

## Egypt's Diversionary Border Security

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*Egypt's militarized border security strategy favors donor preferences but ignores pressing domestic problems of unemployment, poverty, and restricted freedoms, leading to a dilemma in relations between the armed forces and society.*

In September 2019, the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) [announced the completion](#) of a \$64 million [mobile surveillance system](#) to secure its borders, one of [many steps](#) the EAF has taken in this domain. Given the [instability](#) suffered by Egypt's [neighbors](#), such measures are to be expected, but they also indicate an [increased reliance](#) on [international aid](#). An emphasis on border security is likely to please Arab Gulf allies, Israel, and the United States, but it ignores [pressing domestic problems](#) such as unemployment, restricted freedoms, and rising poverty rates. This dynamic creates a dilemma in relations between the armed forces and society: the military-led government has an incentive to repress in order to maintain stability, which makes it harder to solve the pressing domestic problems that drive a wedge between the military and society, making instability more likely.

## **Aid and Border Security**

Long benefitting from [U.S. military assistance](#) and cooperation on border security [with Israel](#), Egypt has diversified its international partnerships to include [China](#), [France](#), [Gulf countries](#), [Italy](#), and [Russia](#). Egypt's reliance on international aid [creates a motivation](#) to focus on instability along the borders, a priority among donors. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi [has affirmed](#) that "Egypt will not stand idle in the face of any movements that directly threaten the national security of Egypt, Libya, the Arab world, the region, and the world," and the U.S. Department of State [has applauded](#) Egyptian initiatives in Libya.

Insecurity also prevails near Egypt's [12-kilometer](#) border with the [Gaza Strip](#), with terrorist attacks in the Sinai and arms smuggling through [underground tunnels](#). Egypt has kept this border [tightly sealed](#) since Sisi came to power, and Israel [pressured](#) the U.S. government to release military aid to Egypt that was suspended after former president Mohammed Morsi was deposed in 2013. Egyptian [coordination](#) with Israel has resulted in Israeli air strikes in Sinai, and the EAF has begun building a [concrete wall](#) along the border. As on the border with Libya, security on the border with the Gaza Strip also appears linked to external assistance.

## **Pressing Domestic Problems**

The EAF's fortification of the border has coincided with a deterioration of living conditions along the Nile. On the surface, GDP growth increased after Egypt signed on to an [International Monetary Fund reform program](#) in 2016, reaching 5.5 percent by the end of 2019, with inflation dropping to its lowest level in four years and public debt and budget deficits on a downward trend. Nevertheless, [poverty rates](#), [unemployment](#), and [living costs](#) increased, motivating [countrywide protests](#) in [2019](#) and [2020](#). The government [cracked down](#) on protesters rather than address the issues that brought them into the streets to begin with. These protests occurred despite [widespread arrests and a ban on unauthorized assemblies](#).

Aid continued to flow, however, despite a [crackdown on civil society](#) and [suppression of political opposition](#). The U.S. government has called for the repeal or amendment of Egypt's [repressive legal regime](#) on nongovernmental organizations, and has suspended aid, but has ultimately [released it](#). This indicates that U.S. aid is not truly conditioned on protecting civil liberties.

## **A Diversionary Dynamic**

The focus of U.S. and other providers of international aid on Egypt's stabilizing regional role creates a diversionary dynamic that encourages the government to augment its border security at the expense of resolving pressing internal challenges. The presence of problems that affect the West—like terrorism, undocumented

immigration, and smuggling—makes donors emphasize the importance of border security, while Egyptian decisionmakers emphasize good donor relations, continued funding, and recognition of its role in the region.

This diversionary dynamic poses a dilemma for relations between the Egyptian military and society. It pushes pressing domestic down on the agenda and creates an incentive for the government to use physical and legal repression in response to demands for solutions to these problems. The continued flow of international aid into Egypt sends an indirect message to the Sisi administration: regardless of the repression, Egypt is too significant to the donor community for aid to cease. One likely result is that repression will in turn distance the military-led government and the armed forces from the larger society, a civil-military dilemma that makes it still harder to resolve these pressing domestic challenges.

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