



Lessons Learned: The State Department Challenges Egyptian Human-Rights Abuses

Governments that act on what President Trump says are likely to find themselves in for a challenge.

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Relations between the United States and Egypt went from smooth to rocky when the administration announced the halt of \$291 million in aid over human-rights concerns. The el-Sisi government criticized Washington's "misjudgment" and "lack of understanding," but otherwise responded cautiously as a delegation led by Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner was visiting Cairo.

The contretemps came as a surprise. President Donald Trump had anointed President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as an authoritarian favorite. On meeting in April the U.S. president unleashed his usual over-the-top praise, saying that the Egyptian strongman, whose security forces "disappeared" many critics and imprisoned anyone who resisted his rule, had "done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation." Insisted President Trump, "We are very much behind President el-Sisi." Human rights went unmentioned.

Even the State Department said little about the subject. Until now.

Roughly \$96 million in funding has been canceled while another \$195 has been suspended, but it could be restored if the el-Sisi regime makes unspecified improvements in its policies. While a welcome expression of American concern, the aid action won't have a significant impact on the increasingly authoritarian el-Sisi regime. Cairo still will pocket about \$1.3 billion in U.S. funds this year. And both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have contributed generously to the el-Sisi government's coffers. Indeed, with its aid Riyadh purchased not only Cairo's support against Qatar but two islands, to the consternation of the Egyptian public.

Nevertheless, the U.S. rebuke provides important lessons about the Trump administration. First, the State Department, which in this case certainly means Secretary Rex Tillerson, desires to do right. With the president's general dismissal of human-rights concerns and embarrassing endorsement of el-Sisi, as well as the tendency of some White House officials to see every foreign relationship through the prism of radical Islam and terrorism, observers widely assumed that el-Sisi would get a free pass on his manifold abuses.

But no. The government has been cracking down not only on political opponents but anyone disobeying the regime. At the beginning of August, fifty policemen, heretofore a mainstay of regime repression, were hit with prison terms for organizing a strike.

Also recently targeted were critical observers, most notably NGOs attempting to monitor el-Sisi's excesses. During the Mubarak dictatorship the Al Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence publicized abuses, helped victims and challenged perpetrators. When I visited in 2014, staff members explained that the use of torture was more prevalent than ever. The el-Sisi government, angry about the scrutiny, shut down the organization in February.

The legislation targeting domestic NGOs also applies to Western organizations. The United States and European states protested the measure, approved last November, and believed they had received assurances from the el-Sisi regime that the law would not be implemented. But after President Trump's ingratiating welcome of the Egyptian dictator, Cairo put the legislation into effect. Washington seemed disinclined to do any more in opposition.

While no effective foreign policy can ignore national interests to promote human rights, the government's actions should be constrained by moral considerations. And when Washington can advance human liberty abroad at little cost or risk, it should do so. At the very least the United States should do no evil and refuse to underwrite abusive regimes absent compelling justification.

None are present in Egypt today. Cairo need not be bribed to eschew war with Israel. Terrorism is a growing problem, but Egypt's military favors using U.S. military assistance to purchase high-priced toys that offer prestige rather than meet the country's most pressing security needs.

Worse, the nation is at war with itself. Yet Washington's generous annual subsidy, a mix of economic and military aid, underwrites a regime that has forced dissent underground and left violence as the only opposition avenue available. Ultimately, President el-Sisi could find himself facing the same fate as former President Hosni Mubarak, abandoned by his own elite supporters to an angry public once they decided that he had become a liability. Better for the United States not to be identified with a brutal regime which kills lawlessly, jails promiscuously, censors relentlessly and enriches shamelessly.

The other lesson is that President Trump doesn't much matter when it comes to U.S. foreign policy. Whether by design or happenstance, virtually nothing he believes appears to matter.

This isn't new. The president criticized both NATO and the U.S.-Korea alliance, but his chief aides reassured the very countries the president criticized. President Trump joined Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates in denouncing Qatar, but Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis put Washington in Doha's corner. The president beat the war drums against North Korea, going mano-a-mano with Kim Jong-un, while most everyone else in his administration insisted that war was not imminent.

Now the State Department is raising the very issue the president pointedly ignored during his meeting with the Egyptian leader. President Trump almost certainly does not agree: there is no presidential endorsement, not even a tweet, about the aid halt. But, more important, he has taken no contrary action, there has been no presidential reversal of state's decision.

Like the rulers of Saudi Arabia and UAE, President el-Sisi probably acted on the assumption that he was in the American president's good graces, and he was. Unfortunately for him, however, President Trump's goodwill has no practical value. The U.S. leader doesn't make policy. He probably doesn't even know what is being done about where and by whom. And, it would seem, he doesn't much care.

These two factors have important implications for the future. Citizens in America and other nations should downplay—if not quite dismiss—the president's spontaneous pronouncements. They reflect his thoughts, not his actions. And he simply doesn't have the discipline and attention span necessary to translate the first into the second. His outbursts should be viewed more as entertainment than policy.

More important, the president won't be a transformative figure, at least when it comes to foreign policy. America's role in Afghanistan will outlast his presidency. NATO will survive. There won't be war with North Korea. The opening to Cuba will persist. And Washington will continue to promote human rights, imperfectly of course, but with conviction. When he leaves the White House, it will be difficult to find President Trump's fingerprints on these or any other policies.

Consequently, governments that act on what President Trump says are likely to find themselves left high and dry. Invite him to visit, fill the boulevards with his picture, host his speech, and he'll agree to most anything. But once he flies home the "adults" in the administration will take over. He will be left to create havoc in domestic politics.

In the case of Egypt, at least, this approach has resulted in a more balanced policy. The president's enthusiastic embrace of Cairo's general-turned-president was an embarrassment. The State Department's own human-rights report on the el-Sisi government runs fifty-nine pages and explains that "the most significant human-rights problems were excessive use of force by security forces, deficiencies in due process, and the suppression of civil liberties. Excessive use of force included unlawful killings and torture."

Trimming U.S. subsidies won't stop those abuses or other abuses. But doing so at least signals that the American conscience is not entirely dead. Washington should end aid to a government that has manufactured so many of its own problems while holding its population in bloody bondage.

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