

Egyptian dictator al-Sisi feted by UK government

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6 November 2015

Britain is the latest country to extend a welcome to Egyptian dictator President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Al-Sisi is the field marshal who led the coup against President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. The UK invitation was confirmed even after an Egyptian court upheld a death sentence against Morsi.

Under al-Sisi, 2,500 people have been killed and 40,000 jailed in a crackdown on dissent targeting the Muslim Brotherhood as well as secular and liberal activists. His regime passed an anti-protest law banning any gathering of more than 10 people.

Al-Sisi came to power after many of his opponents were massacred in Cairo's Rabaa and Nahda squares. Senior officials from the al-Sisi regime have been accused of crimes against humanity after the massacre of more than 800 protesters outside Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque, the worst of three mass killings of supporters of Morsi during 2013.

In September, the British government granted temporary diplomatic immunity to al-Sisi's army chief of staff Mahmoud Hegazy, in the form of a "special mission immunity" certificate, to block "opportunities for arrest or interview" when he was in London visiting an arms fair.

Representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party had contacted Scotland Yard's war crimes unit urging the arrest of the man in charge of the 2013 crackdown as head of military intelligence. He has diplomatic immunity, but many of those in his entourage could have faced possible prosecution.

Numerous commentators pointed to the fact that Prime Minister David Cameron was the first western leader to visit Tahrir Square in February 2011, posing as a friend of democracy just 10 days after the

overthrow of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak.

This was part of efforts to make sure that the regime established following Mubarak's downfall did nothing that would threaten the interests of the UK and other imperialist powers. Four years later, Britain has joined political leaders in Germany, France and Italy in shaking al-Sisi's bloodstained hand to anoint him as a guardian of stability in the Middle East.

Where Britain surpasses Berlin, Paris and Rome is in the extent of its ties with Cairo. Hegazy's presence in London in September is emblematic of the UK's key role in arming the regime in Cairo. He was present at the world's largest arms fair as one of Britain's favoured clients.

In July, *Newsweek* revealed that official records released by the British government and reported by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) showed that London in the first three months of 2015 approved military licences to Egypt for "components of military combat vehicles" worth £48.8 million (\$76.3 million). This was a 3,000 percent increase year-on-year in the value of military deals between the two countries compared with £1.6 million (\$2.4 million) in 2014.

The UK is the largest foreign investor in Egypt, with \$25 billion worth of investments in the five years since 2010. *Al Ahram* reported that British Ambassador to Egypt John Casson tweeted Wednesday that "Egyptians should 'await a surprise' during al-Sisi's visit, hinting at the possibility of new partnership deals between the two countries."

Al-Sisi met with Cameron and British Secretary of Defence Michael Fallon, who declared in August while attending the opening of the expanded Suez Canal alongside al-Sisi that the countries stood "shoulder to shoulder" in a fight against "evil extremism". In an op-ed written for *Al Ahram*, Fallon pledged Britain's

intentions to keep “strengthening Egypt’s hand against the terrorists.”

“Egypt is strategically vital”, he insisted.

Al-Sisi took his visit as an occasion not only to defend his repression but also to demand the support of the UK for operations to protect Egypt’s border with Libya.

“We want some stability,” he said in defence of anti-terrorism legislation enacted in August, adding that the hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters sentenced to death were “unlikely” to be executed because they were convicted in absentia or due to the appeals process. He called on the UK and other European nations involved in the military overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi’s government in 2011 to work with Egypt:

“We need to stop the flow of funds and weapons and foreign fighters to the extremists. All the members of NATO—including Britain—who took part in the mission to overthrow Gaddafi need to give their help.”

The visit prompted demonstrations dominated by the Muslim Association of Britain and a smaller number from the Stop the War Coalition. But once again opposition from within the Labour Party was confined to newly elected “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn and just two of his supporters. Corbyn made another personal statement that does not reflect party policy. He said al-Sisi’s visit showed “contempt for human and democratic rights” and “threatens, rather than protects, Britain’s national security.”

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Secretary of State for International Development Diane Abbott were, along with Caroline Lucas of the Greens, the only three MPs among 55 signatories to a letter opposing

al-Sisi’s visit and sent to the *Guardian*. The letter said the visit “violates the British values which the government claims to champion.”

Meanwhile Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn busied himself issuing denials that Corbyn’s recent questioning in an interview with ITV News Monday of the efficacy of RAF strikes in Iraq—given that “most of the action appears to have moved into Syria”—was party policy. A spokesman for Benn insisted that the air strikes should continue and noted that parliament had voted “overwhelmingly” in favour.

For its part, the self-proclaimed voice of British liberalism, *The Guardian*, was unabashed in its support

for al-Sisi’s visit. After claiming that it welcomed “protests from human rights organisations and other critics,” it declared, “But there is a wider picture. The Middle East is fast unravelling into chaos. It makes sense for the UK and other western powers to keep channels of communication open to Mr Sisi,” with Egypt, along with Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, “one of only four key Muslim countries in the region that can still be described as functioning states.”

With studied impartiality, it urged that with Egyptians wanting “a government that is, at the very least, fair and decent ... both those protesting outside the room and those leaders who are in dialogue with Mr Sisi inside it should give in neither to one-eyed indignation nor to complacency in the face of deplorably autocratic behaviour.”

Al-Sisi’s visit nevertheless took place under a political cloud, after Cameron announced Tuesday night that the Russian Kogalymavia (Metrojet) Flight 9268 that disintegrated over the Sinai peninsula Saturday “may well have been brought down by an explosive device.”

British flights based out of Sharm el-Sheikh airport were instructed not to fly and British flights to and from Sinai were banned unilaterally. The move stranding thousands of UK tourists was made immediately prior to al-Sisi boarding a plane for the UK and without his knowledge. Egypt’s Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry called it a “premature and unwarranted” step that would destroy Egypt’s tourist industry.

An afternoon press conference by Cameron and al-Sisi saw numerous questions about the Russian passenger plane, but, at least in the televised part, none that might embarrass him regarding the massacre and imprisoning of his opponents. Instead, an Egyptian journalist asked Cameron what he intended to do about the Muslim Brotherhood in the UK, given that it was outlawed in Egypt. Cameron responded by promising a review of policy by the end of the year that would show a much more “robust” approach.



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