



Confronting the Oppression of Journalists: Egypt First

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Since the 2011 Arab Spring, Arab states have normalized tough crackdowns on journalists covering post-revolutionary conditions or speaking out against Arab governments. One country that has been identified as having particularly restrictive policies against journalists is Egypt. With Egyptians calling for freedom in 2011 in order to establish independence from the Mubarak regime, few expected that state-controlled media censorship would become a much greater problem under the partial democratic government that exists in Egypt today. Prior to the revolution, Egyptian media enjoyed a freer climate under an authoritarian regime—a strategy employed by the Mubarak government to ensure regime security. Despite Egypt’s human rights record, the [U.S. State Department website reports](#) that “Since 1978, the United States has provided Egypt with what now totals over \$50 billion in military and \$30 billion in economic assistance.” The [U.S. State Department’s report on human rights conditions in Egypt](#) outlines numerous violations: “significant human rights issues included: the worst forms of restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, site blocking, and the existence of unenforced criminal libel.”

Given the fact that the Egyptian government is not monolithic in structure, the U.S. must approach this media censorship issue through a pragmatic lens that considers both the importance of maintaining this key, mutually beneficial relationship, as well as the costs of turning a blind eye to major human rights violations occurring in Egypt. The key to combating the Egyptian journalism crisis is to keep in mind the complex history of media freedom in Egypt as well as the Egyptian government’s desperation to keep its people from staging another revolution. The U.S. and Egypt enjoy a strategic relationship that is mutually beneficial. If the U.S. wants to press the Egyptian government to make changes regarding human rights violations, such as its attack on journalists, it is important that the U.S. offers the right carrots to Egypt to incentivize their backing down from the crackdown on journalists. Additionally, the U.S. government also must use the appropriate sticks to pressure Egypt to change its treatment of journalists and media laws.

The first campaign of pressure towards Egypt would take place in private diplomatic negotiations between the U.S. and the al-Sisi government. In terms of carrots, the U.S. can offer to restore the Egyptian government’s ability to gain from Cash Flow Financing (CFF). This would allow the Egyptian government to pay for U.S. defense equipment in smaller payments over an extended period of time. Additionally, the U.S. could agree to provide greater U.S. foreign direct investment in the Egyptian private sector, which would naturally boost the Egyptian economy. Conversely, in terms of sticks, the U.S. government could threaten increased



import tariffs as well as economic sanctions if the Egyptian government refuses to comply with freer media regulations.

What has been previously described is what can be deemed the “private campaign.” This will be the United States’ first campaign of pressure for freer Egyptian media. If the proposed plan fails, the U.S. will turn to a public campaign of pressure. This second campaign would be an international one. The task of advocating for press freedom in Egypt and across the world does not fall solely on America’s shoulders. The EU has been making small attempts to hold the Egyptian government accountable for its jailing of journalists, but, without the help of a superpower like the U.S., the EU’s pressure is not consistent or persuasive enough. With the new Biden administration recently taking office, [“fresh support from the U.S. could help unblock the path for more robust international diplomacy.”](#) Therefore, if the al-Sisi government were to reject the initial proposal, the U.S. could join forces with the EU to publicly shame and bring attention to the human rights violations occurring in Egypt.

In addition to the more specific sanctions and steps listed above, the Biden administration should implement the recommended procedures offered by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) which apply to the broader realm of press freedom advocacy and protection. Implementing these protocols will help prevent journalism crises like the one seen in Egypt today from happening in the future. The [CPJ’s recommendations](#) for the Biden administration primarily include appointing a Special Presidential Envoy for Press Freedom who reports press freedom violations to the Secretary of State, rebuilding State Department institutions that have supported press freedom, rejoining the U.N. Human Rights Council and restoring funding to UNESCO, and ensuring the independence of U.S. government-funded media around the world.

If the Biden administration is serious about combating human rights violations, then advocating for a free international press is a key component to achieving a better international human rights climate. As Egypt is one of the worst nations regarding press freedom, it only makes sense for the Biden administration to start there, where the U.S. government has potential to hold great leverage.