

EGYPTIAN MILITARY AID SUSPENSION TURNS UP SHORT

Alana Mitias | Security Assistance Monitor



Mi-17 transport helicopter passes an Egyptian Special Operations Forces convoy, Egypt. Photo taken September 11, 2021. Source: Staff SGT Dean Gannon/DVIDS

WHAT'S AT ISSUE

The Biden administration will withhold \$130 million in U.S. military assistance to Egypt this year, citing [concerns](#) over the human rights situation in the country as [recent reports](#) of extrajudicial killings, jailings of political dissidents, and widespread repression of civil society have revived debates over the use of U.S. assistance for the regime's abuses. The administration presented its decision as an [unprecedented step](#) to promote human rights in Egypt and create a human-centric foreign policy. But the \$130 million in question constitutes just 10 percent of Egypt's annual U.S. military aid package, and rights advocates are both unconvinced that the marginal reduction in assistance will move Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government to change course on human rights and concerned that the move undermines congressional attempts impose conditions on U.S. aid to Cairo.

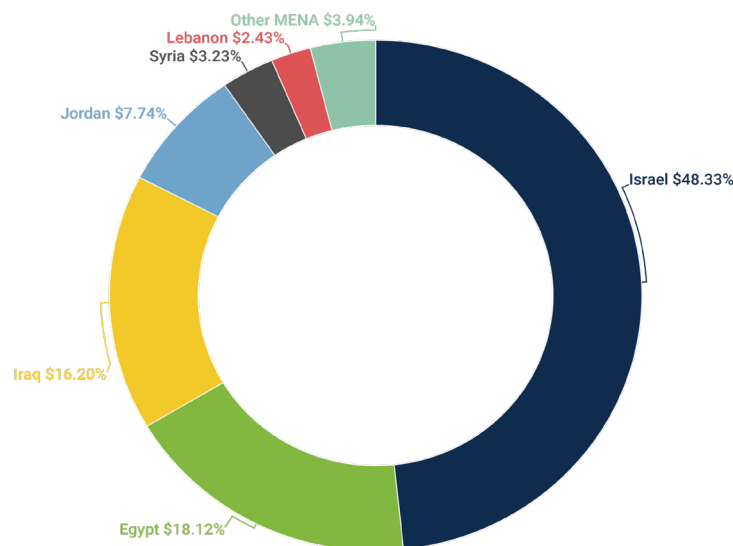
CHANGES TO U.S. MILITARY AID TO EGYPT

Congress specifies the allocation of most U.S. assistance to Egypt in its annual foreign operations appropriations bill. The Consolidated Appropriations Act for [fiscal year 2020](#) withholds \$300 million of the \$1.3 billion Egyptian aid allotment for foreign military financing (FMF) until the Secretary of State certifies that the Egyptian government has taken "sustained and effective steps" toward meeting certain human rights standards. However, the funds can be disbursed without that certification if the Secretary of State determines that to do so is in the U.S. national security interest and submits a report to the

appropriations committees justifying the waiver.

The Biden administration did not use a national security waiver to lift the hold on conditioned funds, as past administrations have. In 2018, for example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a waiver [to release \\$195 million](#) in previously suspended foreign military financing (FMF) for fiscal year 2016 without certified progress on human rights in Egypt. This time, the aid will be released under a previously unused [provision](#) in the law stating that the human rights certification requirement does not apply to funds designated for counterterrorism, border security, and non-proliferation programs in Egypt. Using this statute, the administration will bypass the congressional conditions on the aid by releasing \$170 million of the conditioned funds for counterterrorism, border security, and nonproliferation and temporarily withholding the other \$130 million until the human rights conditions are met.

U.S. Security Assistance to the MENA Region by Country, FY20010-FY2020



WHY IT MATTERS

The administration's decision has disappointed advocates and human rights defenders for a number of reasons. First, the White House's legal maneuvering circumvents the explicit intent of Congress to freeze the aid until demonstrable progress is made on human rights in Egypt. Second, the size of the suspension is small—especially relative to Egypt's total annual U.S. assistance package—and unlikely to leverage meaningful concessions from the Sisi government. Lastly, redirecting funds to counterterrorism programs may entail its own risks for civilian harm. Rights groups have [reported](#) systematic and widespread rights abuses by Egyptian security forces in connection with Sisi's counterterrorism campaigns in the Sinai and [documented](#) their use as pretense for repressing political dissent throughout the country. Especially in the context of the [far stronger rhetorical stance](#) President Biden took during his campaign, Cairo may well see this decision as a success for its efforts to walk the president back from his earlier commitments.