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Egypt's Sisi Heads for Second White House Visit Under Shadow of Helicopter Attack

The leaders are likely to express mutual admiration for each other again, but Cairo's rights record is threatening an Apache deal

By Hamza Hendawi

Returning to the White House for his second visit since 2017, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi can possibly count on more public expressions of praise from his American host, something that could only benefit the Arab nation's general-turned-president at this point in time.

Tuesday's meeting between Mr El Sisi and his American counterpart Donald Trump would be their sixth since their first face-to-face encounter on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meetings in September 2016, when Mr Trump was the Republican presidential nominee.

The two leaders have since repeatedly expressed mutual admiration for each other's leadership.

Last year, for example, Mr Trump lauded the Egyptian leader for doing "a fantastic job" and said the United States was "very much behind" him. Egypt's pro-government media speaks of Trump as a strong leader who treats Egypt with respect and appreciates Mr El Sisi's leadership.

This mutual admiration sharply contrasts with Mr El Sisi's cool relations with Mr Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, who never invited the Egyptian leader to the White House and whose administration repeatedly admonished Cairo over its human rights record. The Egyptian media responded at the time by accusing the Obama administration of supporting the now-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and of working to destabilise Egypt.

As defence minister, Mr El Sisi led the military's ouster in 2013 of the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi amid mass protests against the rule of the Islamist leader.

Mr El Sisi may find a different Washington this time around.

Democrats have replaced the Republicans as the majority in the House of Representatives and Mr Trump is politically stronger after Special Counsel Robert Mueller found no evidence that Trump's campaign "conspired or coordinated" with Russia to influence the 2016 presidential election.

"It is in this context that President Sisi's visit to Washington presents a window to start a new effort to build bridges of dialogue with the Democratic Party," wrote political analyst Mohammed Kamal in the Cairo daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. "He should not exclusively focus on developing relations with the Republicans and the White House."

It won't be easy.

Senator Patrick Leahy, the ranking democrat on the Senate's powerful Appropriations Committee, is trying to persuade the US government not to go ahead with a \$1 billion deal to sell Egypt 10 Apache helicopter gunships until Cairo reimburses the full medical expenses incurred by an American woman who survived with severe injuries an attack by the Egyptian military in 2015 that killed 12, including her Mexican boyfriend.

Egypt says it mistook the group for militants when its Apache helicopters fired on them in the desert west of Cairo. It has offered the woman, April Corley, \$150,000 in compensation. She is demanding around \$15 million and wants a law enacted that would allow US citizens to sue the Egyptian government if they are injured in violent crimes while in Egypt.

Mohammed Al-Menshawi, a Washington-based political analyst from Egypt, counselled Mr El Sisi on how to head off criticism over the issue while in the United States.

"A meeting between the Egyptian President and Miss April will be a step outside the box of traditional thinking and will abort any effort to embarrass him while in Washington," he wrote in a column published in Cairo's independent *Al Shorouk* daily.

The case of Miss Corley would not be the only likely source of criticism while the Egyptian leader is in Washington, which he leaves on Wednesday.

Democrats in Congress also are likely during Mr El Sisi's visit to air their skepticism over a package of constitutional amendments that rights groups are warning amount to a slide back to authoritarian rule. The government says they are needed to reform the country's political system.

With their adoption by parliament and a referendum expected later this month or early May not in doubt, the changes allow Mr El Sisi to potentially stay in office until 2034, grant him more control over the judiciary and give the military a supreme political role as protector and guarantor of the state.

Parliament has yet to adopt the changes in a plenary, but government supporters already have flooded Cairo with banners and giant billboard advertisements appealing to voters to say "yes."

"Do the right thing," many of them say.

Two Egyptian film stars who briefed a Congressman in Washington on Egypt's rights record and the "danger" of the constitutional amendments have been thrown out of the actors' guild and accused of treason.