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Military aid continues

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6/16/2015

“Keeping the US aid to Egypt as it is cannot be described as a major change in Egyptian-US relations, but it is a positive step forward,” said Maasoum Marzouk, a former assistant to Egypt’s foreign minister, on the news that during a meeting last week the US Congress subcommittee responsible for foreign aid has approved the annual \$1.3 billion US military aid package to Egypt.

There are no emotional ties in international relations, Marzouk added. “The Congress decision is not necessarily to support Egypt. It could be linked to other developments like the recent joint Egyptian-Russian naval training that could have sent an alarm signal to the US,” he said.

The fact that there is no change in the amount of military aid the US gives to Egypt has been regarded as a positive sign. In explanation, Kay Granger, a US congressman from Texas, said the US needs Egypt as a stable ally and the money reflects a clear commitment to maintaining ties with Egypt.

The decision indicates that Egypt is on the right track, said one diplomat speaking on condition of anonymity. He added that he expects US-Egyptian relations to improve in the future.

Bahei Eddin Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, said the decision is not linked to any improvement in human rights or democracy in Egypt. “It is a decision based entirely on a calculation of interests,” he said.

The Israeli lobby in the US had played an active role in pushing the US to defreeze its military aid to Egypt because the present Egyptian government and Tel Aviv are cooperating on security matters, especially in Sinai, he added.

At the same time, the US Congress refused officially to receive a Muslim Brotherhood delegation in what analysts have described as another sign of improvement in US relations with Egypt.

But Hassan denied there is a link between the aid issue and the refusal to meet the Brotherhood delegation.

“Although the Congress did not meet the Brotherhood, other parties will meet them, not because they necessarily have hopes of the Brotherhood as a group, but because they are frustrated with the Egyptian government, felt to be fighting not only the Brotherhood but also the secularists and other trends on the pretext of combating terrorism,” he said.

Marzouk believes that Egypt should not pay attention to Brotherhood moves in the US because this will give a false idea of their importance.

“It is not important whether the Congress meets the delegation or not. Egypt’s foreign policy should focus on proving that the Brotherhood’s moves are not important and taking concrete steps towards democracy and the respect for human rights in Egypt,” he said.

US President Barack Obama’s decision to provide Egypt with 12 F-16 fighter jets earlier this year was regarded as a breakthrough in relations. The fighter jets and other weapons had been held up after the 30 June Revolution and the ousting of former president Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Obama said at the time that he would support continuing to provide the \$1.3 billion a year in military assistance to Egypt after a review prompted by the 30 June Revolution and the developments that followed.

The US administration also announced plans to tailor its military aid to Egypt beginning in 2018 to focus on counter-terrorism, border security, maritime security and the security of the Sinai Peninsula.

After former president Hosni Mubarak was ousted in the 25 January Revolution, ties with the US frayed. Washington then began to build relations with the Muslim Brotherhood government. In the weeks following the removal of Morsi in July 2013 there were calls from Congress to review US aid to Egypt.

In reaction to Morsi's removal, Obama announced the cancellation of joint military exercises with Egypt as a way of signalling US displeasure.

However, Marzouk believes that the military exercises benefited the US more than they did Egypt. "The US forces were given the chance to train in a different environment and one that is not available in their country," he said.

The military drills, dating back to 1981, are seen as a cornerstone of US-Egyptian military relations and began after the signing of the Camp David Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel.

Since the ousting of Morsi, the Pentagon has repeatedly delayed the long-planned delivery of F-16 fighter jets to the Egyptian military, and there has been pressure from some congressmen to reduce or end the flow of military hardware from Washington to Egypt.

Less than a year later, Obama said he did not consider Egypt to be either an "ally" or an "enemy" of the US.

After his election as president, Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi made appeals to Washington to help Egypt combat terrorism, saying the country was in need of new military equipment.

The US has been providing Egypt with about \$1.3 billion a year in military aid as a byproduct of the US-brokered Camp David Agreement of 1978 and the Peace Treaty with Israel.

"Mutual interests have been the basis for Egypt-US relations. They still govern those relations today. However, the relations should be built on mutual respect and an equal footing in order to continue and grow," Marzouk concluded.