



Trump Administration Should Stop Subsidizing Egypt's Pharaoh al-Sisi

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Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was one of President Donald Trump's favorite authoritarians, at least until recently. Then the State Department targeted the general turned politician for turning his nation into an open-air prison. But Uncle Sam's support for brutality and repression in Egypt continues to discredit America. The Trump administration should stop underwriting the al-Sisi dictatorship.

Washington began providing "foreign aid" to newly sovereign but still dependent Egypt after World War II. The payments acted as both political bribe and economic support. However, following the ouster of the corrupt and indolent King Farouk and rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Cairo eventually turned to the Soviet Union.

Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, made peace with Israel and flipped back to the West. After the Camp David agreement Washington paid Cairo to keep the peace: Egypt received about \$1.5 billion annually. Hosni Mubarak took over following Sadat's assassination in 1981 and remained a well-compensated U.S. client until his ouster during the 2011 Arab Spring.

He was a victim of rising democratic currents as well as the armed forces' revolt against his attempt to replace military rule with a family dictatorship. Standing by as the people protested conveniently removed the problem. The Obama administration maintained aid for the interim regime and newly elected Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, the military, police, bureaucracy, and business elite together made the country essentially ungovernable. Chief of Staff al-Sisi encouraged Morsi's opponents and then cheerfully heeded their call to act. Morsi made the general's task easy by failing to broaden his appeal.

The Obama administration was embarrassed by al-Sisi's 2013 coup and could not ignore the new regime's brutality. For instance, the military killed more than 800 protestors in Cairo's Raba'a Square, a greater toll than in China's Tiananmen Square. In response, Washington cut some aid and withheld a few weapons, but refused to call the coup a coup—even though the military had arrested the president, jailed his party's leaders, closed independent media, shot down pro-Morsi protestors, and imprisoned most anyone who opposed the new regime. So many were arrested that the government had to build another 16 prisons. President Barack Obama apparently convinced himself that the money gave him leverage to promote the restoration of democracy.

It was a mirage. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates contributed to Cairo's coffers to keep the new dictatorship afloat. The administration eventually yielded and restored U.S. assistance, after shifting the focus of military monies to anti-terrorism purposes. Yet Egyptians with whom I spoke on two visits in 2014 complained that the repression was worse than under Mubarak. Secretary of State John Kerry journeyed to Cairo even as Egyptian courts were handing down mass guilty verdicts and death penalties in cases involving hundreds of defendants. Al-Sisi occasionally apologized for police abuses, including sexual abuse of women, but did nothing to stop them.

President Donald Trump abandoned any pretense of concern over human rights. When meeting al-Sisi in April he declared that the latter had "done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation." Announced the U.S. president, "We are very much behind President al-Sisi."

Cairo was thought to have an expansive wish list for Washington, including increasing aid, removing restrictions on military assistance, declaring the Muslim Brotherhood to be a terrorist group, and extraditing regime critics. Moreover, President al-Sisi apparently interpreted President Trump's position as a green light to escalate the regime's war on the Egyptian people. After the May summit in Saudi Arabia, reported the *Washington Post's* Sudarsan Raghavan: "State security forces have arrested dozens of opposition party members. More than 100 websites deemed critical of al-Sisi's government have been blocked. Human rights lawyers and activists have been jailed for staging protests, and their assets have been frozen. The judiciary is being stacked with pro-Sisi appointees, lawyers and judges say."

But the U.S. government long understood the brutal character of the al-Sisi dictatorship. The State Department's latest human rights report noted 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. Due process problems included the excessive use of preventative custody and pretrial detention, the use of military courts to try civilians, trials involving hundreds of defendants in which authorities did not present evidence on an individual basis, and arrest conducted without warrants or judicial orders. Civil liberties problems included societal and government restrictions on freedoms of expression and the media, as well as on the freedoms of assembly and association in statute and practice."

Private assessments are equally negative. Overall, Freedom House rated Egypt as not free with a press that is not free. The al-Sisi regime is bad on civil liberties and even worse on political rights. The group noted: "The government systematically persecutes opposition parties and political movements" as well as "non-Islamist critics and parties." Indeed, "Serious political opposition is virtually nonexistent, as both liberal and Islamist activists face criminal prosecution and imprisonment."

Moreover, there's no effective check on the executive. Corruption is rampant. Censorship reigns, as "state media and most surviving private outlets strongly support al-Sisi and the military." Academic freedom has suffered and "Freedoms of assembly and association are tightly restricted." Legal cases "demonstrated a high degree of politicization in the court system, typically resulting in harsh punishments for perceived enemies of the government." Government critics face travel bans. Despite the pervasive repression, however, "Terrorism persists unabated in the Sinai Peninsula and has also struck the Egyptian mainland, despite the government's use of aggressive and often abusive tactics to combat it."

Amnesty International wrote of the use of “mass arbitrary arrests to suppress demonstrations and dissent.” Human Rights First cited “the worst government repression in decades.” The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances said Egypt had a large number of “enforced disappearances,” which rose rapidly in 2015. The government did not respond to the committee’s request to visit, “in spite of reminders sent.”

Human Rights Watch pointed to the continuing ban on protests and arrest of “people in connection with protests, many preemptively.” The “authorities ordered travel bans and asset freezes against prominent human rights organization and their directors and brought criminal charges against the head of the Press Syndicate and the country’s top anti-corruption official.” People were routinely tortured and “disappeared” and sometimes killed. Other human rights abuses were pervasive.

The al-Sisi dictatorship does not stop at crushing political opposition. It is determined to extirpate the slightest complaint against the regime. In early August 50 policemen, normally true foot soldiers of repression, were sentenced to three-year prison terms for striking over their working conditions. Ironically, they were charged with inciting violence and intimidating security forces.

Both Washington and Cairo desire “stability,” but stifling even the most modest criticism is like building a boiler without a pressure valve. When the inevitable explosion occurs it will scald all within range. For instance, in 2011, noted the Congressional Research Service, “the popular uprising in Egypt unleashed a wave of pent up anti-Americanism due to the decades-old U.S. relationship with the former Mubarak regime.” The Obama administration attempted to repair the damage by strongly supporting the President Muhammad Morsi, earning the enmity of his critics.

Until a month ago Washington appeared to have shifted back to its reflexive support of the ruling regime, yet Human Rights First warned that Egypt “is headed for severe instability.” The opposition lacks organized, responsible leadership and as anger builds peaceful options prove not only ineffective, but nonexistent. In April Michele Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment testified to “the unprecedented human rights abuses and political repression practiced by the government since 2013 is fanning the flames rather than putting them out.”

With as many as 60,000 detained, Human Rights First cited Egyptian activists who pointed to “the radicalization of prisoners by ISIS operatives.” Mohamed Zaree of the Cairo Institute for Human rights Studies complained that “No one is working with the victims, so they may be easy to radicalize.”

The impact of harsh political punishment will be exacerbated by economic penalties if the government adopts a proposal in Egypt’s parliament, which would dismiss from state employment any member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In a society where government plays an outside economic role, this would leave regime critics impoverished as well as persecuted. The result would be more especially young antagonists less willing to compromise and more prone to violence.

Indeed, human rights attorney Malek Adly worried that far from persuading regime opponents “to abandon extremism and violent ideologies,” the government was creating “ticking terrorist bombs.” Dunne told a Senate appropriations subcommittee that the al-Sisi regime was adopting

“policies that promise chronic instability.” Concluded Human Rights First: “As long as the Egyptian government continues to suppress peaceful dissent and stifle pluralism. It is part of the problem of growing instability, not part of the solution.” Another popular explosion could be bloody.

Yet al-Sisi only grows more repressive. Earlier this year the government launched a war on civil society, shutting down NGOs which monitored the dictatorship’s abuses. Three years ago I visited the Al-Nadeem Torture Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, which began operating during the Mubarak era. The group challenged the government and assisted the victims. In February the regime closed the Centre. Most other independent groups also have had to quit.

The prohibition also applies to Western organizations. U.S. and European states protested the legislation, originally approved last November, and believed the al-Sisi regime had agreed not to implement the law. But after President Trump’s sycophantic welcome the Egyptian dictator put the measure into effect.

Since 1948 American taxpayers have transferred about \$80 billion to Egypt. Aid currently runs about \$1.5 billion a year, most for the military. Yet for years the Egyptian military primarily used the cash to purchase high-priced toys useful for fighting non-existent wars rather than combatting rising terrorism. Elliott Abrams, who served in both the Reagan and first Bush administrations, cited Cairo’s purchase of fighter planes while refusing to contribute to the battle against the Islamic State in Iraq.

Two years ago the Government Accountability Office found that the State Department had “not evaluated the results of billions of dollars in security assistance to Egypt.” Explained the agency: “the absence of an evaluation of security assistance to Egypt raises questions about how this program—supported by \$1.3 billion in U.S. funding annually—is contributing to meeting strategic objectives and what levels of funding are needed for success.”

We do know that Washington’s generosity provides no leverage. Tom Malinowski, assistant secretary of state for human rights in the Obama administration, testified in April: “My job was talking to authoritarian governments around the world. And I have to say the meetings with the government of Egypt were among the least productive and most unpleasant in my time at the State Department.” Malinowski added that “It’s just angry, rude denials of all problems and how dare you, U.S. government official, raise these things with us and where’s our money.”

But in August the State Department shocked officials and observers in both Cairo and Washington by canceling roughly \$96 million in aid and suspending another \$195 million. In practice it is just a wrist slap: Cairo will collect the other \$1.3 billion due from the U.S. and both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will help keep the al-Sisi regime afloat.

Nevertheless, human rights have reentered discussions between the two governments. A State Department official told the *Washington Post* that “We wanted to send the message we’re not happy at the lack of progress in human rights and the NGO law.” Some observers also suspect that Washington targeted the Egyptian government for its relationship with North Korea, which goes back more than a half century. DPRK front companies and shipping agents are believed to use Port Said for weapons sales throughout Africa and the Middle East. Washington previously raised the issue without result.

Egypt's Foreign Ministry complained that the al-Sisi government "sees this measure as reflecting poor judgment of the strategic relationship that ties the two countries over long decades and as adopting a view that lacks an accurate understanding of the importance of supporting Egypt's stability." The result may be "negative consequences for achieving joint Egypt-U.S. interests." However, al-Sisi still met with a visiting delegation headed by Trump-son-in-law Jared Kushner as planned and expressed his "keenness to continue to work on strengthening the multifaceted relations that bind the two countries" and take steps "to further enhance Egyptian-American relations."

Washington cannot remake the world, but its actions should be constrained by moral considerations. At minimum, the U.S. should refuse to underwrite abusive regimes absent compelling justification. None is present in Egypt today. Cairo need not be bribed to eschew war with Israel. Terrorism is a growing problem, but U.S. money and weapons aren't the solution.

Worse, the regime is at war with the nation it governs. President al-Sisi has forced dissent underground and left violence as the only opposition avenue available. Today the U.S. is identified with a brutal regime which kills lawlessly, jails promiscuously, censors relentlessly, and enriches shamelessly.

The dictator's responsibility is clear. Noted Dunne: "When al-Sisi took control in 2013, Egypt did not have a virulent insurgency, thousands dead in extrajudicial killings, tens of thousands of political prisoners, hundreds of enforced disappearances, hundreds killed in terrorist attacks annually including the recent suicide bombings targeting Christians, and a desperate economic situation. Egypt has all of those problems now, along with the strong social polarization and susceptibility to radicalization that result."

If al-Sisi, like a modern pharaoh, can survive such a record, even slashing U.S. subsidies won't end his regime or its abuses. But Washington should take the side of Egypt's people rather than their rulers. In the long-term that might help promote stability as well as democracy.

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