

Kerry begins Middle East tour with visit to back Egyptian military junta

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US Secretary of State John Kerry stopped in Cairo yesterday en route to Saudi Arabia, kicking off a nine-day tour to the Middle East—and Poland—aimed at reasserting US geostrategic influence in the region.

Kerry's tour—taking him to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Algeria and Morocco, along with Poland—comes in the midst of a sharp crisis in US foreign policy. Washington has been compelled to abandon key elements of a policy built around promoting right-wing Islamist forces in the Arab world, which emerged after the revolutionary uprisings in the working class in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011. The US faces increasing doubts in the Middle East about its strength and reliability as an ally.

Amid mass protests against Egypt's Islamist President Mohamed Mursi this summer, the Obama administration supported a July 3 coup by General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. El-Sisi's junta organized lethal crackdowns on protests by Mursi supporters, as well as against workers on strike. The junta is angry, however, over Washington's *pro forma* complaints about the mass murder it has carried out in the streets of Egypt, in which its forces have killed at least 1,300 people.

Above all, there is dismay among US allies across the region at Washington's decision to postpone a direct attack on Syria in support of US-backed, Al Qaeda-led opposition militias, in the face of enormous public disapproval of such a war in Europe and North America. (See, "Plans for Geneva II talks on Syria in disarray") This move and the subsequent opening of US negotiations with the Shiite regime in Iran, Syria's main regional ally, have provoked the ire of Sunni regimes such as Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel.

In the course of his visit, Kerry has taken pains to praise Washington's brutal, reactionary allies and reassure them that, despite opposition to more Middle East wars by the American people, US military hegemony and security

guarantees in the region can be relied on.

In a six-hour stop in Cairo, Kerry met with junta leader el-Sisi, as well as with President Adly Mansour and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy. He praised Egypt's blood-stained junta as democratic, defending his comment in August that the July 3 coup leaders aimed to "restore democracy."

"Thus far, there are indications that this is what they are intending to do," Kerry said of the el-Sisi military junta. "The road map is being carried out to the best of our perception ... I think it is important for all of us, until proven otherwise, to accept that this is the track that Egypt is on and to work to help it to be able to achieve that."

Kerry praised the junta as democratic even as the latter moved the venue of Mursi's trial, which begins Monday, to a heavily-guarded prison complex at the Police Academy on the outskirts of Cairo. Some 20,000 police officers and soldiers will guard the Academy premises while the trial is in session, amid a nationwide police clampdown.

This move is intended to intimidate protests by supporters of Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) against the politically-motivated trial. Mursi and the other senior figures of the Muslim Brotherhood who are his co-defendants face life imprisonment or the death penalty if found guilty on charges of inciting violence.

Top Egyptian officials told the state-run daily *Al Ahram* that Kerry's visit was widely perceived as signaling US approval for the "irreversible end" of the MB—that is, the July 3 coup.

"Some regional capitals—to be frank, Ankara [Turkey] and Doha [Qatar]—assessed that Mursi's removal could be reversed by Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations if backed by external support. Now, it has become clear that despite the admitted opposition to Mursi's removal, a larger segment of Egypt's society is not willing to have

the Muslim Brotherhood back,” one such official said.

Kerry also downplayed the temporary suspension last month, in the wake of the coup, of \$260 million out of \$1.3 billion in yearly US aid to the Egyptian military. The move, which has delayed Egyptian purchases of items such as American fighter planes and tanks, does not block continuing US support to Egyptian army operations in the Sinai Peninsula, supply of spare parts to its existing forces or military training of its officers.

Kerry stressed that the suspension of US aid was automatically mandated by the Congress and not the Obama administration’s preferred policy. “It’s not a punishment. It’s a reflection of policy in the United States under our law,” he said.

Arriving in the Saudi capital of Riyadh for late-night meetings with Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, Kerry acknowledged differences on “tactics” in Syria. “For instance, there are some countries in the region that wanted the United States to do one thing with respect to Syria, and we have done something else,” Kerry said.

He reiterated the US government’s pledge that Iran would not obtain nuclear weapons—an outcome that Washington has repeatedly threatened to go to war over to prevent. He also insisted that long-standing American security guarantees to key Middle Eastern allies remain valid.

“The United States will be there for the defense of our friends and allies. We will not allow those countries to be attacked from outside. We will stand with them,” he added. He listed Persian Gulf oil sheikhdoms—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—as well as Jordan, Egypt, and unspecified “others,” widely taken as a reference to Israel, as nations enjoying US protection.

The fact that Kerry felt the need to give assurances of the validity of US guarantees to long-standing allies reflects the acuteness of the crisis of American policy, which is throwing into question fundamental features of international politics in the region.

The Egyptian junta reacted to initial threats of a cut-off of US military in August by threatening to develop a military alliance with the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin. “Let’s not forget that Egypt went with the Russian military for support and we survived. So, there is no end to life. You can live with different circumstances,” said Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi at the time.

Last week, Israel apparently carried out a military strike on targets inside Syria, disregarding objections by US officials. (See: “Israeli warplanes strike targets inside

Syria”)

Saudi Arabia, which recently turned down a seat on the UN Security Council in protest at US Syria policy, has repeatedly denounced Washington. “The current charade of international control over Bashar’s [i.e., Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s] chemical arsenal would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious. [It is] designed not only to give Mr. Obama an opportunity to back down [from military strikes], but also to help Assad to butcher his people,” former intelligence chief Prince Turki said.

An anonymous high-ranking Saudi official reported on discussions between Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan and European diplomats, in which Bandar denounced the Obama administration.

“Prince Bandar told diplomats that he plans to limit interaction with the US,” the official said. “This happens after the US failed to take any effective action on Syria and Palestine. Relations with the US have been deteriorating for a while, as Saudi [Arabia] feels that the US is growing closer with Iran, and the US also failed to support Saudi [Arabia] during the Bahrain uprising.”

During the Bahraini uprising, Washington also issued empty criticisms of the savage joint crackdown by the Saudi and Bahraini forces, criticisms that angered Riyadh.

The official added that Saudi Arabia might retaliate by ceasing to invest its oil money in the United States, a move that would tend to drive up interest rates. The kingdom has \$690 billion in net foreign assets, much of which is invested in US Treasury bonds. “All options are on the table now,” the official said.



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