[Egypt Extends Campaign Against Dissent to Turtle Bay](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/19/egypt-extends-campaign-against-dissent-to-turtle-bay/)

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From Burundi to Syria, the lone Arab member of the U.N. Security Council is sparking concerns that it’s working to weaken international human rights norms.

Egypt has quietly blocked a staunch critic of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s government from a job on a U.N. human rights panel, the latest sign of Cairo’s increasing willingness to flex its diplomatic muscles at Turtle Bay.

The move last month to prevent the appointment of Yemen specialist Said Boumedouha, which has not been reported previously, comes as Cairo enters the fourth month of its two-year term on the U.N. Security Council. In that time, Egypt has watered down Security Council measures designed to combat rights abuses from Burundi to the Central African Republic. During its presidency of the 15-nation council in May, Egypt plans to host a public debate on the need to fight incitement to terrorism and extremism, a move that Western diplomats suspect is aimed at securing international legitimacy for squelching free speech at home.

The behind-the-scenes diplomatic activism has fueled concern among human rights advocates and some Western governments that the Sisi regime is using its newfound powers at the U.N. to extend its crackdown on dissent beyond its own borders while weakening international human rights norms abroad.

Egypt’s new moves also add another complication to the Obama administration’s efforts at the Security Council, where Russia and China have pushed back on U.S. initiatives from South Sudan to Syria.

“We always saw them as being potentially difficult because of our analysis of the Sisi regime and its own atrocities,” said Simon Adams, the executive director of the New York-based Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. “They have exceeded everybody’s expectations.” On virtually every international front where atrocities occur, Adams said, Egypt has “consistently, across the board, been intransigent, verging on obstructive.”

In Burundi, where a bloody government [crackdown](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/25/burundi-abductions-killings-spread-fear) on opposition figures has led the United States and other countries to [invoke](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-politics-usa-idUSKCN0SU2M520151105) fears of mass atrocities, Adams and other critics say Egypt has sought to weaken a resolution paving the way for the deployment of a U.N. police force to protect civilians. In South Sudan, Egypt has resisted calls by European powers to impose a full-fledged arms embargo on the warring parties. Egypt has also rankled its Persian Gulf allies for failing to use its position as the lone Arab country on the Security Council to draw greater attention to the humanitarian plight of Syrian civilians by, for instance, calling for meetings to discuss the Syrian government’s blockade of aid shipments to besieged towns.

Egypt maintains that its positions at the U.N. have been largely caricatured by human rights advocates and some Western officials, who paint international diplomacy as a morality play populated by heroes and villains. Its diplomats believe that the invocation of human rights to justify interventions from Libya to Iraq has wrought chaos for those countries and their neighbors. An Egyptian official told Foreign Policy that Cairo’s diplomacy is “nuanced,” crafted to fit a range of crises in its neighborhood and restrain the council from taking what Sisi’s government considers to be rash steps. The official pointed out that Egypt is planning to take advantage of its presidency of the council in May by sponsoring, along with New Zealand and Spain, a resolution urging governments and armed groups to respect the sanctity of medical workers and hospitals in conflict zones.

“The Security Council has been polarized on many issues way before we joined it. We are in fact trying to bridge the gaps,” the Egyptian official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said. “We have been proactive on almost every item. We simply refuse to be part of the furniture, as we are stakeholders on most of the issues on the council’s agenda.”

Egyptian diplomats maintain that Cairo has been unfairly pilloried for resisting efforts to impose an arms embargo in South Sudan. While Egypt has opposed a full-blown embargo, which it claims is impossible to implement, it has supported issuing a threat to impose a partial arms embargo, which would ban the import of aircraft and attack helicopters.

The diplomats also claim that Egypt shares its Western colleagues’ concerns about the plight of civilians in Burundi, where Human Rights Watch recently [documented](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/25/burundi-abductions-killings-spread-fear) an escalation in violence. But it feels a confrontational approach, favored by the United States, that seeks to force the Burundian government to accept the deployment of blue helmets against its will is counterproductive. It prefers cajoling Burundian authorities behind the scenes to secure their consent for a broader U.N. role in ensuring the protection of civilians.

And in Syria, Egypt argues that the West’s efforts through the council to highlight the Syrian government’s abuses have fed unnecessary tensions with the country and its chief military backer, Russia, that complicate attempts to negotiate a peace deal. Instead, Cairo prefers to keep the council’s focus on supporting U.S.- and Russian-sponsored U.N. mediation efforts.

Egypt’s diplomatic counterparts at the U.N. say Cairo is shrewdly deploying elaborate and sophisticated arguments on a range of issues to mask its efforts to push back on human rights and on efforts by the West to interfere in the domestic affairs of U.N. member states.

Some U.N. officials have also credited Egypt with helping to press for a cessation of hostilities in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia is leading an air campaign against forces loyal to Houthi insurgents and fighters loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. According to diplomatic sources, Egypt, like the United Arab Emirates, fears the Saudi-led war is planting the seeds for greater extremism that could come back to haunt the region.

Michael Wahid Hanna, an Egypt expert at the Century Foundation, views Egyptian diplomats as skillful and sophisticated procedural emissaries. “They know how to play the game. But the broader question is, ‘To what end?'”

Hanna sees Egypt’s diplomatic activism as part of a strategy to demonstrate to the world that after a period of turbulence, the country’s international position “has been normalized [and] that Egypt is back.” But Cairo’s push has also revealed a sometimes “obstructionist agenda that is often at loggerheads with the United States.”

Even before it began its term, Egypt had made clear to the United States and other major U.N. powers that it would act aggressively to assert its interests, even if that meant butting heads with Washington or other big powers.

When Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, pressed for a vote last month on a resolution that requires expelling entire foreign contingents from peacekeeping missions if their governments fail to hold alleged sexual abusers accountable for their crimes, Egypt pushed back.

Egyptian Ambassador to the U.N. Amr Abdellatif Aboulatta denounced the U.S. approach as amounting to “collective punishment” that would sap the morale of foreign peacekeepers. He proposed an amendment that would have required a series of conditions — including proof that a government had failed to punish alleged abusers — be met before an entire contingent could be cast out of a mission.

Power said the Egyptian amendment undermined the “purpose of this resolution, which is to get countries to respond to credible allegations against their personnel — to change the system that isn’t working.”

On March 11, Power published a [chart](https://twitter.com/MfaEgypt/status/708625793069522945) on Twitter that listed Egypt as a nation “voting (but failing) to undermine a UN Security Council resolution combating sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers” and said it was “sad.” The following day, Egypt’s Foreign Ministry spokesman fired back, saying on Twitter: “What is sad is for a [#UNSC](https://twitter.com/hashtag/UNSC?src=hash) Permanent Rep. to impose resolution on security council for publicity & personal ambition.”

In a [speech](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/samantha-power/rejecting-false-choices-u_b_9693712.html) last week to the U.S. Naval Academy, Power singled out Egypt, saying that while Cairo “faces very real, very grave security threats,” the government’s “crackdown on Islamists, on the independent media, and even on apolitical civil society reaches far beyond tackling these grave threats. These actions suggest a government deeply uncomfortable not just with dissent, but with any activity that is not directly controlled or monitored by the state.”

In recent weeks, she noted, Egyptian authorities have reopened an investigation into more than 150 of the country’s human rights advocates. “Staff from these organizations have been interrogated and threatened, banned from traveling abroad, and smeared in the state-run media,” Power said.

But while they may have sharp differences over policy, council diplomats say they have been deeply impressed with their Egyptian counterparts’ diplomatic savvy.

In contrast to most newcomers to the council, the Egyptians hit the ground running. In its first week on the council, Egypt led the effort to adopt a statement condemning the attacks on Saudi Arabia’s embassy and consulate in Iran.

Colleagues of the Egyptian mission at Turtle Bay say they have mastered the U.N. Security Council’s working procedures, an essential skill for influencing council debates, and Egypt’s experts on Burundi, Somalia, Syria, and North Korea have all served in those countries before coming to New York.

“They are the best diplomats in the Arab world,” one North African diplomat at the U.N. said of Egypt’s foreign service.

Still, Egypt has made clear that it is perfectly willing to obstruct the council’s business on matters that hit close to home.

At the end of March, Egypt blocked a routine decision to approve the hiring of Boumedouha, an Algerian national who serves as deputy director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa division.

Boumedouha had run afoul of the council’s lone Arab government after sharply condemning Sisi’s latest crackdown on human rights activists. “Egypt’s civil society is being treated like an enemy of the state,” he [said](http://www.voanews.com/content/rights-groups-urge-egypt-to-halt-persecution-of-activists/3251499.html) last month. A week later, Egyptian diplomats categorically rejected him for the U.N. post on the grounds that he had shown bias by criticizing Middle East governments, including Egypt.

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