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Egypt's Moves Raising Anxiety in Washington

Posted By Jim Lobe

May 4, 2011 With U.S. lawmakers threatening this week to cut aid to Pakistan over its alleged harboring of the late Osama bin Laden, concern is growing steadily here over the future of ties with another key predominantly Muslim ally heavily dependent on U.S. aid: Egypt.

Washington has supplied an average of two billion dollars a year – about two-thirds of which have gone to the Egyptian military – since Cairo signed the [Camp David Accords](#) with Israel in 1979.

It has also encouraged other countries and international financial institutions to be generous in dealing with Egypt, whose de facto – if often sour – acquiescence under former President Hosni Mubarak in Israel's more controversial actions against its other neighbors and the Palestinians was considered indispensable to maintaining an acceptable status quo.

But the foreign policy independence displayed by the new regime since Mubarak was swept from power nearly three months ago has elicited nervous reactions from key sectors here, particularly in Congress, where the influence of the so-called "Israel lobby" is especially strong.

The most recent action was Egypt's mediation of the reconciliation agreement signed Wednesday in Cairo by the leaders of Hamas and Fatah, an agreement that has been

strongly denounced by leading lawmakers, as well as by the administration of President Barack Obama itself.

House Foreign Affairs Committee chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and the Committee's ranking Democrat, Howard Berman, have already said that all U.S. aid will be cut off to any government that includes Hamas unless it agrees to renounce violence, recognize Israel's right to exist, and uphold all previous agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

And while Congressional leaders have not yet rallied behind such a far-reaching sanction against Egypt itself, the idea of threatening to slash aid to Egypt's powerful military as leverage to rein in Cairo's newfound independence has been quickly gaining currency in recent weeks on Capitol Hill.

"If Cairo's desire for a more 'independent' foreign policy translates into warmer ties with terrorists, America's own long-standing support for the Egyptian military may eventually need to be reconsidered," wrote the neoconservative [Wall Street Journal](#) Tuesday in an editorial that called Egypt's latest moves "an unsettling preview of what could emerge" from the so-called "Arab Spring".

The growing unease began shortly after Mubarak's ouster when Egypt permitted Iranian warships to sail through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, an action which Israel and its supporters here insisted was unprecedented since the 1979 Islamic Revolution when ties between the two Middle Eastern giants were effectively frozen.

But under new foreign minister Nabil Elaraby, Egypt's assertion of independence from both Israel and the United States has gained speed, even as he has repeatedly insisted that Cairo has no intention of renouncing the Camp David Accords.

Early last month, Elaraby announced after a rare meeting with a high-ranking Iranian diplomat that the two countries had "opened a new page".

Since then, Cairo has made clear that it intends to normalize relations with Tehran, a development that would mark a serious setback to U.S. and Israeli efforts to both isolate the Islamic Republic and forge a de facto alliance between Israel, Egypt and the Sunni-led monarchies of Jordan and the Gulf against Iran.

"All the world has diplomatic relations with Iran with the exception of the United States and Israel," Elaraby's spokesperson, Menha Bakhoum, told the [New York Times](#) last week. "We look at Iran as a neighbor in the region that we should have normal relations with."

At the same time, the foreign minister confirmed in an interview with al-Jazeera what had been rumored for weeks – that Egypt would within days open the Rafah border crossing to Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, a development that will effectively end a five-year Israeli blockade that Mubarak helped enforce.

Under the new regime, Cairo has also embraced the drive by the Palestinian Authority (PA) to gain recognition of a unified Palestinian state by the U.N. General Assembly in September and has reportedly urged Washington to do the same.

The Obama administration, however, has indicated that it strongly opposes the effort, insisting that such a move will undermine the "peace process", which, in any event, was effectively suspended last September. With Western European powers reportedly leaning in favor of the initiative, it appears unlikely that Washington can stop it.

All of the steps taken by the new regime appear designed to bring Egyptian foreign policy more in line with popular opinion which, according to public opinion polls, particularly since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, have shown significant opposition to U.S. policies in the region and hostility toward Israel, in particular.

In the latest poll released last week by the [Pew Research Center](#), 54 percent of respondents said they favored annulling the Camp David treaty with Israel, although 36 percent said they thought it should be retained.

A plurality of 43 percent said they would prefer a more distant relationship with the U.S. than that in recent years. The same survey showed strong support for the former Arab League chairman and likely presidential candidate, Amr Moussa, who has favored greater independence from U.S. foreign policy.

With Congress already in a penny-pinching mood on foreign aid, many observers believe cuts in future assistance are inevitable if Egypt's current trajectory continues.

Even before the negotiation of the controversial Palestinian reconciliation accord, lawmakers showed little interest in granting urgent requests by Egypt's new government for 3.3 billion dollars in debt relief that would save the country about 350 million dollars in annual debt payments or even for a proposed 50-million-dollar enterprise fund to attract foreign investment.

"We have to have as full a picture as we possibly can get before we do this, knowing we're in a transition period," the Republican chairwoman of the powerful House Foreign Operations Subcommittee, Texas Rep. Kay Granger, told the Congressional Quarterly.

The publication suggested that it was unlikely that Cairo would even get its usual annual allotment of 250 million dollars in economic aid this year despite a struggling economy – due in part to a drastic decline in tourism – and the risk that economic hardship could radicalize a newly-empowered electorate.

At least one astute observer predicted much will depend on Israel's attitude.

"The reason Egypt has gotten money is because the Israelis and AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) lobbied for it," said Dov Zakheim, a former senior Pentagon official in the George W. Bush administration, at a conference Tuesday at the [Center for](#)

[the National Interest](#). "If the Israelis are not enthusiastic, that will just reinforce Congress' reluctance ...then you're not going to see much (aid)."