatar issued a joint statement calling on both sides to “close all remaining gaps and commence implementation of the deal without further delay.”¹¹

⁸ According to an exposé by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and the Egyptian newspaper *Saheeh Masr*, intermediaries with ties to Egyptian intelligence have sold exit access through Rafah to Palestinians with means for exorbitant prices. See, “Network linked to Egyptian intelligence sells entry permits to Sinai at exorbitant rates,” *Le Monde*, January 26, 2024.

⁹ According to various reports, as of August 2024, an estimated 100,000 Gazans have crossed into Egypt since October 7, 2023. Many of these Gazans reportedly paid \$2,500 to \$5,000 to an Egyptian company to facilitate their exit. For example, see, Azza Guergues, “How 100,000 Palestinians Are Surviving in Egypt Without Refugee Status,” *Foreign Policy*, August 15, 2024; Andrew England, “The powerbroker of Sinai,” *Financial Times*, June 24, 2024; and Adam Rasgon, “When the Only Escape from War in Gaza Is to Buy a Way Out,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2024.

¹⁰ Aaron Boxerman, “A Border Crossing Shuttered for Months Traps the Sick and Wounded in Gaza,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2024.

¹¹ The White House, “Joint Statement from the Leaders of the United States, Egypt, and Qatar,” August 8, 2024.

In late May, Israel took control of Gaza's nine-mile border with Egypt, also known as the Philadelphi (or Salah al Din) Corridor (see **Figure 1**). Israel's seizure of this area has heightened bilateral tensions with Egypt and seemingly exacerbated Egyptian security concerns. Israeli authorities have said that some kind of control over the corridor is essential to prevent Hamas from accessing weapons and contraband they say have long been smuggled into Gaza from Egypt, despite Egyptian officials' claims that their forces had previously cut off smuggling routes.¹² According to one account, Israeli officials believe that most of the weapons smuggled into Gaza have come overground through the Rafah crossing managed by Egyptian officials who "either turned a blind eye or were bribed—probably both."¹³

Although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office has insisted that Israel will not withdraw from the corridor in connection with a possible cease-fire,¹⁴ some media outlets have reported that Israel and Egypt have discussed a possible Israeli withdrawal if Egypt will agree to anti-smuggling measures including security cameras, electronic sensors, and/or an underground barrier.¹⁵ Some reports suggest that Egypt might seek U.S. funding and support to install any such measures.¹⁶ Other reports indicate that Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have discussed the possibility of the PA assuming responsibility for the Rafah border crossing.¹⁷ As of September 2024, Egypt has remained opposed to any physical Israeli presence on the Philadelphi Corridor, claiming that to agree to such a presence would make Egypt complicit in Israel's reoccupation of Gaza.¹⁸ Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has opposed

Figure 2. Egypt-Israel-Gaza Border



Source: CNN, December 27, 2023.

¹² "Egypt replies to 'false Israeli allegations' about smuggling weapons through borders with Gaza," *Egypt Today*, April 22, 2024.

¹³ "A narrow corridor in Gaza has become an obstacle to a ceasefire," *The Economist*, September 9, 2024.

¹⁴ "Netanyahu's office denies report Israel open to pullout from Gaza-Egypt border," *Times of Israel*, July 12, 2024.

¹⁵ Patrick Kingsley et al., "Israel Is in Talks to Withdraw from the Egyptian Border, Officials Say," *New York Times*, July 16, 2024; Barak Ravid, "Israel toughens Gaza ceasefire demands just as optimism for deal growing," *Axios*, July 11, 2024.

¹⁶ Rina Bassist, "Are Israel, Egypt inching closer to deal on Gaza's Philadelphi Corridor?" *Al-Monitor*, July 24, 2024.

¹⁷ "Egypt pushing for Palestinian Authority to take over Gaza's Rafah Crossing – report," *Times of Israel*, August 11, 2024.

¹⁸ Dov Lieber and Summer Said, "It Isn't Just Israel and Hamas. Israel and Egypt Have to Agree, Too," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2024.

an inflexible Israeli stance on maintaining a direct presence, reportedly saying that prioritizing the Corridor “at the cost of the lives of the hostages is a moral disgrace.”¹⁹

In May, Israel seized operational control of the Gaza-side of the Rafah crossing. Since then, Egypt has been unwilling to allow aid shipped through its territory to go through the Rafah crossing while Israeli forces remain on the Gaza side of the border,²⁰ requiring that aid instead go into Gaza via Israel’s Kerem Shalom crossing. Egypt permits trucks to traverse Egyptian territory on their way to Kerem Shalom.

As Arab governments continue to discuss post-war Gaza plans with U.S. officials, Egypt, along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has indicated some willingness to participate in post-conflict security operations under certain conditions; these include a credible pathway toward a future Palestinian state and a complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.²¹

The Economy

On the economic front, prior to the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, Egypt had been experiencing serious fiscal and monetary pressures. In the months prior to the 2023 reelection of President Sisi for a third term, Egyptians faced rampant inflation with food prices soaring 60% in 2023, leading to what one publication described as Egypt’s “most severe cost-of-living squeeze in its modern history.”²²

Following a period in which Egyptian government negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over \$3 billion in financing were stalled over the government’s refusal to move to a flexible exchange rate, the government agreed to float the Egyptian pound (it subsequently decreased by 60%) and raise interest rates. In March 2024, the IMF and Egypt reached a revised financing deal for \$8 billion.²³ Other international lending, including \$6 billion from the World Bank and \$7 billion from the European Union (over multiple years), also has helped stabilize Egyptian state finances.

International financial support for Egypt appears to have been bolstered by UAE aid and investment, which has helped Egypt avoid a sovereign debt default.²⁴ In February 2024, the UAE sovereign wealth fund ADQ announced planned real estate purchases and other deals totaling \$35 billion; the UAE immediately transferred a portion of these proceeds to Egypt’s Central Bank in order to help the Egyptian government pay back creditors.²⁵

As of August 2024, prices have stabilized and even decreased, and Egypt’s foreign reserves are up. Nevertheless, Egypt’s external debt stands at \$154 billion (as of May 2024), and public dissatisfaction with standards of living is reportedly widespread, as Egypt endures a record-

¹⁹ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Netanyahu’s Remarks from his Press Conference,” September 3, 2024; “Gallant said to call Philadelphi demand a ‘disgrace,’ drawing fury from PM, ministers,” *Times of Israel*, September 2, 2024.

²⁰ Hamza Hendawi, “Egypt refuses to reopen Rafah crossing while Israel controls its Gaza side,” *The National* (UAE), May 16, 2024.

²¹ Jacob Magid, “Egypt, UAE prepared to participate in postwar Gaza security force — officials,” *Times of Israel*, June 27, 2024.

²² Economist Intelligence Unit, “Egypt’s cost-of-living crisis threatens regime,” August 21, 2023.

²³ “Egypt signs expanded \$8 billion loan deal with IMF,” *Reuters*, March 6, 2024.

²⁴ Heba Saleh, “Demand for Egyptian debt surges after \$55bn bailout and investment package,” *Financial Times*, April 16, 2024.

²⁵ Tarek El Tablawy and Mirette Magdy, “Egypt Gets First of UAE Payments After \$35 Billion Land Deal,” *Bloomberg*, February 28, 2024.

setting hot summer season accompanied by frequent power outages.²⁶ In July 2024, the government ordered stores in Cairo to close between 10 p.m. and midnight in order to save electricity costs. Saudi Arabia and Libya recently financed \$200 million worth of natural gas imports to help Egypt cope with gas shortages.²⁷ Though Egypt had aimed to be a natural gas exporter due to its off-shore fields, the government owes nearly \$6 billion to international gas companies, depressing investment and production in gas.²⁸

Democracy, Human Rights, and Religious Freedom

U.S. officials and some Members of Congress have frequently criticized Egypt's record on human rights and democratization. The Egyptian government rejects foreign criticism of its human rights practices as illegitimate interference in Egypt's domestic affairs.²⁹ It also claims that it is taking tangible steps to improve its human rights record and broaden political participation by launching a national human rights strategy,³⁰ forming a Presidential Pardon Commission to release political prisoners,³¹ and launching a National Dialogue to allow some open discussion of political issues by a range of various actors³² (excluding the Muslim Brotherhood which the Egyptian government designated as a terrorist group in 2013 after the military deposed an elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government).³³ Certain practices of President Sisi's government, the parliament, and the security apparatus have been the subjects of U.S. criticism, including Egypt's detention and treatment of U.S. citizens. According to the U.S. State Department's report on human rights conditions in Egypt in 2023:

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious abuses in a conflict, including enforced disappearances and torture; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict by government-supported tribal militias; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and the enforcement of or threat to enforce criminal libel laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on and harassment of domestic and

²⁶ Vivian Yee and Emad Mekay, "Heat Waves Are Pounding Egypt, and Often There's No A.C.," *New York Times*, July 22, 2024.

²⁷ "Egypt counts on foreign funds to buy gas as power crisis worsens," Reuters, September 2, 2024.

²⁸ Heba Saleh and Malcolm Moore, "Egypt's journey from gas bonanza to power blackouts," *Financial Times*, September 3, 2024.

²⁹ "Egypt calls on US not to interfere in its affairs," *The Middle East Monitor*, March 15, 2019.

³⁰ Government of Egypt, State Information Service, *Egypt and Human Rights*, February 3, 2022.

³¹ Heba Saleh, "Critics of Egypt's regime given rare platform ahead of elections," *Financial Times* (UK), June 27, 2023.

³² Vivian Yee, "Facing Crisis, Egypt's Leader Tries New Tack: Talking to Opponents," *New York Times*, June 13, 2023.

³³ "Egypt's National Political Dialogue agrees on social issues to discuss, voices appreciation for pardons," *Al Ahram*, July 30, 2022.

international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and female genital mutilation/cutting; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; de facto criminalization of same-sex sexual conduct between adults, including enforcement of other laws to punish that conduct; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association.³⁴

Select international human rights, democracy, and development monitoring organizations provide the following global rankings for Egypt (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Democracy, Human Rights, and Development Indicators

Issue	Index	Ranking
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024	"Not Free"
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index 2024	170/180 Countries
Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2023	108/180 Countries
Human Development	United Nations Human Development Programme, Human Development Index 2022	105/193 Countries

Sources: Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, Transparency International, and United Nations Human Development Programme.

Gender Equality

Despite a constitutional provision affirming gender equality, Egyptian women do not enjoy the same legal rights and opportunities as men and experience widespread discrimination.³⁵ The World Economic Forum ranks Egypt 135th of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap index; the country performs in the bottom 10 countries on the measure of women's economic participation and opportunity.

According to the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law index, an annual study that evaluates the laws and regulations that affect women's economic opportunity in 190 economies, Egypt's score of 50.6 is lower than the regional Middle East and North Africa (MENA) average of 54.7.³⁶

Violence against women and rampant sexual harassment persist in Egypt. According to the nonpartisan research network Arab Barometer, in the Arab World, Egypt ranks first in sexual harassment with 63% of women reporting some form of sexual harassment.³⁷ Child marriage and female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) are both practiced to some extent, despite laws against them. According to Amnesty International, "Authorities prosecuted women social media influencers for their conduct on social media."³⁸

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Egypt*, April 22, 2024.

³⁵ Op. cit., U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Egypt*.

³⁶ World Bank, *Women, Business, and the Law 2024* data as of October 1, 2023.

³⁷ "Egypt's Sexual Harassment Problem: Encouraging Reporting as a Possible Remedy," Arab Pulse, Arab Barometer (Wave V), March 26, 2020.

³⁸ Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2022/2023 State of the World's Human Rights*, Egypt, 2023.

Coptic Christians

Most Egyptians are Sunni Muslims (perhaps 90%).³⁹ A relatively small percentage are Coptic Christians, and this minority has faced discrimination and persecution, from the government as well as from other citizens and terrorist groups.

For years, the Coptic Christian community in Egypt has called for equal treatment under the law, and members of the community have won several court cases, beginning in 2019.⁴⁰ Since taking office, President Sisi has publicly called for greater Muslim-Christian coexistence and national unity. In January 2019, he inaugurated Egypt's Coptic Cathedral of Nativity in the New Administrative Capital east of Cairo saying, "This is an important moment in our history.... We are one and we will remain one."⁴¹

Despite these public calls for improved interfaith relations in Egypt, the minority Coptic Christian community continues to face professional and social discrimination, along with occasional sectarian attacks. According to the 2024 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report, "While larger-scale violent attacks on religious minorities, especially Copts, did not return to previously high levels, individual incidences of anti-Coptic violence—such as physical attacks on Copts in the workplace—persisted."⁴²

The Nile River, Ethiopia, and Sudan

Egypt relies on the Nile River (see **Figure 5**) for hydroelectricity, agriculture, and most of its domestic water needs, and thus treats restrictions to the flow of the Nile from upstream countries as an existential issue. The government has been at odds with Nile Basin countries to Egypt's south that seek to revisit colonial-era treaties governing the allocation of Nile waters. Tensions are particularly strong with Ethiopia (population 118 million), which operates the \$4.2 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a major hydroelectric project on the Blue Nile, which starts in Ethiopia. Egypt argues that the dam will limit the flow of the Nile below Egypt's share, as agreed upon in a 1959 Egyptian deal with Sudan (of which Ethiopia was not part). Ethiopia claims that the dam, which would double its electricity generating capacity, is critical to its efforts to eradicate poverty.

³⁹ The World Factbook, last updated August 23, 2024.

⁴⁰ See George Sadek, "Egypt: Court Grants Christian Woman Share of Father's Estate Equal to Share of Her Two Brothers," *Global Legal Monitor*, The Law Library, Library of Congress, January 9, 2020. See also, "Egypt court gives Coptic woman inheritance equivalent to the man," *Egypt Independent*, April 11, 2023.

⁴¹ "Egypt's Sisi Opens Mega-Mosque and Middle East's Largest Cathedral in New Capital," Reuters, January 6, 2019.

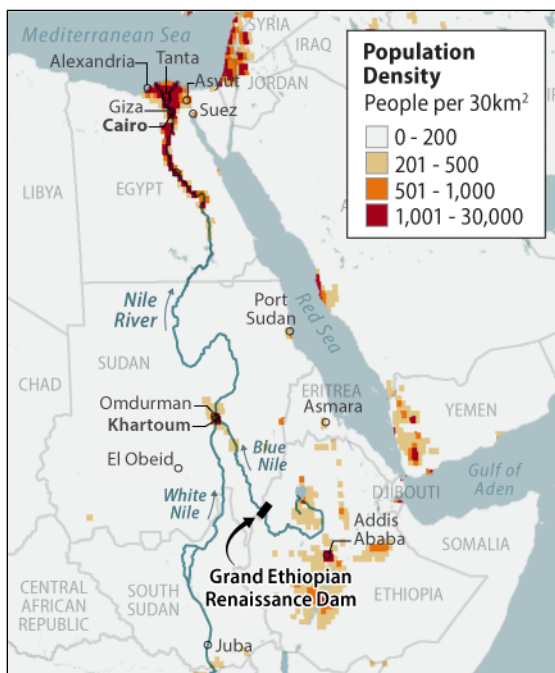
⁴² Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 2024.

After years of failed talks, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan continue to disagree over how much water should be released from the GERD on an annual basis, particularly during prolonged droughts. In September 2023, Ethiopia announced the completion of the fourth and final filling of the reservoir behind the GERD. According to one account:

Having completed the filling of the dam three years ahead of schedule and scored a big political “win”, Ethiopia’s government is expected to become more flexible in negotiations.... Ethiopia is now more likely to make concessions on a water-sharing agreement now that the filling of the dam cannot be called into question, only how the flow is managed and how to ensure that a minimum water level is maintained at critical downstream reservoirs for Egypt, particularly Lake Nasser.⁴³

In the wake of fighting that broke out in Sudan in April 2023 between Sudan’s military, led by Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al Burhan (who was trained in Egypt and Jordan), and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a state paramilitary force led by Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (who has ties to Libya’s Khalifa Haftar and has received military support from the United Arab Emirates⁴⁴), Egypt publicly called for a cease-fire and offered to mediate between the warring parties while reportedly privately supporting Burhan’s forces.⁴⁵ According to one account, Egyptian policy in Sudan is to support a military-led government similar to its own, maintain a united Egyptian-Sudanese front on the Nile River dispute against Ethiopia, and deter the RSF from further developing close relations with outside powers, such as Russia.⁴⁶ Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, Egypt already was home to an estimated four to five million Sudanese, most of whom are economic migrants seeking to improve their livelihoods. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of September 2024, almost 500,000 Sudanese have fled to Egypt since the war began.⁴⁷ Human rights groups have reported detentions and deportations of Sudanese refugees by the Egyptian military.⁴⁸ Some State

Figure 3. The Nile River



Source: CRS Graphics.

⁴³ Economist Intelligence Unit, “Dam filling strains Ethiopia’s relations with Egypt,” *ViewsWire*, September 26, 2023.

⁴⁴ U.N. Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan*, U.N. doc. 2/2024/65, January 15, 2024; *New York Times*, “Talking peace in Sudan, the UAE secretly fuels the fight,” September 29, 2023; and Oscar Rickett, “How the UAE kept the Sudan war raging,” *African Arguments*, February 21, 2024.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., *Wall Street Journal*, “Ignoring U.S. calls for peace, Egypt delivered drones to Sudan’s military,” October 14, 2023.

⁴⁶ David Pilling, Andrew England, and Andres Schipani, “Risk of regional powers picking sides raises stakes in battle for Sudan,” *Financial Times*, April 19, 2023.

⁴⁷ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation>.

⁴⁸ Global Detention Project, *Urgent Appeal on the Detention and Refoulement of Sudanese Refugees in Egypt*, April 1, 2024; Sara *The New Humanitarian*, “Inside Egypt’s secret scheme to detain and deport thousands of Sudanese refugees,” April 25, 2024.

Department and U.S. Agency for International Development staff displaced from Sudan are serving at the U.S. mission in Cairo.

U.S. Foreign Aid to Egypt

Since 1946, the United States has provided Egypt with nearly \$90 billion in bilateral foreign aid (calculated in historical dollars—not adjusted for inflation), with military and economic assistance increasing significantly after 1979. Annual appropriations measures have included several conditions governing the release of these funds. Successive U.S. Administrations have justified aid to Egypt as an investment in regional stability, built primarily on long-running cooperation with the Egyptian military and on sustaining the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. All U.S. military aid to Egypt finances the procurement of weapons systems and services from U.S. defense contractors.

Table 2. U.S. Bilateral Aid to Egypt: FY2021-FY2025 Request

In millions of current U.S. dollars

Account	FY2021 Actual	FY2022 Actual	FY2023 Actual	FY2024 Enacted	FY2025 Request
FMF	1,095.00	1,300.00	1,300.00	1,300.00	1,300.00
ESF	125.00	160.00	125.00	125.00	125.00
INCLE	0.35	—	—	—	—
NADR	3.25	3.65	3.50	3.50	2.00
IMET	1.80	—	1.80	1.80	2.00
GHP	—	5.00	6.00	—	4.00
Total	1,225.40	1,468.65	1,436.30	1,430.30	1,433.00

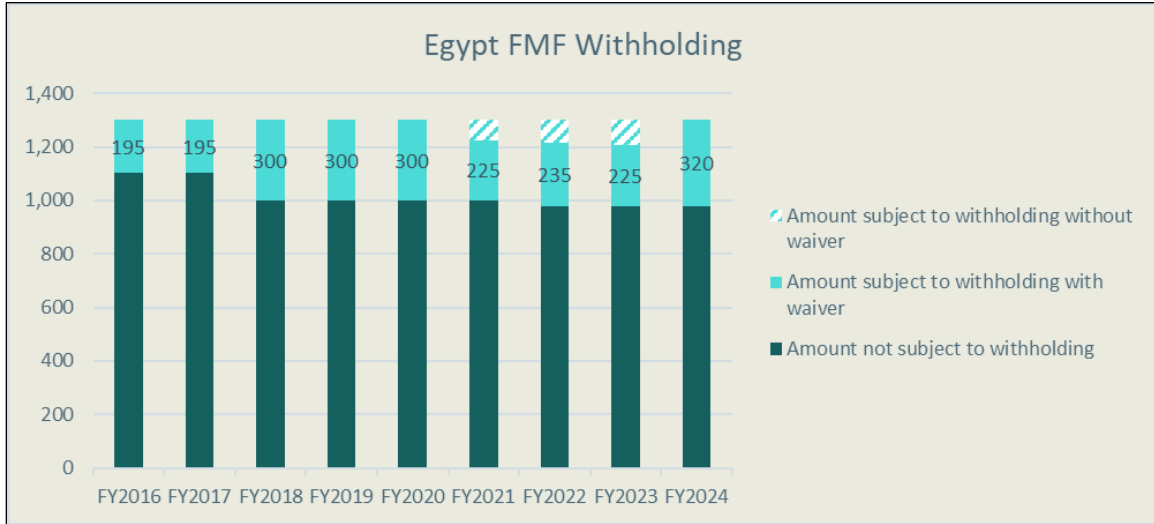
Source: Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Congressional Budget Justifications (FY2022-FY2025); P.L. 118-47, Division F; P.L. 118-50, Division A; and CRS calculations and rounding.

For FY2025, the Biden Administration has requested \$1.4 billion in bilateral assistance for Egypt, the same amount Congress appropriated the previous year (see **Table 4**). Nearly all of the U.S. funds for Egypt come from the FMF account. For over a decade, Congress has conditioned a portion of FMF aid to Egypt on various human rights criteria (see **Figure 4**). For fiscal years 2020-2022, the Biden Administration and Congress have reprogrammed or withheld a total of **\$655 million in FMF** originally designated for Egypt based on relevant provisions in appropriations law.⁴⁹ On September 11, 2024, pursuant to Section 7041 (a)(3)(B) of P.L. 117-328, the FY2023 Omnibus Appropriations Act, Secretary Blinken waived the democracy and human rights certification requirement on \$225 million in FMF for Egypt; he also reported to Congress that the government of Egypt is making progress in releasing political prisoners, thereby releasing an additional \$95 million in FMF. The Secretary's actions marked the first time under the Biden Administration that U.S. officials did not reprogram any FMF for Egypt. According to reports, the

⁴⁹ Days prior to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks against Israel, Senator Benjamin Cardin, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced a hold on up to \$235 million in FY2022 FMF, due to expire at the end of the 2023 fiscal year on September 30, 2023. The current status of that hold is unknown.

Secretary’s decision to release FMF funds for Egypt was based on Egypt’s role as an intermediary between Hamas and Israel.⁵⁰

Figure 4. Egypt: Conditions on U.S. Military Assistance
 In millions of current U.S. dollars



Source: Prepared by CRS based on Foreign Military Financing (FMF) allocations and terms from annual appropriations acts, FY2016-FY2024.

P.L. 118-47, the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024, makes several notable changes to annual appropriations for Egypt. First, it withholds \$320 million in FMF assistance subject to various democracy-related certifications, though Congress included waiver authority on national security grounds (for the entire withheld amount unlike previous years). Second, lawmakers, for the first time, removed the democracy-related conditions from the bill text and inserted them in the Joint Explanatory Statement. Finally, appropriators also inserted into the Act’s text a new clause of “not less than” to mandate the Administration obligate at least \$1.42 billion in total aid to Egypt in FY2024.

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⁵⁰ Michael Crowley, “Citing Gaza Help, Blinken Waives Human Rights Conditions on Aid to Egypt,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2024.

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