# Where's My Favorite Dictator?

## An Analysis of the American Empire

## In Post-Revolution Egypt

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Jeremy Alan Brill Booth

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## ABSTRACT

In 2011, Egypt became the epicenter of a regional wave of uprisings demanding an end to corruption, inequality, and undemocratic governance. The Egyptian revolution marked the hopeful beginning of a democratization process. However, in 2013 a military coup by General Abdel Fatah El-Sisi deposed the elected president and ended Egypt's democratic experiment (DeSmet 2021). Despite the deterioration in U.S.-Egypt relations during the Obama administration and the erosion of political freedoms and economic stability over the last decade, the Trump administration enthusiastically embraced El-Sisi's regime. Did Trump's claim that El-Sisi was his "favorite dictator" signal a profound shift in American policy? In this case study of American foreign policy in Egypt during the Trump administration, I argue that the United States has pursued a strategy of democracy prevention to secure American interests and incorporate Egypt into a regional neoliberal order. Trump maintained the imperial approach of his predecessors by deepening security ties with the Egyptian military, accelerating the securitization of foreign aid, and outsourcing imperialism to the IMF and the Gulf. Nevertheless, Trump's America First foreign policy departed from past presidents by promoting Sisi's authoritarianism, rejecting democracy promotion and soft power, and aggressively deterring Egypt from aligning with American rivals. I assert that the Trump administration's foreign policy strategy responded to declining American influence in the Middle East and North Africa. America First foreign policy was an aggressive but contradictory and limited strategy to sustain American dominance in a region characterized by increasing multipolarity.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, uprisings spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), demanding an end to corruption, inequality, and undemocratic governance. Egypt became the epicenter of the Arab Spring as millions mobilized to overthrow the authoritarian president, Hosni Mubarak (Lynch 2013). The Egyptian uprising began a revolutionary process in which popular forces organized to achieve social and economic justice and democratize Egyptian society (DeSmet 2016). From 2011-2013, the revolutionary movement won free elections, constitutional reforms, and increased freedoms for civil society. However, in 2013 a wave of social upheaval and violence culminated in a coup that deposed the newly elected president and brought a military general to power.

Over the last decade, President Abdel Fateh El-Sisi has repressed revolutionary forces and consolidated an authoritarian regime. The post-revolutionary government maintains power through unprecedented levels of violence, support from foreign states, and elevated levels of debt (Alexander and Naguib 2017; DeSmet 2021; Mandour 2021). Political freedoms and economic indicators have deteriorated sharply under Sisi's rule. In a brief period, Egyptian security forces closed hundreds of civil society organizations, jailed and murdered thousands of political dissidents, and banned public demonstrations (Human Rights Watch 2021). Sisi's regime has consolidated ownership of the economy in the hands of an exclusive military elite while implementing a neoliberal program of austerity to repay unsustainable debts (Adly 2021; Shafik 2021). This neoliberal transformation of state capitalism has already exacerbated dire poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Springborg 2021). Sisi's neoliberal agenda and campaign of state

repression have secured his hold on power for now. Nonetheless, the new regime has failed to stabilize the country's social conditions or halt Egypt's economic deterioration.

The Egyptian state is a major non-NATO ally of the United States, exemplified by the $1.3 billion in aid provided each year to the Egyptian military (Gardner 2011). Egypt's geostrategic location, substantial domestic market, and importance as the largest Arab-Muslim population make it a lynchpin of U.S. regional policy (Sharp 2019). From 2017 to 2021, the Trump presidency was a key supporter of Sisi as his regime consolidated power. Trump took a distinctly warmer tone towards Sisi than the Obama administration, openly praising Sisi's unapologetic use of violence in the war on terror (Lacy 2017). Trump reportedly declared Sisi "his favorite dictator" (Campisis 2019). The Trump administration insisted that close ties with Sisi were essential to guarantee U.S. security interests in the broader Middle East and North Africa (Holmes 2019). Yet over the last decade, the U.S-Egypt relationship has been fraught with tensions. American elites have questioned the rationale for the bilateral relationship with Egypt. They ask whether the Egypt-U.S. alliance is obsolete in an era of American disengagement from the region and a renewed focus on great power competition (Cook 2019; Holmes and Miller 2020; Schenker 2020). Officials in Washington have expressed anger about Sisi's escalating human rights abuses, the regime's refusal to liberalize the Egyptian economy, and Cairo's ties with U.S. adversaries like Russia and China. These tensions inspired congressional efforts to cut bilateral aid and sanction the Sisi regime during the Trump administration.

Given the last ten years of radical upheaval in Egypt and mixed signals from American elites about the future of U.S. policy, it is essential to consider how Egypt-U.S. relations evolved

after the Arab Spring. In this case study of U.S. foreign policy during the Trump presidency, I analyze continuity and change in political, economic, and military ties between the United States and Egypt. After summarizing realist and liberal approaches to American foreign policy, I assess the mainstream interpretations of Obama's response to the January 25th revolution and the 2013 counter-revolutionary coup in Egypt. Finding these explanations inadequate, I explore the history of American imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa and Egypt's unequal incorporation into the American-led world system. Inspired by the work of Julian Go, I argue that a structural analysis of the rise and decline of American imperial hegemony provides a more robust explanation of American foreign policy behavior. I find that Trump sustained the long-term American commitment to democracy prevention and informal imperialism in Egypt. For instance, Trump maintained security ties with the Egyptian military, accelerated the securitization of foreign aid, and further outsourced imperial responsibilities to the Gulf and the IMF. Nevertheless, Trump's America First foreign policy departed from past administrations by actively promoting Sisi's authoritarianism, rejecting democracy promotion and soft power, and aggressively deterring Egypt's cooperation with rivals like Russia. I argue that the Trump administration's foreign policy strategy in Egypt was partially a response to declining American power in the Middle East and North Africa. America First foreign policy was an aggressive but contradictory and ultimately limited strategy to sustain American dominance in a region characterized by increasing multipolarity.

# CHAPTER TWO

# AMERICAN EMPIRE, EGYPT, AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

## Liberalism, Realism, and Obama's Egypt Policy

Traditional international relations scholarship focuses on Egypt's distinct and complicated role in U.S. foreign policy following the end of World War II (Gardner 2011). After the 1952 overthrow of the British-backed monarchy, Egypt resisted American efforts to shape the post-colonial regional order. The Arab nationalist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser opposed U.S. cold war interventions in the region and denounced American support for Israeli settler colonialism (Gardner 2011). Nasser's opposition to American regional policy was nonetheless short-lived. A disastrous defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War with Israel damaged Nasser's popular support, and his sudden death in 1970 threatened to unravel Egypt's fractious ruling coalition. To stabilize the regime and halt Egypt's decline in regional power, Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat reversed Egypt's geopolitical allegiances and became a close ally of the United States (Roccu 2021). The 1978 Egypt-Israel peace treaty began a 40-year partnership, and Egypt aligned with the U.S. sphere of influence. Since the signing of the Camp David Accords, the United States has provided financial, military, and diplomatic aid to Egypt's government (Gardner 2011). In exchange, Egypt has nurtured friendly ties with Israel, facilitated U.S. military power projection in the region, and opened its markets to American business interests (Clark 1997). After the end of the Cold War, President Hosni Mubarak further strengthened Egyptian ties with the United States (Brownlee 2012). His regime supported American military interventions during the first Gulf War and later facilitated the Global War on Terror, notoriously torturing suspected terrorists at the behest of American intelligence services (Pillay 2013: 261). In addition to the geopolitical

benefits of close ties, U.S. officials prioritize Egyptian security because of fears that the failure of the Egyptian state could destabilize the region (Collins & Rothe 2014).

Egypt's prominent place in U.S. geostrategic considerations has guaranteed close security cooperation and the provision of foreign aid to Egypt across Republican and Democratic presidencies alike (Heydemann 2014). Although there is strong bipartisan support for U.S-Egypt collaboration, there also exists a long-standing tension in international relations policymaking and scholarship between realist and idealist/liberal understandings of the U.S. relationship with Egypt. Realists emphasize that states prioritize power and security in an anarchic global system. Foreign policy behavior ultimately responds to power distributions in the state system (Jackson and Sorensen 2013: 65). According to realism, the United States *should* prioritize security interests when formulating policy towards Egypt. Thus, the U.S. can tolerate authoritarianism and human rights abuses by Egypt's government so long as the regime upholds American security interests like peace with Israel and cooperation in the War on Terror (Hawthorne and Miller 2018). Alternatively, liberals and idealists focus on the spread of market economies and representative democracies as the fundamental determinants of a stable international order (Jackson and Sorensen 2013: 99). Ethics and human rights considerations should and *often do* factor prominently in American foreign policy practice (Nelson 2017). Liberals advocate soft power strategies to pressure the Egyptian state to reform its undemocratic practices. Liberal claims that soft power will guarantee American security interests by encouraging Egypt to become a democratic society less prone to terrorism, conflict, and economic turmoil.

A vital component of the liberal approach to foreign policy is democracy promotion. Since the 1990s, the U.S. government has provided millions of dollars to American agencies and

Egyptian civil society groups to encourage reforms like transparent elections and an independent parliament and judiciary (Scott and Carter 2015, 2020; Snider and Faris 2011). American officials characterize democracy promotion as a cost-effective way to transform Egypt into a friendly, economically prosperous society (Durac 2009). The prominence of democracy promotion in U.S.-Egypt policy made it a funding priority during the Clinton and Bush administrations (Huber 2015:60). Yet despite ample funding and bipartisan support, scholars question the efficacy of democracy promotion efforts and the long-term commitment of the United States to a reform agenda in Egypt. In the past, U.S. government officials have quickly reversed democracy promotion policies when these programs threaten to empower social actors hostile to U.S. interests. Lafi Youmans (2016) demonstrates how the Bush administration abandoned its "Freedom Agenda" in Egypt when officials realized that free elections could bring the unfriendly Muslim Brotherhood to power. Inconsistent democracy promotion efforts fit a broader pattern of "democratic exception" in which the United States provides aid to authoritarian allies in the Middle East to guarantee American security interests (Berger 2011). Short-termism and vested private interests also obstructed a consistent policy of democracy promotion in Egypt (Heydemann 2014). During the Bush presidency, Berger (2011) notes that pressure from the defense and oil lobbies impeded congressional attempts to link Egypt's foreign aid package to democratic reforms like free elections. Other scholars argue that democracy promotion paradoxically *strengthened* the autocratic Mubarak regime by providing funds to his cronies and allowing Mubarak to characterize democracy as a colonial imposition (Tansey 2016; Snider 2018). Democracy programming also prioritized market liberalization and economic reforms that did not act to strengthen Egypt's representative institutions (Snider and Faris 2018).

In sum, decades of American democracy promotion in Egypt have not led to democratization while clashing with U.S. security interests and economic priorities.

Obama's response to the 2011 uprising is a case study of the tensions in American foreign policy between democracy promotion and realpolitik. Obama began his administration advocating "pragmatic realism." The United States would balance support for democratic reform with the prioritization of security interests and a policy of non-interventionism (Ibrahim 2016: 68). After the trauma of the Iraq War, Obama sought to reconcile with Arab populations, reduce the U.S. regional footprint, and disavow military adventurism (Huber 2015). Even though the American government espoused pro-reform rhetoric, Obama also cemented ties to Mubarak's repressive security state and reduced funding for Bush-era democracy promotion programs (Nelson 2017).

The outbreak of the Arab Spring upended Obama's attempt to balance security interests and democracy promotion. In response to the 2011 mass protests in Egypt, Obama initially called for the Mubarak regime to protect demonstrators and undertake a reform process to quell widespread anger (Atlas 2012). Instead, Mubarak's security forces unleashed a wave of violent repression against peaceful protestors, and the Egyptian state began to lose control of the country. Obama's position became untenable. With Mubarak's fall inevitable, the administration abandoned their longtime ally and called for a transition to an elected government (Holmes 2019). The election of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi in the first contested polls in modern Egyptian history was a turning point in Egypt's democratic transition. The American prioritization of this transition was nonetheless short-lived. The Morsi administration's ham-fisted response to the instability of the post-revolution period spurred another uprising in 2013 to

bring down his increasingly autocratic administration (Kirkpatrick 2018). This wave of demonstrations provided the popular backing for a coup led by the Egyptian military. Security forces arrested Morsi and installed Defense Minister General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi in power with a mandate to restore stability and reconstitute the Egyptian state. A wave of counter-revolutionary violence ensued, culminating in the August massacre of 900 Morsi supporters by security forces at Rab'a mosque (Kirkpatrick 2018).

Obama was outraged by the mass killings. He told his advisors, "We can't return to business as usual..We have to be very careful about being seen as aiding and abetting actions that we think run contrary to our values and ideals" (Crowley 2016). Cabinet advisors wanted to signal displeasure at the military takeover without sacrificing security ties. An official coup declaration would have required an immediate aid suspension, harming cooperation on counter-terrorism in the Sinai and long-standing military-to-military relations (Holmes 2019). Instead of a coup declaration, the administration attempted to balance Obama's values and interests by downgrading bilateral ties (Wittes 2013). Obama temporarily suspended the delivery of weapons to the Egyptian military and launched a review of the Egyptian aid package (Sharp 2020: 2). Despite the aid suspension and State Department condemnation of the Rab'a massacre, security cooperation continued, and the administration made little effort to restore the elected government. Secretary of State John Kerry even went so far as to suggest that by ousting Morsi, the military was "restoring democracy" (BBC 2013). After backing the transition to democracy, the Obama administration reverted to a silent tolerance of authoritarian rule.

Scholars identify multiple factors contributing to the Obama administration's muddled and contradictory response to the Egyptian revolution. Domestically, disagreements between

hawks and doves in Obama's cabinet and heightened polarization between Republicans and Democrats in Congress led to policy-making gridlock (Fabrini and Youssef 2015). Williams (2016) faults the Obama administration's "strategic absence" for failing to anticipate and react to the Arab uprisings. In its eagerness to withdraw from the region and narrow the scope of U.S. commitments, the administration neglected to take a proactive stance on the regional upheaval. Other scholars find Obama's abandonment of a democratic agenda is consistent with long-term U.S. behavior in the region (Brownlee 2012, Nelson 2017, Selim 2012). The United States historically takes a *realist* approach to the Middle East and prioritizes security over reform, especially when officials perceive a threat to strategic interests. This orientation amongst Obama cabinet members resulted in an ad-hoc and reactive response to the Arab Spring (Huber 2015).

Constrained by an American public weary of military interventions and uncertain of American interests in a chaotic regional order, the Obama administration supported regime change in some contexts (e.g., Tunisia) and backed status quo powers in others (e.g., Bahrain). In Egypt, the administration initially supported the transition to an elected government as long as the new regime upheld American security interests (Holmes 2019). But Obama's calculus shifted as Egypt's revolution descended into violence, and the Islamic State expanded across Syria, Iraq, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. After a 2015 wave of terrorist attacks in Egypt, congressional anger that the United States was not doing enough to support Sisi's struggle against terrorism forced Obama to restore the suspended security aid (Ackerman 2015). For American officials, Morsi's ouster was regrettable, but democratization was no longer a priority as ISIS terrorism and civil conflict engulfed the region. Obama begrudgingly accepted a return to military dictatorship so

the United States could focus on the war on terror, stabilize Egypt under Sisi's rule, and protect the border with Israel.

Traditional international relations scholarship provides essential insights into how the contradictions between realism and liberalism influenced U.S.-Egypt relations under Obama. These perspectives illuminate the ideological tensions and conflicting interests at the heart of American statecraft. Nevertheless, focusing on high politics, power distributions between self-interested states, and the impact of liberal culture on international relations is insufficient to understand American foreign policy. The United States' status as an empire fundamentally determines its geopolitical behavior.

## U.S. Empire and the World System

The United States is not simply a predominant power in the world system; it is a global empire. Go (2008: 201) defines an empire as "a transnational political formation by which one state exerts political power and control over subordinate territory and people." Despite exceptionalist attempts to deny American imperialism (Lake 2008), scholars provide convincing evidence that the United States is an empire (Amin 2004, Cox 2004, Go 2011, Gill 2018, Harvey 2003, McCoy 2009). The American Empire is sustained by military force, economic power, and cultural hegemony, alternating between aggressive and indirect strategies depending on the global context. Gill (2018) explains that following World War II, the United States did not form a territorial empire in the image of Great Britain. Instead, American elites established an informal empire, exercising control without formally declaring sovereignty over new territories. The American Empire asserts power globally through combinations of hard power (e.g., invasions, drone strikes, special operations, threats of force) and soft power (e.g., economic aid,

loans, and cultural influence). Informal approaches range from regime change operations to overthrow rival governments (see Guatemala in Grandin 2006) and equipping friendly military regimes (see Contras in Grandin 2006) to subtle economic methods like providing access to American goods and markets. Military power is projected globally through a vast network of American military bases situated in allied states, relying on the offshore deployment of military forces. Mann (2013) calls this a strategy of extensive, not intensive, power in which invasion and conquest do not lead to territorial annexation in the traditions of past empires.

After World War 2, the United States also pursued informal imperialism through the consolidation of an "institutional empire." American aid and security guarantees rebuilt decimated core states like Japan and West Germany and subsumed these states under the American sphere of influence. The United States created the institutions of the post-war *Liberal International Order (LIO)* (i.e., the Marshall Plan, NATO, the United Nations, and Bretton Woods) as part of a vision of "global–imperial leadership exercised by U.S. elites…. via an international order of organizations and relationships" (Parmar 2018:162). This multilateral institutional architecture incorporated allied states as markets for American goods and sources of raw materials and spread American culture, consumerism, and political ideas abroad. Consolidating a pro-capitalist bloc also legitimized American military presence in foreign lands to protect the West against communism. The post-Cold War LIO shapes interstate relations to the interests of the American Empire by socializing foreign elites into a consensus-based system under American leadership (Parmar 2018:162). Western elites conceptualize this rules-based order, like American society, as an egalitarian market society of states with rules binding on all members (157). The United States sits atop this hierarchy, acting with impunity and pursuing

narrow self-interest through its disproportionate influence in multilateral bodies like the U.N. security council and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In addition, the American-led system implicitly excludes most of the world's population from membership in the liberal order based on racial notions of inferiority (Parmar 2018: 158,172). This racist dualism justifies violence, warfare, and the abrogation of universal human rights in the societies of the global South in defense of the liberal privileges of the global North.

The American Empire, as a capitalist superpower, plays a leading role among the Western states that dominate the global economy. The modern world system is a capitalist world economy bound together by capitalist social relations and an international division of labor (Wallerstein 1974; 2004). The system consists of core, periphery, and semi-periphery regions between which the ownership of the means of production and claims on surplus output are unequally distributed (Wallerstein 2004:11-12). Core states historically owned the most technologically advanced means of production and accrued a disproportionate share of surplus through monopsony power, monopolies of intellectual property, and control of trade networks (Clelland 2014:2). Core nations and firms use their geopolitical influence and economic dominance to underprice the labor and commodities of the global South. On the other hand, semi-peripheral and peripheral states historically undertook less capital-intensive production activities and were primary commodity suppliers (Wallerstein 1974). Even though the South is responsible for most global industrial labor and production today, northern firms use their monopoly power to drive down the prices of Southern products (Hickel et al. 2022: 8, Smith 2013). Unequal power leads to trade outcomes in which "every unit of embodied resources and labor that the South imports from the North, they have to export many more units to pay for it"

(Hickel et al. 2022: 2). Relations of *unequal exchange* between core and periphery exacerbate the unequal distribution of resources, technologies, and access to knowledge in the world system (Hickel et al. 2014). Unequal exchange is colonial extraction in a modern form. Thus, the legacies of colonial occupation and imperial terrorist violence result in the persistent underdevelopment of societies in the Global South (Rodney 1982, Jalata 2013). Although the world system is dynamic and peripheral societies can reach higher levels of development, core states use their political, economic, and military wherewithal to fortify the unequal distribution of resources and wealth.

Over the history of world capitalism, cycles have occurred in which a single state rises to lead the world system (Arrighi 1994, Wallerstein 2004). The United States became this global hegemon, the most powerful capitalist state in the world system, at the end of World War II (Arrighi and Silver 2001). In the era of globalization, American Empire facilitates the global expansion of capitalist social relations, incorporating nations, regions, and networks of foreign elites into the American-led capitalist international order (Parmar 2018). Robinson (2006) observes that globalization ended the classic form of inter-imperial rivalry, in which individual states compete to serve the interests of their domestic capitalists (see Lenin 1939). Instead, the contemporary nation-state is part of a global web of supranational institutions and cross-border capital flows. This globalized state depends on transnational capital and coordinated production and trade across borders to sustain domestic economic growth (Bromley 2006). Therefore, to maintain domestic social order, the modern nation-state must coordinate with other capitalist states and partially serve the interests of a transnational capitalist class (TCC) that owns and invests most global wealth (Robinson 2001). In this context, American Empire plays an ultra-

imperialist role in the world system, leading a cross-national alliance of ruling classes to exploit the global south and reproduce an unequal global economy (Parmar 2018:160). In return for acting as a "universal capitalist" (Wood 2003:153-154), the United States receives a disproportionate share of the wealth and resources of a highly unequal global economy. In summary, the U.S. imperial state provides the security and coordination functions that facilitate the expansion of capitalism globally. In this way, the American Empire serves a broader class alliance of Western and transnational capitalist elites outside the imperial metropole.

U.S. Empire deploys the power of finance capital and dollar hegemony to promote neoliberalism and sustain American dominance over global capitalism. The U.S. government and American financial firms have enormous influence over the global monetary system, indicated by the dollar's international reserve status (Mann 2013, Harvey 2003). The U.S. Treasury, Wall Street, and U.S.-backed economic governance institutions (i.e., the Wall Street Dollar Nexus) hold global authority over money and credit flows. Over the past 40 years, the United States has harnessed the power of dollar hegemony to conduct the project of neoliberalism. David Harvey (2007: 2-3) defines neoliberalism as a set of economic prescriptions and a theory of governance that promotes capital mobility and free markets. Neoliberal reforms aim to maximize economic growth through policies of "free trade and market liberalization, deregulation, fiscal discipline, privatization, and commercialized social programs" (Bogaert 2013: 2019). For Harvey (2007) and Davidson (2020), neoliberalism is a class project to reassert capitalist power and sustain capital accumulation in an era of declining profitability. Capitalists strengthen their class power by dismantling the social welfare state and deregulating national economies (Slobodian 2018, Davies 2016). Neoliberalism benefits the American Empire

by subordinating peripheral states to the accumulation needs of the global north (Hanieh 2013: 12). The market transformation of subordinate states redistributes wealth from the south to the core (especially the United States) through debt, unequal exchange, and foreign ownership of local assets (Smith 2016). In the process of neoliberal integration, peripheral nations become dependent on the products and intellectual property of the core. Neoliberalism is a vital component of what David Harvey (2003) calls the "new imperialism," a combination of U.S. military and financial power that reshapes the economies and class relations of peripheral states to the economic requirements of the core. Scholars of American imperialism insist that American geopolitical power is partially a relationship of exploitation and domination over other societies. Consequently, American imperial power and Egypt's subordinate position in the neoliberal world system are the foundations of the U.S.-Egypt relationship.

## Egypt in the World System

Modern Egypt developed as a peripheral, colonized state in the world system. In the 19th century, the country joined the world market as a commodity frontier and supplier of cotton to the British Empire (Alff 2021). Egypt was over-reliant on the cotton economy, and an economic downturn drove the early modern Egyptian state to insolvency. The British Empire used the pretext of debt and economic crisis to institute a colonial protectorate. The resulting concentration of land ownership in the hands of domestic rentiers and foreign banks inhibited Egyptian industrialization (Alexander and Naguib 2018:95). By the beginning of the 20th century, Egypt was fully subordinated as an exporter of cheap agricultural commodities for European markets, reliant on European debt to fund state initiatives (Cammett et al., 2015). Economic stagnation and imperial domination combined to cause frequent fiscal crises, high

poverty, and a lack of investment in education, health, and infrastructure. Even after nominal independence in 1922, the British maintained control of Egypt's foreign and economic affairs through a client monarch, King Farouk (Jakes and Shokr 2021). The coup that brought Nasser to power in 1952 was a reaction to this dual crisis of colonization and economic subordination. Nasserism attempted to decolonize Egypt and achieve financial independence through a state-led land reform program, import substitution, and public investment.

Despite Egyptian attempts to achieve social development and political autonomy, Egyptian state capitalism proved inefficient and corrupt. Oligarchic control of the economy encouraged the growth of a state bourgeoisie that siphoned off economic surplus, failing to invest in the job-rich industries that saw peers like South Korea explode with economic dynamism (Cammett et al. 2015). Nasser further weakened Egypt's economy by diverting resources into military confrontations with Israel and Gulf monarchist forces in Yemen. The disastrous defeat in the 1967 war with Israel destroyed an already sclerotic economy and undermined the popular legitimacy of the Nasserist political project (Jakes and Shokr 2021). Anwar Sadat inherited a state mired in a legitimacy crisis and faced the defeat of Arab nationalism by U.S. imperial clients like Israel. Consequently, Sadat's realignment with the American empire was an attempt to protect state legitimacy and revive the economy through policies of market liberalization (infitah), debt financing, and the accumulation of geopolitical rents (i.e., economic and military aid) (DeSmet 2016). Yet Sadat's market-friendly authoritarianism remained fragile because the need for foreign support to restore economic productivity and bolster the security apparatus made the Egyptian ruling class highly dependent on the West.

## U.S. Empire in the Middle East and Egypt

Since its rise to global hegemony, the American Empire has intervened aggressively in the Middle East and North Africa. The region's strategic location, oil resources, and potential alignment with geopolitical adversaries made regional influence key to global American imperial ambitions (Amin 2004). Following World War II, American imperial planners determined that control of Middle Eastern hydrocarbons was necessary to expand U.S. industry (Mitchell 2011). American elites also feared that the rise of Soviet and anti-colonial forces in the region would deny access to markets, resources, and trade networks. Even today, as the United States becomes less dependent on Gulf oil for its energy security, American security presence prevents rivals from controlling oil markets (Achcar 2016). The United States first articulated its regional imperial strategy through the Eisenhower Doctrine and the later Carter Doctrine (Gardner 2011). These policies justified military, economic, and diplomatic interventions to protect American interests. Key to achieving regional domination was support for local authoritarian clients. In the 1970s, the United States consolidated a counterrevolutionary bloc of regimes to repress leftist, Arab nationalist, and Soviet-aligned forces (Achcar 2016). The original pillars of this order were the Saudi monarchy, the Israeli settler state, and Iran under the dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi. After the Islamic revolution overthrew Shah Pahlavi, the United States found a new client in Sadat's Egypt.

American Empire provided aid and weapons to MENA regimes to strengthen their security forces and prevent the overthrow of rulers by anti-imperial and democratic social movements (Selim 2013). In Egypt, The United States pursued a policy of "democracy prevention" after Sadat's realignment with the West. Brownlee (2012:6) insists that American

elites supported Egyptian authoritarianism because they believed that autocratic rule would protect American security interests. American elites feared that democratization would empower a progressive government opposed to U.S. policies like the Israeli occupation of Palestine. American officials provided financial and military aid to the Egyptian state to prevent a transition to a potentially unfriendly regime. Consequently, Holmes (2019) considers the United States one of the four pillars of Egypt's regime (the other three are the military, the business elite, and the masses). The U.S. government and the Egyptian administration share a common belief in the benefits of American regional primacy and oppose popular and democratic sovereignty in Egypt (9). As a regime partner, the United States has been vital to the durability of Egypt's post-Nasser governments. For instance, during Mubarak's rule, the U.S. government provided military aid to "coup-proof" the armed forces, economic assistance to stabilize Mubarak's regime in times of crisis, and police training to crush mobilizations against the government.

Re-conceptualizing the United States as a pillar of the regime and Egypt as an imperial client reveals a fundamental purpose of democracy promotion. Democracy promotion is a strategy of informal imperialism that shapes a political order favorable to U.S. security and economic interests. For example, Bush's "Freedom Agenda" and promotion of elections were primarily concerned with finding a political successor to Mubarak that would adhere to U.S. policies on Iran, Israel-Palestine, and counterterrorism. Bush officials feared that Mubarak's rule was becoming unstable, and that political liberalization would preserve and revitalize the regime while keeping it aligned with U.S. priorities. Yet Bush officials would only promote democracy if the outcome of elections were favorable to American interests (Brownlee 2012; Selim 2012).

When the Muslim Brotherhood won seats in the Egyptian parliament in 2005, and Hamas gained power in Gaza in 2006, Bush officials soured on democracy promotion (Brownlee 2012; Youmans 2016). Bush reversed course not due to the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas's anti-democratic or fundamentalist ideologies but because they threatened Israeli security. In the case of Egypt, democracy promotion is primarily a tool of soft power to guarantee that the regime aligns with American policies. Regardless of whether democracy promotion is a genuine effort to institute representative government, security, and military aid dwarfs and contradicts the goals of democracy aid to Egypt (Selim 2012). Critical scholars conclude that U.S. democracy promotion goals are negated by security aid, thereby rendering democracy promotion a hypocritical and cynical cover for democracy prevention (Brownlee 2012, Hinnebusch 2011, Rothe and Collins 2012). In short, military and economic support for authoritarianism *and* democracy promotion are strategies of informal imperialism. While primarily focused on maintaining Egypt's allegiance to the American-backed regional state system, American imperial strategies also aim to incorporate Egypt into the American-led neoliberal order.

## Neoliberal Imperialism and Revolution in Egypt

American imperial strategies in the Middle East and North Africa evolved after the defeat of Arab nationalist and communist forces in the 1970s. Accompanying these political and military defeats was a global economic downturn that damaged the economies of Global South states like Egypt. (Hanieh 2013: 29, Mann 2013). A spike in oil prices, loss of export earnings, and high debt loads after the Volcker Shock of 1979 led to balance of payment issues in the region. Economic stagnation was an opportunity for core states, led by the United States, to restructure the regional political economy in the interests of Western capitalists. Starting in the

late 1970s, the United States harnessed debt, economic aid, and democracy promotion programs to facilitate the neoliberal transformation of Egypt. The Mubarak regime faced insolvency due to the regional financial crisis and was forced to implement structural adjustment programs to gain access to American aid and international loans (Bogaert 2016, Shafik 2021). During this period, the United States also initiated democracy promotion programs to liberalize Egyptian economic and political institutions and align them with Western laws, markets, and trade regimes. From this perspective, U.S. democracy promotion is more than a strategy to empower local elites. Democracy aid promotes polyarchy, a limited form of representative rule that confines popular decision-making to elections dominated by a small group of elites (Robinson 1996, Gill 2018). Robinson (1996:624) argues that polyarchy is more effective than authoritarianism in sustaining global capitalist social relations. Polyarchy provides limited outlets for democratic contestation and modest civil liberties while retaining control of the economy in the hands of an internationally oriented ruling class. Democracy promotion, structural adjustment programs, and debt were critical components of an effort to reshape and incorporate Egypt into the global division of labor on terms amenable to the interests of Western capitalists and the American Empire.

The American-backed project of neoliberalism fundamentally transformed Egypt's political economy, altering state-society relations in ways that eventually catalyzed the January 25th Revolution of 2011. In the 1990s and 2000s, Mubarak's neoliberal programs empowered regional and domestic owners of capital to the detriment of the working classes (Hanieh 2013). Market liberalization in a highly autocratic context facilitated rampant cronyism. Thus, connections to the Mubarak regime dictated business success, and the government concentrated

the ownership of the economy in the hands of a small group of crony capitalists (Shafik 2021; Jakes and Shokr 2020). Moreover, regional and multinational firms from the oil-exporting states of the Gulf and transnational investors gained access to Egypt's economy through the foreign ownership of local businesses and sovereign debt obligations (Roccu 2021). This process exacerbated wealth and income inequalities, subordinating economic decision-making to foreign powers and a small group of domestic elites. Second, the state apparatus grew more punitive and corrupt during the neoliberal era. Neoliberal policies virtually dismantled the Egyptian welfare state and reoriented state power to the extraction and concentration of wealth in the hands of the state and a crony capitalist bourgeoisie (DeSmet 2016). Neoliberal policies required the centralization of decision-making processes in bureaucratic institutions, and the government expanded the security forces to suppress resistance to unpopular budget cuts. Finally, neoliberal policies harmed local production and self-sufficiency, making Egypt dangerously dependent on agricultural and commodity imports (Hanieh 2013; Daher 2021, 2022; Roccu 2021). After the multiple rounds of neoliberal reforms, Egypt transitioned further into a low-wage/low-employment economy producing textiles, petroleum products, and agricultural exports for the world market. Furthermore, the state violently dispossessed smallholder farmers and consolidated agricultural land under the ownership of large agribusinesses. In sum, neoliberal policies encouraged deindustrialization and wealth concentration, leading to mass unemployment, migration, and food insecurity.

Decades of neoliberal reforms facilitated the rapid growth of capitalism in Egypt, but this growth came at the cost of deepening poverty, unemployment, and inequality. As the fourth decade of Mubarak's rule ended, Egyptians confronted a state system increasingly oriented

towards neoliberal austerity, violent repression, and the enrichment of a small class of crony capitalists. Mass resistance to authoritarian neoliberalism inspired the outbreak of the January 25th uprising, symbolized by the revolutionary slogan "bread, freedom, and social justice."

The January 25th revolution in Egypt profoundly threatened the ruling class and its American patrons. The failure of Nasserist state capitalism and the authoritarianism of Sadat and Mubarak deprived the Egyptian state of popular legitimacy. According to Shafik (2021:306), "the post-Nasser regime has been capable of prolonging its power in the absence of hegemony" through coercion and rents. Mubarak's implementation of neoliberal policies undermined the already weak welfare state's ability to distribute public goods, leaving the regime reliant on violence to preserve social control. Police brutality, cronyism, and subservience to foreign powers hollowed out the regime's social base, eventually leading to Mubarak's downfall. The military coalition that replaced Mubarak faced the most severe threat to the Egyptian ruling order since the end of the colonial monarchy.

From a critical political economy perspective, the January 25th uprising was a disaster for American imperial interests. The Obama administration feared revolution would fracture the security partnership and reverse Egypt's neoliberal integration with the West. Selim (2012) explains:

> The United States worried about losing its Arab client regimes in the Middle East and the damage revolutionary regimes could do to American strategic interests in the region, including possible setbacks for the US-led war on terror, potential volatility in energy markets, and endangering the security of Israel. (260)

The new president Mohammed Morsi's pro-Palestinian views and initial resistance to an IMF structural adjustment program unsettled the Obama administration (Frerichs 2016). Despite this populist rhetoric, Morsi quickly assuaged American concerns, reaffirming the security partnership with Israel and proposing subsidy cuts. Would Morsi finally usher in the era of managed democracy (i.e., polyarchy) originally envisioned by U.S. democracy promoters? The 2013 coup dashed Obama's hopes for the consolidation of a pro-western liberal government.

On the one hand, Obama's refusal to call Morsi's ouster a coup and the eventual release of suspended aid signaled that the American Empire wanted to retain its Egyptian client (Holmes 2019). The Arab Spring threatened fundamental imperial interests, requiring Obama to abandon a transition to managed democracy and consolidate ties with the new dictatorship. On the other hand, the aid suspension and downgrading of relations represented an unprecedented schism in the imperial relationship. Following the 2013 coup, voices across the American political spectrum called for overhauling an anachronistic and counterproductive relationship (Hawthorne and Miller, 2020). Realists grew angry about Egypt's ties with American rivals Egypt in Russia, China, and North Korea. Besides, after billions of dollars in security aid, the Egyptian military contributed little to regional security, refused to modernize, and declined to participate in the campaign against ISIS (Cook 2019, Miller and Sokolsky 2017). Realists believed the United States should no longer subsidize Egypt to maintain peace with Israel. Likewise, Liberals were alarmed by the regime's corruption, endemic human rights abuses, and unfair treatment of foreign firms (Hawthorne and Miller 2020, Human Right Watch 2021). They feared the United States was legally complicit in Egyptian human rights abuses, and Sisi's crackdown fueled

terrorist recruitment and jihadist insurgency (Woodyat 2019: Ardovini 2018). As Obama transitioned out of office, the 40-year relationship hit a new low.

## CHAPTER THREE

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

The Trump administration came to power amid profound uncertainty in the U.S.-Egypt relationship. Yet, in a reversal from the Obama era, Trump attempted to reenergize bilateral ties. As a sign of the thaw in relations, Sisi was one of the first foreign leaders to personally congratulate Trump on his election victory (Egyptian Streets 2016). In April 2017, Trump welcomed Sisi to the White House for a high-profile visit, rescinding Obama's informal prohibition on Sisi's presence in Washington. In remarks to the media, Trump declared, "I just want to let everybody know, in case there was any doubt, that we are very much behind President al-Sisi. He's done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation" (U.S Embassy 2017). Trump admired Sisi's toughness and saw the Egyptian regime as an essential partner in the war against terrorism and political Islam. Obama had irresponsibly neglected a critical ally, and Trump would repair frayed ties, regardless of human rights concerns (Walsh and Baker 2017). To media pundits, Trump's support for Sisi betrayed American foreign policy's traditional balance between values and interests (NYT Editorial Board 2017: Crowley 2017). In their view, Trump's pro-authoritarian stance was a departure from past presidents and violated the norms of the liberal international order. In the more astute opinion of Middle East scholars, Trump's rhetoric was distasteful, but his realist approach to Egypt was not a fundamental departure from past administrations (Hamid 2017, Dunne and Kagan 2017, Miller 2019, Dunne 2019).

Both perspectives suggest that Trump's foreign policy was primarily a product of domestic political factors like his authoritarian personality, venality, or the influence of the right-wing coalition that brought him to power (see Kenny and Norris 2017). But foreign policy is not

determined solely by "domestic political cultures, institutions, electorates, or 'national character'" (Go 2011: 135). Go explains that this *metropolitan bias* obscures the broader global context in which imperial elites formulate policies. The structural dynamics of the world system and the competition for economic and geopolitical dominance influence imperial policies, strategies, and behavior. When assessing foreign policy decisions, scholars must consider key structural variables like a state's hegemonic status (i.e., relative economic strength or weakness globally) and the power and capabilities of rival states. In the case of Egypt, how was Trump's pro-authoritarian stance influenced by the relative decline in American regional power? Did this pro-authoritarian policy represent change involving American strategies of informal imperialism in Egypt and the region more broadly? Below, I undertake a case study of U.S. foreign policy in Egypt during the Trump administration to answer these questions. I assess continuity and change in economic, military, and political aspects of American imperial strategies in Egypt. I argue that the Trump administration's Egypt policy was a strategic response to American Empire's declining regional power. Trump pursued an aggressive but ultimately constrained strategy in Egypt sustain American dominance in the Middle East and North Africa despite increasing regional multipolarity.

In this case study, I focus on bilateral ties between the United States and Egypt during the Trump administration (from 2017-2021) to identify continuity and change in the political, military, economic, and diplomatic relationship. I adapt Michael Mann's analytical framework in which the sources of imperial hegemony emanate from ideological, economic, military, and political forms of power (Mann 2013). First, to assess the Trump administration's relations with the Sisi regime, I used the LexisUni database to collect all U.S.- Egypt foreign affairs-related

articles from the New York Times from 2017-2021. As a paper of record, the NYTimes provided an overview of key events and themes in the bilateral relationship during the Trump years. I surveyed these articles and secondary literature on Trump's foreign policy doctrine to develop thematic codes related to U.S.-Egypt relations. I then collected primary data from the Trump White House and State Department archives. This data included Egypt-focused briefings, public speeches, budget requests, policy documents, and press releases of key cabinet U.S. government officials and President Trump. I coded this material in Nvivo to identify the core themes articulated by U.S. officials when discussing American foreign policy in Egypt. This data shows how Trump officials expressed American imperial interests, legitimized bilateral ties, and highlighted tensions in the U.S.-Egypt relationship. Collecting and analyzing official White House and State Department documents was essential to determine how the administration's foreign policy approach departed from the Obama administration. I relied on Trump's National Security Strategy (2017) and the National Defense Strategy (2018) to assess Trump's overall foreign policy ideology, the conception of American imperial power, and view of the geopolitical threats to American hegemony.

To assess American soft power strategies of democracy promotion, development assistance, and human rights sanctions, I reviewed trends in congressional foreign aid appropriations. I collected data on development and democracy aid programs to Egypt in the FY 2018-2021 budget cycles from the Congressional Research Service and the Project on Middle East Democracy. I also analyzed the Trump administration's four budget request documents, a vital outline of Trump's foreign policy priorities. I then compared Trump's requested funding levels and programmatic goals to long-term trends in American foreign aid appropriations. To

assess the importance of human rights sanctions and conditionality in Trump's foreign policy, I analyzed White House and State Department public diplomacy, budget requests, and punitive actions related to the Egyptian government's rights violations. I address the bilateral defense relationship by exploring archived Department of Defense news briefings, policy documents, and press releases associated with joint military exercises, security operations, legal agreements, and foreign military sales. I correlated these military-to-military activities with the long-term trends in Egypt's congressional security assistance package (i.e., $1.3 billion in foreign military financing provided each year to the Egyptian state) to achieve a broad overview of defense ties. In addition, a key component of Egypt-U.S. defense relations is foreign military sales. I relied on reports from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and the Congressional Research Service to evaluate long-term trends in American weapons exports to Egypt.

My evaluation of American economic power relied on data from the World Bank, Egyptian Central Bank, American Chambers of Commerce in Egypt, and the U.S. International Trade Administration. I explored U.S. foreign direct investment trends, bilateral trade, and financial flows to scrutinize the U.S.-Egypt economic relationship. This data was instrumental in assessing Egypt's economic integration with the United States. Furthermore, to investigate the role of outsourcing imperialism in the patron-client relationship, I contrasted the American-Egyptian financial data sets with reports on the IMF structural adjustment program in Egypt and economic and military data on Gulf bilateral relations over the same period (i.e., Gulf FDI, trade, financial aid, and weapons sales to Egypt). The goal of the case study is to assess the status of Egypt as a client of U.S. informal imperialism during the Trump administration and evaluate the strategies of informal imperialism that took prominence. This study contributes to scholarship on

American foreign policy in Egypt and the Middle East and sociological theories of American imperialism. Specifically, I hope to contribute to the debate on whether American Empire is in decline.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## STRATEGIES OF INFORMAL EMPIRE IN AN ERA OF DECLINE

Trump entered office lamenting the deterioration of the United States. His morbid inauguration speech presented a dark vision of a nation beset by crime, the loss of traditional values, and economic stagnation. Despite mainly proffering a racist and ultranationalist view of a decaying domestic order, Trump also expressed anxiety about the future of America's empire:

> For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay (Trump 2017)

Trump's security advisor H.R. McMaster further articulated fears of imperial weakness in the 2018 National Security Strategy:

> The United States began to drift. We experienced a crisis of confidence and surrendered our advantages in key areas. As we took our political, economic, and military advantages for granted, other actors steadily implemented their long-term plans to challenge America and to advance agendas opposed to the United States, our allies, and our partners (White House 2017a:2)

Was Trump correct to mourn the waning of American power? As detailed above, America's post-World War 2 informal empire had relied on military and economic preponderance, offshore power projection, dollar hegemony, and leadership of the liberal international order. Scholars disagree about whether the pillars of this imperial order are in decline (Gill 2018: 73). On the one

hand, the United States retains the most powerful military force globally and one of the largest and most advanced economies (Gill 2018, Harvey 2003, Mann 2013, Wood 2003). In 2022, five hundred ninety of the top two thousand publicly traded companies were American entities (Murphy and Contreras 2022), the dollar remains the world's reserve currency (DiPippio and Pilazzi 2022), and the critical institutions of the global financial and interstate system are in Washington D.C. and New York. On the other hand, American GDP is shrinking as a proportion of global output, allies, and rivals increasingly contest American leadership of multilateral institutions, and American military preponderance fails to translate into durable military victories (Arrighi 2001, Bulmer-Thomas 2018, Go 2011, Lachmann 2011). Although there is disagreement about the status of the American Empire globally, there is more consensus about the relative weakening of American primacy in the MENA region (Achcar 2016, Hudson 2013, Lynch 2019). Despite overwhelming military power, economic resources, and a network of allied regimes, the United States has struggled to achieve its strategic goals after the end of the Cold War. The invasion of Iraq (described below) is a prime example of the discrepancy between American capabilities and the capacity to achieve desirable outcomes (Baker 2014, Ali ). Yet the signs of decline are broader than the unsuccessful nation-building project in Iraq.

Regarding economic power, American exports have decreased as a proportion of regional trade (from 16 percent of imports in 1991 to 8 percent in 2020) as Gulf, Asian, and European investment outpaces American foreign direct investment (OECD 2021; WITS 2023). American security policies have entrenched Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, stoked the regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and failed to contain or mediate an end to conflicts in Syria and Libya (Finkelstein 2018, Mabon 2016, Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). Furthermore,

blowback from the War on Terror has contributed to the proliferation of jihadist groups, harmed civilian populations, and damaged regional public opinion of the United States (Johnson 2000, Glas and Spierings 2021).

American Empire under Trump was also less focused on the MENA region. After a windfall domestic fracking boom, the United States no longer relies as heavily on Middle East oil for its energy needs (Mitchell 2012, Mundy 2020). Furthermore, policymakers are less concerned about the the Middle East due to the military withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, the defeat of al Qaeda and ISIS, and declining terror attacks on the homeland (LaFree et al. 2016). Obama's *pivot to Asia* partially acknowledged that the United States overcommitted to the region (Harold 2015; Mayborn 2014). The burgeoning rivalry with China and Russia (Hung 2022), and the importance of East and Southeast Asia for the future of the global economy, necessitated a redeployment of imperial resources elsewhere. Therefore, in the case of the Middle East, Trump was correct to assert America's relative decline. But how was this reflected in the administration's foreign policy doctrine?

In a comparative historical study of the British and American empires, Julian Go (2011) finds that empires evolve in response to changes in the geopolitical and economic structures of the world system. Empires go through hegemonic cycles in which imperial strategies adjust to changes in the relative distribution of economic power among states (213). In the hegemonic phase, the world system is unicentric and a single imperial state is the dominant global economic power (220). This phase corresponds to informal and less aggressive forms of imperial rule through "clientelism, financial entanglements, and covert operations" (224). Hegemons have a comparative economic advantage that makes liberalization, open markets, and free trade an

attractive mode of imperial rule. At the end of World War Two, the United States emerged as the global hegemon. Many American strategists advocated the colonization of the Pacific and the regions occupied during the war (230). Why didn't the United States establish formal colonies during its hegemonic maturity (1973-1945) and directly rule this new empire? Hegemony meant that the United States had no peer economic competitors and thus no need for aggressive, direct colonization to expand markets and access to raw materials (230-231). On the one hand, imperialism could be "outsourced" to European allies by incorporating their existing colonies in the Pacific into the American sphere of influence. On the other hand, credit, aid, and trade were sufficient to open European and Asian markets to U.S. goods and capital. Also, imperial strategists had to account for the sentiments of subjugated populations and the response of rival states to aggressive tactics. Direct annexation of territories could upset the post-war status quo between the USSR and the United States (232). American imperial planners feared that reestablishing formal colonies would inspire third-world anti-colonial resistance, and the USSR would gain new allies in the Cold War. Containment, strategic restraint, and indirect military confrontation were sufficient to consolidate a capitalist bloc under informal American control without igniting a new world war. As a result, the United States did not require direct rule and colonization to achieve its economic and geopolitical goals.

In the decline phase of the hegemonic cycle, a global empire loses its relative economic dominance in the world system and faces heightened competition from rising states. This phase is characterized by geopolitical and economic rivalry, conflict, violence, and tension (Go 2011). Rising nations become aggressive in the geopolitical struggle for power and invest their growing economic output in military capacities to challenge the weakened empire's dominance of the

global field (Lachmann 2011). For the hegemon, the loss of trade and investment undermines the fiscal and military capacities of the imperial state. The diminishing empire fears that its weakened military will be unable to prevent encroachments on its spheres of influence, military outposts, and alliance networks. The hegemon then resorts to direct imperial aggression and militarism to defend its global empire against threats from rising competitors. Starting in the 1970s, American Empire began its hegemonic decline (1973-Present). After the onset of the fall, Go (2011:180) finds a higher frequency of American military interventions, troop deployments, and direct invasions globally. From 1980 to the 2003 occupation of Iraq, the United States invaded and occupied Grenada, Panama, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq (twice) (191-200), deployed troops to the MENA region, and carried out large-scale military interventions in the Balkans, Somalia, and other African countries. Why would the United States become more aggressive in the age of American unipolarity, especially after the collapse of its closest competitor, the Soviet Union?

Unipolarity does not guarantee sustained hegemony. After 1973, the United States faced economic competition from Japan and Germany and, in the 1990s, was alarmed by the rising power of post-Soviet Russia, China, and the European Union (Go 2011; Mann 2013). Moreover, economic and political crises destabilized the client regimes that were pillars of the informal American empire into the 1960s. In the periphery, movements overthrew American allies like Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, and clients, like Noriega in Panama, were less amendable to American dictates in a more fluid geopolitical context (Go 2011:195). Wars and instability in the Balkans, Latin America, and the Caribbean also threatened the vital markets, investments, and free trade agreements critical to American global economic competitiveness. It follows then

that aggressive American militarism was a strategy to discipline recalcitrant clients, prevent the rise of peer competitors in Europe and Asia, and stabilize areas of economic importance. Even unipolarity could not guarantee long-term hegemony and aggressive tactics were an effort to sustain American imperial dominance amid myriad economic and geopolitical threats.

American Empire's pivot to aggressive imperialism culminated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The attack aimed to overthrow Saddam Hussein, a long-time impediment to American control of the Middle East (Harvey 2003, Go 2011). Bush officials hoped the invasion would reaffirm America's indispensable military supremacy and deter rivals like China or Iran from seeking more regional influence. Bromley (2006) claims Bush officials tried to enact a post-9/11 imperial strategy of preemptive war and nation-building. American power in the Middle East traditionally relied on temporary military interventions, informal aggression (e.g., sanctions and containment), covert operations, and clientelism (Bromley 2006:59). Neoconservatives felt these approaches had failed to contain adversaries in Iran and Iraq and could not guarantee long-term support from client states like Saudi Arabia (Bromley 2006:60. Alternatively, the neoconservative strategy of aggressive imperialism would harness preemptive military force to overthrow rival regimes. Following military conquest, the colonial occupation would engineer a friendly government and incorporate "rogue" states like Iraq into the American-backed order. Neoconservative imperialism was not conquest and colonization in the classic Leninist sense. The colonial occupation of Iraq would be temporary (Ajami 2006). After reconstituting Iraq as a liberal, capitalist state friendly to the West's interests, the United States would withdraw its military forces and leave behind an informal network of military bases to project power across Eurasia (Baker 2014, 2013:293). This ambitious and aggressive nation-building imperialism was

ultimately unsuccessful, with disastrous consequences for Iraq and the region.

American authorities bungled their nation-building plans in Iraq, ultimately delegitimizing the American strategy of imperial conquest. Naive American planners assumed Iraqis would greet their neoliberal nation-building project with enthusiasm. After the invasion, American officials decided to dismantle large parts of the Iraqi state, for example, by purging Sunnis from the state apparatus through de-Baathification (Baker 2014, Pollack 2006). As the security situation deteriorated, attempts to privatize the Iraqi economy and daily American atrocities against the Iraqi people (especially torture at Abu Ghraib prisons) combined to fuel widespread anger. Eventually, imperial mismanagement of the occupation exploded into insurgency and civil war (Jamail 2016; Pitt & Jamail 2014; Schwartz 2008). According to the Iraqi scholar Dina Rizk Khoury (2013), the invasion and occupation of Iraq resulted in at least 500,000 deaths, 5 million refugees, and economic collapse. When Obama pulled American troops from the country in 2012, the United States had failed to achieve the prime objectives of Bush's neoconservative nation-building project (Mann 2013). American military forces retained no viable presence to project power in Eurasia, Iraqi integration into the neoliberal order was incomplete, and the occupation had empowered Iran. Perhaps most consequently, for the War on Terror, the American invasion of Iraq inspired the formation of jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State that would commit atrocities worldwide (Hassan 2015).

Since aggressive, direct imperialism proved an untenable strategy in the MENA region, Obama instead outlined a "light footprint" approach that relied on remote tactics and ended the experiment with imperial nation-building (Biegon and Watts 2020:14). Trump inherited this legacy of failed neoconservative imperialism. His foreign policy in the Middle East and North

Africa, specifically in Egypt, would have to balance the aggressive impulses of a declining empire with the constraints of a post-Iraq regional context.

## The Trump Foreign Policy Doctrine

Scholars characterize Trump's foreign policy, variously, as Jacksonian/Jeffersonian (Rolf 2021), incoherent (Larson 2021), illiberal and irrational (Karkour 2021), Islamophobic (Hassan 2017), and Christian fundamentalist (Ulgul 2021). For Beigon and Watts (2020), and Noonan (2020:189), the means and tactics of Trump's foreign policy differed from past presidents. Still, the ends were consistent with achieving American global primacy and maximizing competitive advantages for American businesses. Trump's hostility to NATO and the United Nations obscured a fundamental continuity with Obama's strategic orientation. Like Obama, Trump renounced direct imperialism and nation-building after Bush's disastrous military adventures (Biegon and Watts 2020). Trump adopted Obama's "light footprint" strategy of remote warfare and continued the pivot to Asia (Goldsmith and Mercer 2019:11). Yet despite these similarities, the Trump doctrine differed from Obama's approach by emphasizing sovereignty, geopolitical competition, and the dangerous consequences of globalism.

The 2017 National Security Strategy established an American First foreign policy to rejuvenate the four pillars of American power: "economic competitiveness, national security strength, fair and free trade, and foreign partnerships that match action and resources with intent and rhetoric" (The White House 2017a; The White House 2021:1). Ettinger (2020:421) finds the main principle of Trump's foreign policy was the idea of *populist sovereignty*. Populist sovereignty asserts that the government's primary duty is to secure the interests of the citizenry and the *folk community*. According to this ideology, "peace, security, and prosperity depend on

strong, sovereign nations" as the pillar of a stable international order (The White House 2017a:1). Thus, nations should be free from constraints on activity so long as they respect the rights of other (allied) states (Ettinger 2020:415; The White House 2017a:26). Sovereigntists felt that the American government under Obama had neglected the nation's vital interests, thereby facilitating imperial decline.

In addition, trump's America First foreign policy was a realist position that the global balance of power should determine state action and policy (Ettinger 2020: 414) (The White House 2017a: 55). The United States will endeavor to spread American values, but within the practical limits of national security interests (The White House 2017a:2). Obama had ignored the realities of great power politics and the imperative to outmaneuver allies and rivals in an ongoing geopolitical power struggle (Pompeo 2019:3). In the National Defense Strategy, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis (2018) declared that the United States was entering a dangerous new era of geopolitical competition. American Empire was confronting "increased global disorder characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory" (Mattis 2018:1). State competitors like China and Russia, rogue regimes like North Korea, and non-state actors like the Islamic State challenged the US imperial order. Mattis (2018:1) warned that the American "competitive military advantage has been eroding." The United States no longer dominated all domains of warfare, and technology was developing rapidly, providing advantages to non-state actors and rival states alike (3). The American military, state, and economy must modernize and prepare for geostrategic confrontation to win the new imperial competition. From Mattis' perspective, Obama was naïve about the world's return to

multipolarity (Hung 2022). In contrast to Obama, Trump recognized the shifting power dynamics of the global field and would move to confront states that challenged American hegemony.

In terms of soft power, America First Popular sovereignty rejected liberal internationalism and democratic idealism in favor of national self-interest. Parmar explains that liberal internationalism is the legitimating theory and ideology of the American-led Liberal International Order (LIO). Liberals embrace "democratic values, economic interdependence, international institutions as a framework for cooperation in addressing global crises and problems, and the broad promotion of general welfare" (Parmar 2018:154). Trump and advisors like John Bolton disdained this cosmopolitan orientation (Ettinger 2020:413). For America Firsters, self-reliant states can voluntarily cooperate but should not tie themselves to the norms of an international legal regime. Integrating the United States into multilateral institutions through binding legal commitments weakens American sovereignty (Ettinger 2020:420). Trump officials asserted that liberal idealism was naïve and the globalist embrace of foreign aid and soft power was an ineffective approach to foreign affairs. Tea Party reactionaries like Budget Director Mick Mulvaney disparaged development and democracy aid as an inefficient waste of taxpayer money (Bresnahan et al. 2019; White House 2017b:34). Developing nations were over-reliant on American support and took advantage of American generosity without providing strategic benefits. Trump highlighted this theme in his controversial speech to the United Nations:

> "The United States is the world's largest giver in the world, by far, of foreign aid. But few give anything to us. That is why we are taking a hard look at U.S. foreign assistance. ……We will examine what is working, what is not working, and whether the countries who receive our dollars and our protection also have our interests at heart. Moving

forward, we are only going to give foreign aid to those who respect us and, frankly, are our friends." (Trump 2018)

Concerning democracy promotion, Trump felt that these programs were destabilizing allies and undermining the security concerns of the American homeland. This stance was a considerable departure from the institutional framework of the post-World War 2 order. Of course, the American Empire had frequently acted unilaterally and violated international law (McCoy 2017). Yet the United States had historically balanced imperial impunity by devolving some power to multilateral institutions. Besides, post-World War 2 imperial planners felt that promoting the values of representative government and universal civil liberties was essential to retain the legitimacy of American expansionism (Go 2008:217-218). In a period of perceived threats to American dominance, Trump questioned the benefits of American ultra-imperialist leadership. The United States had overextended its commitments and was serving the interests of foreign elites instead of the American people. Ultimately, multilateral institutions were arenas of competition, and Trump refuted universalist commitments that could restrict the American Empire's scope of action.

How would Trump make the American Empire great again? Militarism, economic competition, the decisive use of force, and the ideology of popular sovereignty would renew American strength. The American military would rearm, prepare for an era of geopolitical competition, and intervene globally to confront state and non-state rivals (The White House 2017a:4). The United States would proudly support its allies and aggressively confront adversaries (the White House 2017a:49). Conversely, Trump would no longer foster hegemony through liberal idealism and the American leadership of multilateral institutions (The White

House 2017b:1-2). He would shed the costly and ineffective burdens of foreign aid, development assistance, and democracy promotion.

While America First foreign policy was the guiding ideology of Trump's foreign policy, it was but one trend in a broader imperial structure. Go (2011) reminds scholars that empires are not monolithic entities. They are formations "with potentially conflicting tendencies, tactics and techniques, and multiple modalities of power that do not always add up to a coherent style" (Go 2011:240). American Empire can be benign or aggressive, consensual or authoritarian, isolationist or internationalist. These tendencies coexist and conflict in different periods of imperial rule. One mode of imperialism, such as aggressive direct rule, will become more prominent depending on the historical, political, and geographic context in which an empire competes for power. America First policy contained these contradictory tendencies; isolation and aggression, exceptionalism and fears of decline, protectionism, and free trade. From a critical theory perspective, Trump's foreign policy expressed the overall trajectory and contradictions of the United States as a modern capitalist society (Dahms 2022:41). Still, Trump's actions inevitably reinforced the imperial order's dominant imperatives: capital accumulation and geopolitical power. Dahms (2022:22) refers to this as the paradox of inversion in modern society: "Regardless of an individual or collective actor's intent, the consequences of their actions are transformed to reinforce the existing social order" (also see Jalata & Dahms 2015). Whether Trump espoused isolationism or aggression, he was constrained by the structural limits on American power and forced to commit to the long-term American imperial objectives of domination. Accordingly, as key outpost of imperial power, the Middle East and North Africa would be the first target of the America First foreign policy doctrine. And Trump's America

First foreign policy in the MENA region would showcase the contradictions of American aggression in an era of constrained and weakening regional power.

In the Middle East, Trump embraced America First hard power to stem the decline in regional primacy and articulated three objectives to strengthen American influence. Most importantly, military forces would remain in the region and realign to account for post-Iraq constraints. First, the administration would contain Iran, the remaining rival for regional hegemony (The White House 2017b: 34). Second, American security forces would continue the War on Terror to defeat the Islamic State and prevent the rise of new jihadist extremist groups (37). Third, the administration would maintain a robust military presence to "preserve a favorable regional balance of power" and protect energy security (34). As a regional security guarantor, the United States would deploy military force to stabilize markets, trade, and oil flows to the Global North. The American Empire would fight rogue states and terrorist non-state actors who attempted to "carve out zones of exclusion from the circuits of transnational capital" (Biegon and Watts 2020:6). As a key client of the American imperialism, Egypt would play a pivotal role in this nationalist hard-power strategy.

## Authoritarian Stability and the War on Terror

To prolong American imperial influence over Egypt, Trump aimed to renew ties with Egypt's security establishment, stabilize the regional situation by defeating ISIS and restart the neoliberal integration of Egypt's economy with the West. In its fundamental principles, Trump's approach to Egypt was consistent with previous presidents. The administration reaffirmed the pillars of the bilateral relationship; cooperation in the fight against terrorism, maintenance of the 1972 Egypt-Israel treaty, and American military power projection through overflight rights and

priority access to the Suez Canal (U.S. Department of State 2019a). Nonetheless, Sisi's 2017 state visit signaled a new approach to the relationship. Trump officials lambasted Obama for abandoning loyal allies like Mubarak, which they claimed led to the rise of terrorist groups and the chaos of the Arab Spring. In a speech at the American University in Cairo, Secretary Pompeo criticized Obama for his timidity, appeasement of Iran, and underestimation of "radical Islamism" (Pompeo 2019). Obama's withdrawal and neglect of his partners had allowed the Islamic State and Iran to gain power. Pompeo asserted that "when America retreats, chaos often follows. When we neglect our friends, resentment builds. And when we partner with enemies, they advance" (Pompeo 2019). In place of Obama's equivocation, Trump would act decisively and promote autocracy to restore order to the Arab states. Trump fervently and publicly embraced Sisi's authoritarian rule. He met personally with Sisi three times in 2017, exchanged multiple official phone calls, and later met with Sisi on the sidelines of the 2019 United Nations General Assembly (Miller and Rufner 2018:24; White House 2019). Whereas Obama had downgraded the bilateral relationship and shunned the regime in response to the 2013 coup, Trump lauded Sisi as a model leader and stabilizing force. In an interview with Fox, he admired Sisi's authoritarian grip on the country. "He took control of Egypt. And he took control of it" (Crowley 2017). In a heated exchange with Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, Secretary Pompeo summarized Trump's stance on authoritarian allies:

> There's no doubt that it's a mean nasty world out there, but not every one of these leaders is the same. Some of them are trying to wipe entire nations off the face of the earth, and others are actually partnering with us to help keep Americans safe. There's a difference

> among leaders. You might call them “tyrant," you might call them “authoritarian," but there's a fundamental difference (Congress.gov 2019)

Egypt and the American Empire needed authoritarian stability, and Sisi would provide it.

The proliferating violence and terrorism in Egypt after the 2013 coup supplied the rationale for renewed ties with Sisi. In 2018, after a horrific series of terrorist attacks on Coptic churches and a Sufi mosque, Vice President Mike Pence visited Cairo and vowed to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with Sisi in the war on terror (White House 2018b). The following month, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Cairo to support Sisi, refusing to address questions about the government’s recent censorship campaign against local journalists (Department of State 2018). American officials encouraged Egyptian security forces to crack down on extremists and carry out a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against an ISIS affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula (Sharp 2018). To evangelical cabinet members like Pompeo and Pence, Sisi was a protector of Coptic Christian minorities and a promoter of a tolerant vision of Islam (Department of State 2019b). This Christian fundamentalist discourse justified Sisi’s authoritarian rule to contain the anti-American Muslim masses (Hassan 2017). Trump perpetuated this Islamophobia when he considered designating the Muslim Brotherhood as an international terrorist organization (at Sisi’s behest) (Savage et al. 2019). American officials had already concluded the Egyptian Brotherhood had no real ties to terror groups and was not a coherent global organization (Dunne and Miller 2019, Kirkpatrick 2019, Brown 2010). Designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization would legitimize Sisi’s crackdown against political opposition groups, secular and Islamist alike. Even though Trump decided not to sanction the Muslim Brotherhood,

the mere consideration justified Sisi's campaign of repression to liquidate radical Islamist elements in Egyptian society.

American elites lionized Sisi as a partner in the War on Terror who would suppress anti-systemic forces. Islamophobic discourses framed the Egyptian masses as inherently extremist, requiring the firm hand of an autocrat to control their irrational impulses. According to America First doctrine, Sisi's counter-revolution must be encouraged to guarantee the stability of the Egyptian state. Sisi's illiberalism was irrelevant to Trump so long as he promoted American security. Although it is true that Trump's stance was not a drastic departure from the long-term American policy of democracy prevention in Egypt, his stridently pro-authoritarian rhetoric directly impacted the political situation in Cairo. Holmes (2019) suggests that Trump actively encouraged the regime's campaign of repression. In May 2017, just days after Trump met with Sisi and praised his leadership, the government arrested a presidential candidate, detained a human rights leader, and banned popular Egyptian media outlets. Even for a regime prone to crackdowns, this was an almost unprecedented level of civil society repression, and it was happening under the glowing praise of President Trump (Holmes 2019:220). In short, American Empire could no longer act unilaterally against threats in the region and relied on allies like Egypt to act as a proxy for American power. The Trump administration moved from democracy prevention to authoritarian promotion to guarantee Sisi's loyalty as a proxy. The collateral damage to Egyptian from the regime's repression was an acceptable cost to sustain the regional balance of power in favor of the United States.

## The Decline of Imperial Soft Power

Whereas the America First approach to hard power was interventionist and aggressive, Trump's isolationism was more evident in his rejection of soft power. From the beginning of the administration, Trump cabinet officials were skeptical of any human rights aid conditionality or sanctions for human rights violations. Former Secretary of State Tillerson summarized this approach, "If we condition [U.S. policies] too heavily…it creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests" (Finnegan 2017). Concerns about Egyptian human rights violations were de-prioritized and turned into transactional bargaining tools. Throughout Trump's tenure, State Department and White House officials released half-hearted statements expressing "concern" about a wave of tortures and enforced disappearances (Department of State 2020). Although State Department spokespeople assured the press that American officials were "having conversations" about human rights with Egyptian counterparts, they emphasized that rights violations were a matter of private diplomacy (White House 2017c).

Equivocation on Egyptian human rights violations is, admittedly, endemic in all American administrations. Still, the weak official condemnation of the Sisi regime's unprecedented crackdown during the Trump presidency was notable. As an illustration, the administration failed to forcefully condemn the death of an American citizen imprisoned after the Rab'a massacre, instead calling it "avoidable" and "tragic" (U.S. Department of State 2020b) And when former president Mohamed Morsi died in prison from deliberate neglect, the State Department was silent. In contrast, Trump held a high-profile press conference and media spectacle after the White House negotiated the release of an American citizen, Aya Hegazy (BBC 2017). Trump later boasted to the media: "So we've had 17 prisoners released during the

Trump administration. Most people don't know that. You remember Aya. We called the President of Egypt, and he released her…the previous administration was unable to get her out" (White House 2018b). According to Trump, human rights violations were only relevant if they impacted American citizens, and the White House could exploit them as an opportunity to promote the American First brand.

Although Trump improved the bilateral relationship with Sisi, prominent tensions remained over Egypt's loyalty to American interests. In 2017, the Trump administration withheld or reappropriated $300 million in foreign aid to punish Egypt for policy disagreements (Walsh 2018). First, the administration wanted the regime to cut ties with North Korea amid Trump's diplomatic reproach with Kim Jong Un. Second, American officials demanded that Sisi overturn the spurious convictions of American non-profit workers in NGO case 173 for facilitating illegal foreign funding (CRS 2017:26). Finally, Tillerson asked the government to rescind a draconian NGO law that criminalized foreign financing of American and international non-profits in Egypt (Sharp 2018:50). Observers were confused about contradictory signals sent by an administration that had just lavished praise on Sisi during the April White House visit. Nevertheless, the moves were consistent with Trump's nationalist realpolitik. The American government narrowly focused the aid hold on security concerns and sovereignty issues related to American citizens and non-profits. Sanctions would dissuade Egypt from cooperating with an American adversary and punish the regime for violating the special rights of American citizens to operate in the country. In contrast, sanctions were inappropriate to punish the Egyptian government for broader human rights violations or to defend the universal rights of non-Americans in Egypt.

Trump's disdain for liberal internationalism was most evident in his approach to foreign aid. The 2017-2021 budgets proposed massive cuts to foreign assistance across all four budget cycles. Upon entering office, Trump wanted to downsize the State Department and USAID. In 2017, budget director Mick Mulvaney demanded a 30 percent cut in foreign aid appropriations (McInerney and Bockenfeld 2017:2). Trump officials felt that other wealthy nations should take on the "burden" of development finance, and developing countries needed to become more "self-reliant" (White House 2017b:33). The State Department would transition development grants to loans and lenders like the IMF would provide the bulk of development finance (White House 2017a:39). Democracy promotion programs saw the most substantial proposed cuts. The 2020 budget proposed a 50-66 percent decrease in democracy programming across the board (McInerney and Bockenfeld 2017:3). Democracy promotion and foreign aid were deprioritized and instead reconceptualized as a tool of geopolitical competition and rivalry.

In the MENA region, the budget reframed foreign assistance as a tool to counter violent extremism, support security allies and antagonize regional adversaries like Iran. For example, the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) initiative received ample funding because it aimed to topple the regime in Iran (Miller et al. 2020:3). While the budget-maintained aid to strategic allies like Egypt and Israel, nations considered marginal to American security interests, like Tunisia, bore the brunt of foreign aid reductions (Miller and Ruffner 2019:2-3). In Egypt, democracy and development aid continued their long-term decline under Trump. Since the 1990s, Economic Support Funds for Egypt (which includes democracy and development programs) have decreased from $1.1 billion to $126 million in 2020 (Sharp 2021: 41). In particular, democracy aid declined from $50 million in 2008 to $7.8 million in 2017 (McInerney

and Bockenfeld 2017:38). The Egyptian government had long been hostile to democracy promotion programs and Trump officials feared that democracy aid would antagonize the regime. To take a case in point, during the 2011 revolution, the state media blamed the uprising on a mysterious 'fifth column" trained and funded by American non-profit organizations (McInerney and Bockenfeld 2017:39). Due to these suspicions that democracy aid was behind regime change efforts, the Egyptian government had accumulated a large backlog of appropriated U.S. aid funds and was obstructing USAID projects. In 2013, the regime's crackdown on civil society expanded to American-affiliated democracy promotion organizations when 43 non-profit workers, including 17 American citizens, were convicted on spurious charges of facilitating illegal foreign funding (Al Jazeera 2020). Hence the regime's hostility to non-security aid provided Trump officials with an additional rationale to cut democracy aid or shift funding to less controversial economic development initiatives. From the perspective of Trump officials, not only were democracy promotion programs ineffective. These programs also undermined the security ties that Trump was working hard to recultivate.

The slow dissolution of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) exemplifies the long-term decline in democracy aid to Egypt and the broader MENA region. The MEPI was a flagship initiative of Bush's "Freedom Agenda" to combat terrorism and instability in the Middle East. This State Department program trained civil society actors and entrepreneurs to promote democracy and free markets in the region and aimed to reshape Arab societies into Western liberal democracies (Yerkes and Coffman Wittes 2004). Obama quickly soured on the MEPI after coming to office in 2007 and proposed cuts to its budget (McInerney and Bockenfeld 2017:24). The more combative pro-reform rhetoric of the MEPI angered client regimes, and

Obama felt the initiative was obstructing American attempts to repair ties with allies after Bush's misadventures. Trump sustained these cuts and further defanged the MEPI, shifting its programs from democracy promotion to less controversial economic development programs (Miller et al. 2020:15).

In sum, the steep decline in Egyptian development and democracy assistance and the marginalization of human rights considerations was not merely a product of Trump's reactionary disposition. American soft power was already weakening before Trump came to office. Trump merely accelerated the shift away from informal imperial rule based on the consensual integration of MENA states into a liberal market order. In a region characterized by conflict and contention, American elites no longer viewed soft power strategies as practical tools to guarantee American interests. Officials felt that democracy promotion (i.e., promoting polyarchy) would destabilize American clients and compromise the military and market networks that constituted the American-backed order. The drop in development assistance marked a striking contrast to the early 1970s when Egypt relied on American aid for $1/5^{th}$ of food imports (Hanieh 2013). The Carter administration used American food and economic assistance to pressure Sadat to realign with the West. In a reversal from the period of American hegemony, Trump policymakers no longer embraced soft power as a strategy of informal imperialism, or perhaps they felt the United States could no longer afford the cost. Ultimately, centrist Senators still believed in the utility of democracy promotion. They resoundingly rejected Trump's proposed aid cuts and sustained Obama-era funding levels for many democracy programs (Miller and Rufner 2018:2). Nonetheless, Trump's alarming proposals reflected the overall shift of American foreign policy

away from liberal idealism and the soft power tools of democracy promotion, development aid, and human rights sanctions.

### Defense Relations, Security Aid, and Arms Sales

Even though America First foreign policy was skeptical of soft power and foreign aid, the Trump administration had no qualms about sustaining an aggressive military posture and maintaining robust funding levels for military and security aid. Trump officials insisted that the United States must decisively confront a dangerous world filled with rogue states, terror groups, cartels, and great power rivals (White House 2017a:1). Whereas Obama was too hesitant to use lethal force and apologetic about the righteousness of American power (Pompeo 2019), Trump would be more aggressive while avoiding full-scale invasions and direct conquest. Following this aggressive orientation, the American military would expand and innovate to sustain "overmatch" against state and non-state rivals (Mattis 2018:3,10). Investments in the defense industrial base, cyber defense, a space force, and A.I. warfighting technologies would boost morale and help the United States compete for geopolitical primacy in an era of rapid change (White House 2017a:20). In the MENA region, Trump pursued Obama's light-footprint approach, completing the withdrawal of ground troops from Iraq and relying on aerial warfare, special operations, and drone warfare (Beigon and Watts 2020). Yet, in line with the shift to nationalist hard power, the administration increased the pace of drone and air strikes in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and lowered the threshold for the use of force (Malone 2018; Schmitt & Savage 2019; Niva 2017). Consequently, American military and intelligence agencies became more tolerant of civilian deaths and intensified the military campaigns against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen.

Egypt remained a critical but contentious military partner in the Trump-era regional security architecture. The American and Egyptian militaries continued cooperation on counter-terror operations, maritime security, and the migrant and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean (Sharp 2018). Egypt joined the American-led Combined Maritime Forces and signed a Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement to gain access to sensitive American military technology (Embassy of Egypt 2018; U.S. Navy 2021). After the 2013 coup, military-to-military relations cooled when Obama withheld military aid and canceled Exercise Brightstar, the biannual series of joint exercises led by the Egyptian and American military forces (Holland and Mason 2013). Following Trump's election, military officials wanted to express confidence in Sisi's regime and re-energize the bilateral defense relationship. In 2017, Trump restarted the Brightstar exercises, and defense secretary Mattis welcomed Sisi to the Pentagon to publicly praise his counter-terror initiatives (DOD 2017a; McCleary 2017). Mattis also spoke with his defense counterpart in Egypt multiple times and visited Cairo on a 5-day trip to the region. In 2019, the new defense secretary Mark Esper hosted Egyptian Defense Minister Mohamed Zaki at the Pentagon and reiterated that the Egyptian military was a force for stability in the region (Garamone 2019). After years of contentious relations, these high-profile visits, exercises, and agreements signaled that the Pentagon wanted to preserve Egypt as a pillar of the American security order.

The United States government continued to provide $1.3 billion in yearly security and military aid to the Egyptian state during the Trump years. American Empire's prominent regional security clients, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, were notably absent from Trump's proposed foreign aid cuts and received 90 percent of the foreign military financing budget request in F.Y. 2021

(Miller et al. 2020:8). In Egypt, military aid funded Egyptian purchases of M1A1 Abrams tanks, F-16 fighter jets, and Apache helicopters (Sharp 2020:26). Security aid supported the IMET, NADR, and INCLE programs to train Egyptian military officers, interior ministry officials, and prosecutors. Funds for weapons purchases continued to dominate the Egyptian aid package under Trump, part of a longer trend in the militarization of aid that started during the Obama administration. Over the last two decades, American foreign aid militarization has occurred in two ways. First, the U.S. government directs an increasing proportion of foreign aid to military and security categories. For instance, 78 percent of the FY 2019 foreign aid request went to security and military programs (Miller and Ruffner 2018:3). Second, Section 333 of the National Defense Authorization Act allows the Department of Defense (DOD) to fund security activities traditionally overseen by the State Department. Over time, funds have shifted from the more accountable foreign aid budgeting process to opaque defense department budgets (GAO 2018:4; Turse 2020). Secretive programs overseen by the DOD, like the Training and Equip program for the war against the Islamic State, are expanded at the expense of the more transparent Foreign Military Financing programs. Again, the structural shift to aggressive informal imperialism in the form of security and military aid was underway before Trump's tenure and accelerated further during his presidency.

Although military aid continued to flow to the Egyptian armed forces, uncertainty about Egypt's role in the American-led security order led to disagreements among American elites about the future of the security aid package. Despite billions of dollars in weapons and training, Egypt's military is operationally ineffective. A former Obama official, Tom Malinoski, expressed exasperation with the misuse of American security aid:

> "Its military is utterly, disastrously, incompetent in addition to being cruel...The only thing they know how to do well with these F-16s and Apache's is to show them off in parades and air shows designed to make the regime look good" (Hartung and Binder 2020).

The Egyptian military's ineffectiveness emerges, paradoxically, from the military elite's desire to entrench its power in Egyptian society and remain a pillar of the ruling regime. A large army provides economic benefits to the military elite (such as conscript labor and military-owned industries), prestige, and a mass constituency of loyal officers and soldiers (Springborg 2017: Beinin 2018). Transitioning to a nimbler force would disrupt the massive military-industrial complex and patronage networks at the heart of Sisi's regime. Therefore, Egyptian military planners are hesitant to modernize their combat doctrines and confront their primary security challenge, modern insurgencies (Springborg 2019:3). They instead purchase underutilized and expensive land warfare systems (e.g., M1A1 Abrams tanks) fit for a bygone era of interstate conflict with Israel.

The United States initially provided security aid to Egypt to secure the 1979 peace treaty with Israel (Gardner 2011). However, since the 1990s, Egypt has strengthened ties with Israel to suppress jihadist militants in the Sinai Peninsula and contain the spillover of violence in occupied Palestine (Kaldas 2020). Today, Israeli and Egypt petroleum companies also cooperate through the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (Das 2020). As Egypt's relations with Israel improve and the nature of its security challenges changes, American elites have questioned whether the military aid package continues to serve American interests (Murphy 2022). These disagreements led Obama to review Egyptian aid after the post-coup suspension of weapons

deliveries. In 2015, before restarting aid disbursements, Obama officials revised the military aid policy towards Egypt (Springborg 2019:5). Egypt would no longer be able to pay for big-ticket purchases over multiple years through cash flow financing. More importantly, Egypt must use American aid to purchase weapons and equipment related to "counterterrorism, border security, maritime security, and Sinai security" (Springborg 2019:5). The Egyptian military could no longer buy land warfare systems with little applicability to modern counterinsurgencies. Trump officials agreed with Obama that the American government could not afford to subsidize prestige purchases for Egypt in an era of austerity. Despite Trump's enthusiasm for weapons sales, he declined Sisi's request to reinstitute cash-flow financing for weapons purchases (CRS 2021:31). American Empire was shifting to a lighter regional footprint and needed to revise the security relationship to reflect the post-Arab Spring environment. The key to a successful imperial strategy was to reform the security partnership without alienating Egypt and driving Sisi into the arms of rival states.

Weapons sales to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East remained a pillar of U.S. foreign policy under Trump. Stockholm Research Institute finds the region accounted for 35 percent of the global arms trade between 2015-2019, and "around 47 percent of US arms exports between 2016-2020 went to the Middle East" (Weizeman et al. 2020:3). The United States provides weapons to the region for more than just economic reasons. After all, weapons sales strengthen allies and prevent their overthrow by potentially anti-American movements (Selim 2013). Saudi Arabia received the largest share of American imports, accounting for 24 percent. Still, Egypt remained an essential destination for American arms during the Trump years (Weizeman et al. 2020:3). From 1980 to 2014, the United States was Egypt's most prominent

weapons exporter. As mentioned, Egypt has purchased Apache helicopters, tank rounds for the Sinai counterinsurgency campaign, and technical support for Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates (CRS 2020:15-16). Yet even though Egypt continued to import American arms, there was an overall reduction in the proportion of Egypt's weapons sourced from the United States. Whereas from 2010-14, Egypt imported 47 percent of its arms from the United States, that share decreased to 15 percent from 2015-2019 (Wezeman et al. 2019:11; CRS 2020). This reduction occurred despite Egypt achieving the status of the world's 3rd largest weapons importer from 2016-2020 (Wezenman et al. 2020:6). What explains the decrease in American arms imports to a critical imperial client? First, the tense relationship with Obama, congressional threats of permanent aid cuts, and more stringent human rights conditions on aid disbursement angered Egyptian officials (CRS 2020:15-16). Egyptian military elites felt they could not rely on their mercurial imperial patron to supply arms and must source weapons elsewhere. Second, the American foreign aid package was not inflation adjusted, so the Egyptian military lost purchasing power over time, and the advanced American weapons system became prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, American officials hesitated to provide Egypt with weapons like advanced fighter jets that could erode Israel's Qualitative Military Edge in the region (Dizboni and El-Baz 2021). As the United States reorganized its regional posture, American Empire became a less reliable patron of the Egyptian military. Where would Egypt source its arms? An American rival stepped in to take the place of the United States.

Russia established a close bilateral relationship with the Egyptian government after the 2013 coup. Russian President Vladimir Putin supported Sisi's strongman fight against radical Islam and saw Egypt as a critical ally for the Russian power projection in the MENA region. Sisi

visited Russia multiple times early in his tenure, and in 2019 the two countries signed a comprehensive partnership agreement (El Anani 2021). In addition, Russia is an essential economic partner for Egypt, providing wheat imports, tourist revenues, and nuclear energy technology. After the fallout with Obama, Sisi strengthened ties with Russia to diversify his foreign patronage away from the United States (Bechev 2021). Russian President Vladimir Putin moved to replace American arms sales as Russia and Egypt drew closer (Sharp 2018:45). For the Egyptians, Russian weapons were cheaper and came with none of the human rights entanglements of American weaponry. Following Obama's aid suspension, Russian arms imports increased to 34 percent of Egypt's total from 2015-2019 (Wezeman et al. 2019:6). By 2014, Egypt had already purchased Russian MiG-28M2 fighters, Ka-52 helicopters, and Antey-2500 anti-ballistic missile systems (Bowen 2021). However, in 2018 when Egypt attempted to purchase advanced Sukhoi Su-35 Multi-Role Fighter aircraft, the United States strenuously objected and threatened sanctions against Egypt (CRS 2020:39). The deployment of advanced fighter jets like the Sukhoi SU-35 would upset the favored regional balance of power by giving Egypt an air force to match Israel. Moreover, Russia-American relations had deteriorated after Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, Putin interfered in the 2016 election, and the West accelerated talks of NATO enlargement. Amid these tensions with Russia, Trump signed the CAATSA Act to halt Russian weapons exports. Egypt would be subject to secondary sanctions if it completed the purchase of the Sukhoi jets. Journalists speculate that pressure from Secretary Pompeo and the threat of sanctions eventually led Egypt to cancel the jet order (Idon 2022).

The reduction in American weapons exports to Egypt and the closer ties between Egypt and Russia provide further evidence of diminishing American regional power and the aggressive

but constrained response of the Trump administration. As Go (2011:214) emphasizes, a hegemon's decline leads rival states to compete for a more significant share of geopolitical power. Although not a peer contender, Russia attempted to fill the void of the American withdrawal from its imperial role in the Middle East left. Due to the high costs and complications of regional politics, the United States could no longer meet the security needs of its Egyptian ally. However, when Egypt grew too close to an American rival, the administration lashed out at its erstwhile client and threatened sanctions. If the Trump administration could no longer appease its client through security, it still had methods of coercion like sanctions to discipline Egypt.

## Neoliberal Integration and Outsourcing Empire

As explained previously, American imperial dominance relies on economic hegemony and the reproduction of inequality between the world system's core and periphery. Adam Hanieh (2013:36) explains that since the 1970s, the United States has exerted informal imperial control over the Middle East by incorporating allied states into an American-led economic bloc. Key to regional integration was the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab States and the implementation of neoliberal policies. During the 1990s and 2000s, Clinton and Bush Jr. encouraged MENA states to adopt a standard set of neoliberal reforms: privatization, deregulation, public-private partnerships, trade liberalization, and austerity measures. A flurry of free-trade agreements during the Bush Jr. administration and the reduction of tariff barriers consolidated this neoliberal order (Hanieh 2013:38). In the 2000s, American trade in the region increased dramatically, and MENA economies became tied to American and Europe business interests through a surge in trade and foreign direct investment (39). As detailed in Chapter 1,

Egypt joined this neoliberal bloc, and economic ties to the United States remained strong during the Trump administration.

During the Trump years, Egypt was the top destination for US goods exports to Africa. From 2015-2020, the United States was the third largest importer to the Egyptian market (WITS 2020a). American products included "wheat and corn, mineral fuel and oil, machinery, aircraft, and iron and steel products." (Sharp 2023). On the other hand, Egypt exports textiles, petroleum products, fertilizers, and clothing to the United States (ranking as the 5th largest recipient of Egyptian products from 2015-2020) (WITS 2020b). From FY 2014 to FY 2020, the United States was the source of $11.4 billion in foreign direct investment to Egypt (ranked 3rd among all nations analyzed during that period) (Central Bank of Egypt 2023). American firms invest predominately in the Egyptian oil and gas sector, and the remainder of non-oil investment flows to financial services and manufacturing (U.S. International Trade Administration 2022a). To solidify its position in the regional neoliberal bloc, Egypt joined several American-backed trade agreements in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2005, Egypt signed a Qualifying Industrial Zones protocol with the United States. Under the agreement, exports to the United States are duty-free if they contain 10.5 percent Israeli content (U.S. ITR 2022b; Hanieh 2013).). The deal was part of a broader American effort to integrate Egypt into Western markets and a pro-Israel security alliance.

Even though American corporations remained vital economic actors in Egypt during the Trump administration, economic relations had deteriorated after the 2011 revolution. American firms and their representatives appeared hesitant to invest in the aftermath of Mubarak's fall, as indicated by the dip in FDI during the tumultuous revolutionary period (CBE 2023a). Hanieh

(2013:43) observes that starting in the late 2000s, the American proportion of Egyptian (and regional) trade began to decline. Egyptian Central Bank statistics confirm that this relative decrease in the American share of Egyptian trade continued during the Trump years (CBE 2023b). In 2018, an American Chamber of Commerce delegation of American executives from Apache, Microsoft, and other firms visited Egypt to revive economic relations (AmCham 2018). Corporate leaders praised Sisi for returning stability to the country and liberalizing the business environment by initiating IMF structural adjustment reforms. Nevertheless, investors remained frustrated with the Egyptian state's onerous bureaucracy, unfair incentives for state enterprises, and endemic corruption (U.S. Department of State 2020c). Free trade negotiations started under Bush Jr. stalled over non-tariff barriers, regime favoritism in government procurement contracts, and arbitrary legal and decision-making structures (Mabrouk 2019). Sisi's regime improved relations with the American government and business community, but his refusal to release the military's grip over the economy frustrated American capitalists. American capital continued to flow into Egypt under Trump, although U.S. economic ties were not as strong as in the era of American unipolarity. And as American influence over the Egyptian economy weakened, the United States devolved imperial responsibilities to regional partners and multilateral institutions.

Go (2011) describes how the new American superpower outsourced many imperial functions to allied states after World War 2. Key to the consolidation of the American Empire was the delegation of imperial responsibilities to the old empires of Europe (140). Instead of annexing or dismantling European colonies, the United States incorporated them into an informal imperial architecture (142). The United States provided financial aid and protected the colonial holdings of the French, British, and Dutch, and in return, the European states facilitated

American access to colonial markets and raw materials. The United States also expanded its military bases into these colonial areas and supported the European empires as a security bulwark against the Soviet Union. In this way, the United States could avoid the costs and consequences of violent annexation while expanding its global economic and military presence. While I agree with Go that outsourcing Empire was an effective strategy during the ascent of the American Empire, it has also been a tool to maintain power during its imperial decline. How did the United States outsource empire in Egypt and the MENA region during the Trump administration? First, by delegating the project of neoliberal incorporation to multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund.

As detailed above, American Empire relies on the financial power of dollar hegemony and neoliberal institutions to reproduce a world system that favors American capital. Egypt's modern state formation has been a process of unequal development and neoliberal incorporation into this American-dominated system. In the wake of the 2008 recession and the January 25th revolution, Egypt confronted a severe balance of payments crisis (IMF 2016:5-7). Capital fled the country after Mubarak's fall, exacerbating Egypt's long-standing structural challenges (i.e., high sovereign debt, import dependency, inefficient subsidies, and currency overvaluation) (Momani 2018). By the time Sisi came to power, Egypt was facing severe foreign currency shortages, inflationary pressures, and the growth of a foreign currency black market (Kaldas 2023). Egyptian central bank interventions to defend the currency depleted foreign currency reserves, threatening Egypt's ability to import goods and sustain employment and private sector activity (IMF 2016:5). The Egyptian state had to rely on debt to keep the economy afloat. Still, Gulf patrons and private creditors were reluctant to lend to a government plagued by high

deficits and ballooning interest obligations (Mandour 2020, 2021). The crisis presented an opportunity for American-backed financial institutions to intervene and reenergize the neoliberal project in Egypt.

In 2016, the IMF stepped in to offer Egypt a $12 billion low-interest loan that would unlock credit from private and sovereign lenders. But the loan came with stringent conditions. In return for access to credit, the regime carried out subsidy cuts, currency devaluations, the privatization of state assets, and market deregulation (Hamama 2016). Mubarak had undertaken an IMF-backed structural adjustment program in the 1990s but refused to implement many of the IMF's policy recommendations (Shafik 2021). He feared a redux of the bread riots that nearly toppled Sadat when that regime carried out food subsidy cuts in the 1970s. By contrast, Sisi confronted more dire economic circumstances than Mubarak and could not resist IMF mandates. Also, the government was confident it could repress any opposition to the reforms.

The 2016 IMF package, and two later additional IMF loans, did little to revitalize economic growth and arguably exacerbated Egypt's financial crisis and structural deficiencies. IMF-mandated austerity devastated working- and middle-class Egyptians, deepening poverty, unemployment, and inflation. The government instituted a regressive value-added tax and increased fees for public schools and public transit (Economist 2019). Gas and bread subsidy cuts led to a spike in the cost of food and transportation for working-class Egyptians, while the state ignored IMF requests to provide cash transfers to low-income workers (TIMEP 2017). Austerity eroded domestic demand and led to a severe cost-of-living crisis.

Liberalization of the Egyptian economy exacerbated Egypt's debt burdens and caused massive inflation. The central bank diverted a significant portion of the IMF loan to defend the

Egyptian pound. It injected credit into the economy, but investment supported unproductive activities like an unneeded expansion of the Suez Canal (Adly 2021:296). Currency devaluation in 2016, high-interest rates, and monetary liberalization led to an influx of hot money into Egypt (Salem 2022; El Dahshan & McManus 2016). Most of this money flowed into low employment, volatile sectors like real-estate, financial speculation, and oil and gas and did little to enhance private sector growth., The Egyptian regime further exacerbated economic imbalances by binge borrowing through the private bond markets, assuming short-term credit would stay cheap (Kaldas 2019: Reuter 2019). Egypt did appear to be on the path to debt sustainability until the onset of the COVID pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. In 2020 and 2022, capital fled the country, the Egypt pound collapsed, and debt burdens spiraled out of control (Kassab 2022). Contrary to its stated aims, the IMF liberalization program worsened Egypt's debt crisis, stoked inflation, and rendered the Egyptian state insolvent.

The IMF reforms also accelerated the consolidation of economic ownership in the hands of Sisi's authoritarian regime. The state privatized public sector firms and sold them to military-connected elites (Kassab 2022; Guergues 2022). The expansion of regime-affiliated enterprises further squeezed private-sector competition, discouraged investment, and enhanced the monopoly power of unproductive military firms (Kaldas 2020a; Seyigh 2019,2022). The regime used the fiscal space created by the loan program to fund questionable infrastructure projects and weapons purchases that primarily benefited elites associated with the military. As Egyptians suffered a cost-of-living crisis, Sisi poured money into a dubious military-run project to develop a New Administrative Capital in the desert (Bolleter & Cameron 2021). IMF legal reforms also decreased economic transparency and enabled regime corruption. For example, the 2014

Procedures for Appealing State Contracts banned citizens from challenging privatizations in court (Kassab 2022). Revolutionary activists had reversed corrupt privatization deals completed under previous neoliberal programs, and Sisi wanted no legal impediments to this new wave of privations. On the other hand, The IMF demanded that Sisi reduce the military's role in the economy but was unwilling to withhold funds or pressure the regime to take transparent steps toward structural reform (IMF 2023:62). As a result; the IMF enabled the process of wealth concentration it claimed was the cause of Egypt's economic stagnation.

Timothy Kaldas (2023) concludes that by almost all objective economic measures, the IMF program was a failure. Official poverty rose from 27 percent in 2015 to 29 percent in 2022, and women's labor participation collapsed. By 2022, Egypt's economy had contracted for 63 out of 72 months. The IMF structural adjustment program may have been a disaster for ordinary Egyptians, but it was a windfall for Western and Gulf investors and a strategic victory for American Empire. Debt made the Egyptian regime dependent on Western financiers for economic survival, a key leverage point to prevent Egypt from leaving the American sphere of influence. Furthermore, the reforms deepened Egypt's integration into Western networks of capital accumulation and intensified the extraction of Egyptian wealth through debt and unequal exchange. The International Monetary Fund, as a proxy for American Empire, leveraged a financial crisis to complete Egypt's subsumption under the Euro-American neoliberal bloc. Whereas the IMF was the primary institutional actor pushing forward the process of neoliberal incorporation in Egypt, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman) also played an essential role as state proxies for American imperialism.

Like the European empires of the post-war American imperial system, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have a unique status in the hierarchy of American regional power. Hanieh (2013:45) claims that the GCC countries and Israel sit atop a regional order constructed by the United States and Europe after the 1970s. As clients of the American Empire, Gulf states have been integral partners in the region's neo-liberalization process and the consolidation of American hegemony. Historically Gulf class formation relied on American security and cheap Egyptian labor to develop an authoritarian political economy centered on hydrocarbons and related petrochemical industries (Hanieh 2013:46). Flush with petro-dollars, Gulf investors moved westward in the 1970s to invest in North African economies and spearheaded the process of neoliberal integration. In Egypt, as neoliberal land privatizations displaced Egyptians and created a pool of unemployed workers, economic ties with the Gulf became vital to Egypt's economy. In 2017, over half of Egypt's expats lived in the Gulf, sending home billions in remittances annually. Remittances are one of the primary sources of foreign currency for Egyptians, providing a quarter of current account inflows from 2015-2020 (Butter 2020:10; Central Bank of Egypt 2020:36). In terms of foreign direct investment, from FY 2014 to FY 2021, Gulf firms accounted for approximately 20 percent of FDI, with investments in retail, real estate, logistics, and telecommunications (CBE 2023a). Moreover, GCC countries are top trading partners. Saudi Arabia and the UAE alone accounted for more than 10 percent of Egyptian imports between 2015-2020 (CBE 2023b).

The Gulf states cooperate with the United States because they have a shared interest in repressing democratic, Islamist, or jihadist forces in the region that could endanger trade networks or the monarchist political systems that protect oil flows. After the outbreak of the

Arab Spring, the GCC acted quickly to crush protests in the Gulf (Achcar 2016). However, Gulf monarchs were dismayed at Obama's tentative support for the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia and his efforts to improve ties with Saudi Arabia's regional adversary Iran. In particular, the Emirati and Saudi monarchies perceived Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat to their regimes (Achcar 2016). When Morsi was elected, Saudia Arabia and the UAE were shocked at Obama's willingness to accept an Islamic leader in Egypt. Furious that the United States was no longer an adequate security guarantor, the GCC states acted independently to lead a regional counter-revolution against the Arab Uprisings. In Egypt, the UAE supported a grassroots movement, Tamarod, to overthrow President Morsi (Butter 2020:8). After the coup in 2013, the Gulf stabilized Sisi's new regime by providing 30 billion in long-term deposits and oil supplies (9). Implicit in the 2016 agreement with the IMF was that Western loans would accompany Gulf financial support (Butter 2020:9). These bailouts gave Gulf states leverage to demand unpopular political concessions from Sisi, such as the cession of the Egyptian island of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Soliman 2017). Moreover, the Gulf states used their financial power to demand neoliberal reforms and shift the ownership of Egyptian assets into the hands of Gulf companies (Hanieh 2013; Middle East Eye 2022; England et al. 2023). Even before the coup, Gulf Capital had purchased large stakes in Egyptian firms through private equity deals and became a prominent landowner in the Egyptian real-estate sector.

Although the GCC countries see Egypt as a security liability, and relations have been tense, the countries drew closer after Trump's election. In September 2018, Trump sponsored the Abraham Accords to normalize relations between Israel, UAE, and Bahrain. The agreement solidified a counter-revolutionary bloc that included Egypt (Beinin, 2022) and implicitly

accepted Palestinian apartheid in return for Israel's economic and security cooperation. Secretary Pompeo tried to harness the momentum from the Abraham Accords to form an Arab security collective, the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). Here we see the limits of the American effort to outsource imperialism. Trump officials envisioned that MESA would function as a Middle East security architecture and delegate the American security role to Arab clients, allowing the United States to reduce its regional military presence (Farouk 2019; Lopez 2019). At the same time, Trump officials hoped that the agreement would deny Chinese, Russian, and Iranian influence in the region without requiring full American involvement. Despite Pompeo's energetic diplomacy, Arab states ultimately rejected the idea of a binding security alliance. In an area characterized by multipolarity, Arab states did not want to foreclose potential relations with China or Russia and sacrifice the ability to balance against other Arab states in the competition for hegemony.

For an empire in retreat, outsourcing has its limits. Whereas the IMF continued to serve the economic priorities of the American Empire under Trump, the GCC states increasingly acted independently to secure regional power, often at the expense of American interests. Today, Saudi Arabia is drawing closer to American rivals like China (Atlantic Council 2023). Indeed, Trump's warm relationship with the Saudi Crown Prince could not prevent MBS from pursuing oil price hikes and a non-aligned foreign policy stance (Bordoff and Young 2023). Like in business, as the United States outsources responsibilities to imperial partners in the Gulf, these contractors may eventually become rivals in the competition for power. Bromley (2006:46) sees this as the paradox of the American Empire. Part of what made American imperialism so compelling was how it devolved power to partner states. But in building up the economies of

allies like Japan and Germany, the United States sowed the seeds of hegemonic decline by enhancing the productive capacities of economic competitors. As the American empire outsources imperial responsibilities in the MENA region to local states and international financial institutions, these actors develop interests and capabilities that often contradict American policies. Consequently, outsourcing imperialism may be an unsustainable solution to the decline in American power.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# CONCLUSION

Today, Sisi's counter-revolutionary regime consists of a coalition of the security state, military, and business elites that relies on foreign patronage and repression to sustain weak hegemony. The reconstituted Egyptian state rules predominantly through state terror (Rutherford 2018; Achcar 2021). As a result, mass incarceration, torture, and targeted violence have effectively liquidated independent civil society and the political opposition (Amnesty 2018). This shift towards more assertive and violent authoritarianism aims to avoid a repeat of the 2011 uprisings and responds to widespread opposition to a new wave of austerity and privatization measures (Shafik 2021; Mandour 2020). Despite successfully consolidating power, Sisi's neoliberal authoritarianism has failed to resolve the long-standing contradictions of Egyptian capitalism (Springborg 2022). Instead of investing in job-growth industries and developing a program to address glaring issues like climate change, the regime has concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a military elite indebted to foreign powers. Accordingly, poverty, inflation, unemployment, and food insecurity have skyrocketed, and Egyptians face the threat of economic stagnation and ecological collapse (Abou Ali et al. 2023; OECD 2022). As this paper has shown, the United States government is complicit in Egypt's current economic and political crisis.

This case study of the Trump administration's foreign policy in Egypt has emphasized what many international relations scholars fail to acknowledge, that the United States is a global empire. Scholars of imperialism demonstrate how the United States maintains an informal empire through military preponderance, economic power, and leadership of the liberal

international order. The United States is the hegemonic guarantor of the capitalist world system and leads the global project of neoliberal integration. In the MENA region, the United States has pursued the imperial objectives of geopolitical dominance and economic hegemony through aid to authoritarian client regimes, neoliberal economic policies, democracy prevention, and military violence. In the 1970s, Egypt became a client of the American Empire. Since then, the United States has pursued a strategy of democracy prevention in Egypt to secure American security interests and incorporate Egypt into the neoliberal order. Trump maintained this informal imperial approach by deepening security ties with the Egyptian military and accelerating the securitization of foreign aid. In addition, Trump continued the long-term American policy of outsourcing imperial relations with Egypt to Gulf states and the International Monetary Fund. Nevertheless, Trump's America First foreign policy departed from past presidents by promoting Sisi's authoritarianism, rejecting democracy promotion and soft power, and acting aggressively to deter Egypt from aligning with regional rivals like Russia.

Julian Go's structural analysis of the rise and fall of global empires privdes a valuable framework to assess Trump's shift to a strategy of imperial aggression in Egypt. I have argued that the administration's Egypt policy was a response to American Empire's declining power in the Middle East and North Africa. Trump's pro-authoritarian rhetoric, the doctrine of populist sovereignty, and the rejection of soft power showed an aggressive intention to reassert hegemony in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the region's shift to multipolarity and the failures of direct imperialism after the Iraq invasion constrained the ability of Trump to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. As a result, Trump's America First foreign policy produced contradictory results in Egypt. Promoting authoritarianism and rejecting soft power drew Sisi closer to the United

States but failed to deter Egypt's realignment with rivals like Russia. Outsourcing imperialism allowed the United States to achieve Egypt's neoliberal integration through IMF structural adjustment but empowered Gulf states to pursue an independent foreign policy. Finally, the threaten of sanctions over Russian weapons purchases prevented Egypt from acquiring Russian fighter jets but further alienated the Sisi regime. So too, Trump's aggressive, nationalist approach failed to stem the long decline in the American share of trade, investment, and weapons sales to Egypt. In sum, Trump's Egypt policy expressed the aggressive inclinations of a declining empire, but the administration could not always translate imperial capabilities into desirable outcomes.

Several contemporary scholars, activists, and policymakers believe that U.S.-Egypt policy requires fundamental reforms (Miller and Hawthorne 2020; Gerges 2013).
With Egypt's regional power waning and the U.S. shifting focus to East Asia, many question the strategic rationale for maintaining strong ties with the Egyptian regime. This case study contributes to the debate on American foreign policy reform. This research encourages policymakers to reflect on the potential consequences for global and regional stability of maintaining the status quo in Egypt. American aid to Egypt's regime is a question of financial priorities and moral values. Since the 1970s, the U.S. government has provided Egypt with over $80 billion in military and economic aid (Holmes 2019). In an era of austerity and increasing threats from climate change, pandemics, and international conflict, should the American government provide $1 billion in aid to the Egyptian military annually? Should public finances subsidize a regime that violates human rights and threatens stability in the Middle East and North Africa? The neglect of this critical foreign affairs issue in American public discourse

marginalizes the voices of those in Egypt who face the consequences of American support for a highly repressive government.

From Egypt to Hungary and Brazil, communities worldwide are witnessing the rise of authoritarianism and the erosion of support for liberal democracy (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021). The 2016 U.S. presidential election and the events of January 6th brought this crisis of democracy to the United States. This paper contributes to a broader understanding of U.S. foreign policy's role in the rise of authoritarian populism and how American imperial behavior contributes to the general erosion of faith in democracy around the globe. In closing, Julian Go reminds us that domestic politics are not the sole determinant of foreign policy—the structures of the world system fundamentally influence imperial behavior abroad. Conversely, scholars must attend to how the actions of the American Empire abroad have profound and dangerous implications for democracy and social stability at home.

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## VITA

Jeremy Booth grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and graduated in 2012 from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a B.A. in Global Studies. After graduation, he worked for eight years in the field of international education in Egypt and Virginia and at the UW-Milwaukee Center for International Education. He chose to attend the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, to pursue a Master of the Arts degree in Sociology with a concentration in Political Economy and Globalization. His research interests include critical political economy and world systems theory, imperialism and American foreign policy in the Middle East, and the post-Arab Spring politics of Egyptian society. After graduation, he will continue his social justice-focused career in international education and foreign relations. He is grateful for the support and love of his family and friends back home in Wisconsin.