

F-16 deal redefines US relationship with Egypt's Morsi administration

Ahmed Eleiba, Monday 14 Jan 2013

Consignment of US F-16 jet fighters to Cairo signals level of support for Egypt's President Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood from which he hails, say military experts



A consignment of F-16 jet fighters to Cairo from Washington during the next few weeks has stirred up yet another hornet's nest in Egypt's fraught political atmosphere.

In the opinion of many observers, the controversy over the deal is a thoroughly political one, as the additional fighter planes will do little to alter strategic balances of power in the region. It is unlikely that similar arms deals during the Mubarak era would have aroused such an altercation. The new factor, of course, is the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, which has worried political circles in both capitals.

Various parties abroad and domestic adversaries of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) are keen to loosen the strategic embrace between the two countries. Nevertheless, in an interview with Al-Ahram Weekly, a US source stated that Washington would support the authority in Cairo as long as it remained committed to the democratic process.

To officials in Washington, it is the defence question that counts more than the political, even if the arms deal has sparked some political controversy here or there, the source said. The same source stressed that the deal did not come attached with any security demands linked to the situation in Egypt or in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

This is consistent with the outcome of the US-Egyptian joint defence committee meeting held in Cairo several weeks ago. The 28th of these regular sessions, the meeting affirmed the US's strategic vision that maintains the necessity of sustaining the partnership that has existed between the two countries over the past three decades. That Egypt represents a cornerstone of this strategic vision was probably the main factor in the success of the F-16 deal.

Ambassador Hussein Haridi, former assistant foreign minister, prefers to use the term "the rules of the game" when referring to the arms agreement. "It appears that the Muslim Brotherhood understands these rules very well," he asserted.

Some experts in military affairs are more inclined to see the issue purely in terms of the army, its morale and its armament needs, seeing little reason to colour the issue with domestic political considerations. It is in this context that a military spokesman has noted on numerous occasions the close military coordination between the US and Egypt.

But this is not how another military expert sees it. In his opinion, it is impossible to separate politics from the question of arms for Egypt. For example, he said, in the current contest between President Barack Obama and US Congress, one cannot overlook the fact that there is a major agreement with regard to the management of Egyptian-US relations centring on military aid to Egypt, which takes priority over economic assistance.

The F-16s slated to arrive are the block 50/52 versions. The F-16s that are currently in the Egyptian arsenal are the A, B and C models of blocks 30/32 and 40/42. These have been in operation in Egypt since the 1980s. Perhaps the importance of the new arrivals derives from the fact that they belong to a more advanced line, even if other Arab countries possess subsequent models with more enhancements. The UAE, for example, possesses F-16s from block 60/62. As for Saudi Arabia, it boasts the most expensive arms deals in the history of US weapons sales, estimated in the neighbourhood of \$60 billion over ten years. Riyadh and Washington are currently contemplating yet more deals of similar scale.

Cairo already has some 200 F-16s, but is looking forward to 20 new upgraded ones. Israel may have only 102 F-16s, but it will retain the qualitative edge when it obtains the F-35s. These fifth generation multi-role fighters – designed to perform ground attacks, reconnaissance and air defence missions with stealth capability – will not go into service for two years, but Israel will get first dibs when they are marketed internationally a couple years from now.

It has been suggested that they are unlikely to be deployed in the US Air Force until they have first demonstrated their prowess in the skies of the Middle East. With such advanced and sophisticated weaponry, Israel will retain its qualitative military superiority not just over Egypt but over all Arab countries combined. This only confirms that the current US-Egyptian arms deal offers no breakthrough with respect to strategic equations.

But, domestically, it means quite a bit. Retired Brigadier General Safwat Al-Zayat told the Weekly in a telephone interview from Doha that in the game between the White House and Congress, the Zionist lobby may still try to obstruct the deal. "Even though they know that the aircraft mean little in terms of military balances, they feel they have to say something with a political twist that includes Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brothers in a useful sentence. But then, the White House is playing the same game," he said.

He continued: "Even if this bothers people in the military, it is obvious that the finalisation of the deal on 11 December, which happened to be at the height of the mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square against Morsi, conveyed a political message. Between the lines, Washington was sending a message to three parties. The first was to Morsi and it stated, 'We support you. Move ahead.' The second was to the army and it said, 'We are encouraging this man,' meaning Morsi. The third was to the opposition forces and it said the same thing. We need to bear in mind that Morsi had been put to the test during the last [Israeli] war against Gaza and

passed with flying colours from the US perspective."

If the above-mentioned US source had no reservations with regard to Washington's embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood, another source close to the same political circle complained that the Brotherhood were being two-faced in their dealings with Washington – which is to say that what is happening on the ground in Egypt is different from what they try to market to US public opinion. To this, a Brotherhood source responded: "How can we be sure that the US administration is dealing honestly with us?" The implication was that Washington is keeping its lines of communication open with the Egyptian opposition and army.

Ambassador Haridi agrees that the F-16 deal signals an unprecedented level of support for Morsi and the Brotherhood. He finds this regrettable because "it leads me to understand that the Muslim Brotherhood reached power with US approval, and this means the provision of services." Therefore, he added, "Congress will not intervene, unless there is some dramatic excess or unless the Brotherhood deviates from the framework of its understanding with Washington. In any event, the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo understands the rules perfectly and has no intention of breaking them."

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