

Egyptian dictator el-Sisi welcomed to the White House

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President Donald Trump welcomed the bloodstained military dictator of Egypt, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to the White House Monday, giving a public demonstration of support for a regime that has slaughtered thousands, crushing the revolutionary uprising of millions of workers and youth that inspired the world in 2011, and currently jails tens of thousands of political opponents and dissidents.

More than a thousand Egyptians are facing death sentences handed down by kangaroo courts where they could not present a defense and in which no evidence was actually submitted. Others are jailed for life, including the elected president of Egypt, Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose government was overthrown by el-Sisi in a military coup in July 2013.

This bloody record did not give Trump the slightest pause, as he shook el-Sisi's hand vigorously—in notable contrast to his refusal to make the same gesture when German Chancellor Angela Merkel was his guest last month. “We are very much behind Egypt and the people of Egypt,” Trump said, as he stood side-by-side in the Oval Office with the chief oppressor of the Egyptian people.

“You have a great friend and ally in the United States and in me,” Trump told el-Sisi. “I just want to let everybody know that we are very much behind President el-Sisi, he has done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation.”

The Egyptian president responded with extravagant flattery of Trump, declaring, “Since we met last September, I've had a deep appreciation and admiration of your unique personality, especially as you are standing very strong in counterterrorism field.” The Egyptian regime has made no objection to Trump's efforts—in the name of counterterrorism—to ban visitors from seven Muslim-majority countries, including two of Egypt's neighbors, Libya and Sudan.

A White House statement announcing the visit of el-Sisi listed only two issues on the agenda for the meeting, terrorism and economic reform. The most important issues were unstated: The escalation of US military intervention throughout the Middle East and Washington's efforts to mobilize its client states, military dictators and oil despots alike, in support.

Egypt is the second-largest recipient of US military and economic aid in the region, trailing only Israel. However, despite huge weapons purchases, including fighter jets, armored vehicles and advanced weaponry, there are no Egyptian warplanes taking part in the US-led bombing of Iraq and Syria. Egypt has also rejected requests from Saudi Arabia to back the coalition of Gulf monarchies waging war in Yemen against Houthi rebels who overthrew the Saudi-backed regime of President Abdrabbuh Mansur al-Hadi.

Egyptian officials have resisted the pressure for such military contributions because of security crises on both the eastern and western borders: Islamist guerrilla attacks in the Sinai peninsula, and the civil war in neighboring Libya. Even more significant is the continuing fear of a social explosion at home, six years after the mass movement that brought down the military regime of President Hosni Mubarak. The most critical function of the massive Egyptian military apparatus, funded by \$77 billion in US aid over three decades, is to police a population of 90 million, by far the largest in the Arab world.

Trump has ostentatiously discarded the occasional human rights rhetoric of the Obama and Bush administrations. However, he has not yet rescinded some of the restrictions imposed on Egyptian military purchases during the period after el-Sisi's coup. At the time, Obama felt compelled to posture as a critic of the most violent acts of repression, even while maintaining security ties with Cairo, including \$1.3 billion in annual military aid.

In particular, el-Sisi is seeking the restoration of “cash-flow financing,” a particularly favorable method of military assistance that allows Egypt to buy US military equipment on easy, long-term credit terms. Observers in the Egyptian media—all subject to state censorship—suggested that expanded Egyptian cooperation with US military efforts against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria might be the price to be paid for restoration of the long-term credits.

Despite Trump’s enthusiastic embrace of el-Sisi, both as a candidate and as president, his initial budget request to Congress included sharp cuts in foreign aid that would have devastating consequences for the bankrupt Egyptian economy. On military aid, the Trump budget guaranteed continued funding for Israel but not for Egypt, which was said to be still under evaluation.

The official unemployment rate in Egypt is 12.7 percent, compared to 9 percent in 2011, when discontent over the economy was a driving force in the revolution that overthrew the Mubarak dictatorship. Youth unemployment is estimated at more than 30 percent.

President el-Sisi met with his financial paymasters at the World Bank even before visiting Trump at the White House. He also met with Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, and was to meet later in the week with officials of the International Monetary Fund. At each stop, including the White House, el-Sisi pledged to continue his program of “economic reform,” which involves slashing subsidies for consumer goods like bread and further opening the Egyptian economy to foreign investment.

Last month the cut in subsidies for bread, demanded by the IMF, triggered riots in many cities. In a commentary in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Zeinab Abul-Magd of Oberlin College wrote, “The riots reveal that, underneath this tranquility, a war is raging between the country’s domineering army and its civilian poor,” adding, “The stability of Egypt’s military regime is not guaranteed to last.”

El-Sisi has devoted himself to shoring up his support within the military establishment, lavishly funding state investments in enterprises run by military officers. Last month his regime engineered the release from prison of the former dictator, Hosni Mubarak, quashing his conviction on corruption charges.

Trump’s meeting with el-Sisi is part of a US foreign policy offensive throughout the Middle East. Later in the week Jordan’s King Abdullah visits the White House—another US-backed despot who is under mounting pressure to contribute more to the military campaign in

Iraq and Syria.

Last weekend Trump dispatched his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to Iraq, accompanying General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and White House counterterrorism adviser Thomas Bossert. He is participating in talks with Iraqi leaders in Baghdad and getting a first-hand look at the Iraqi military siege of Mosul, where US warplanes have slaughtered hundreds of civilians in relentless bombing.

The 36-year-old Kushner, scion of a billion-dollar real estate family, has no foreign policy experience, but has a growing portfolio, including China, Mexico and the Middle East, which stamps him as the “crown prince” of an increasingly dynastic regime.

The Dunford-Kushner mission follows press reports that the Pentagon will no longer announce or confirm the movement of troops into or out of Iraq and Syria, following orders from Trump’s National Security Council. A Pentagon official told the *Los Angeles Times* that the purpose was “to maintain tactical surprise, ensure operational security and force protection.”

The real purpose, however, is to conceal from the American people, and from world public opinion, the ongoing escalation of US military operations in the region, which includes recent deployments of 400 Marines into northern Syria and 300 paratroopers to reinforce the Iraqi onslaught on Mosul.

The Trump administration has also approved the sale of F-16 warplanes to Bahrain’s monarchy, suspended for years because of savage repression of the Shi’ite majority in that country. King Hamad responded with an intensification of the repression, approving a constitutional amendment Monday allowing military courts to try civilians for offenses against the state of emergency which has been in effect since 2011.



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