

# SLATE

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## Trump Is Helping to Bring About an Egyptian Dictatorship

By Joshua Keating

Benjamin Netanyahu isn't the only Middle Eastern leader to visit Washington this spring in search of a Trump endorsement. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi stopped by the White House on Tuesday for a conversation and all-important photo-op with the U.S. president who has praised him in the past as a "fantastic guy." Trump kept the compliments going Tuesday, saying Sisi is "doing a great job" and "We have never had a better relationship between Egypt and United States than we do right now."

The press availability for the two men in the Oval Office was overshadowed a bit, as everything now seems to be, by Trump's riffing about border security and accusing Barack Obama of creating the child separation policy, but Sisi still got what he needed. The meeting and warm welcome were a strong message to Egyptians back home—both ordinary citizens and the military commanders who will actually determine whether Sisi gets to keep power—that Egypt's most important ally is fully behind him.

Sisi needs that message to be loud and clear as he pushes through a controversial set of constitutional amendments to consolidate his own power. These include measures to give the president more control over the military and judiciary as well as changes that would extend the presidential term from four to six years and allow Sisi to run for two more terms, meaning he could be in power until 2034, when he is nearly 80 years old. The effective elimination of presidential term limits for Sisi would mark the end of one of the last tangible legal changes still on books from the 2011 revolution that overthrew longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak. It's as clear a sign as any that Sisi intends to follow in Mubarak's footsteps, although perhaps with an even greater degree of repression.

That's all fine with Trump and his team, who believe that Obama foolishly abandoned Mubarak and that a strong, autocratic (and, crucially, pro-Israeli) Egyptian government is a boon to regional stability. The Egyptian-brokered cease-fire between Hamas and Israel last month bolstered this view. Sure, all this praise for a dictator is a little hard to square with the Trump team's talk of democracy and human rights in Iran and Venezuela, but this is not a group that's

been overly concerned with charges of inconsistency. Sisi's government, though, has been making itself very hard to defend.

Many of Sisi's backers portray him as a defender of secular, modern values against Islamist extremism. Trump praised the Egyptian leader for "moving his country to a more inclusive future" after the opening of the largest cathedral in the Middle East in Cairo in January, and his daughter and adviser Ivanka also commended Egypt for "major reforms aimed at empowering Egyptian women." But the showpiece cathedral aside, discrimination against Christians and other religious minorities remains rampant. Women who have reported sexual harassment have been arrested and prosecuted. Men arrested for homosexuality are subjected to brutal and humiliating anal exams.

The notion that Egypt is a steadfast ally in the fight against terrorism is complicated by a recent report from Human Rights First documenting the scale of radicalization and ISIS recruitment in Egypt's prisons. "It's like a fire in a forest," said one former prisoner quoted in the report. "When you start off with a cell of 200 people, you could have by the end of a year at least 100 of them radicalized. It was happening everywhere I was detained." The movement that became al-Qaida was born, to a large extent, in Egypt's brutal prisons, but yet another generation of U.S. policymakers is looking on approvingly as Egypt tries to detain and torture radicalism into submission.

This supposedly pro-American government is currently detaining around 20 U.S. citizens, many on farcical charges. Vice President Mike Pence, in fairness, has raised their cases in talks with Sisi, but there's been nowhere near the level of pressure that was applied to release U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson from Turkey.

Undercutting the notion that the country that receives more than \$1 billion in U.S. military aid every year is a reliable security partner, U.S. human rights groups have been highlighting a 2015 incident in which Egyptian military Boeing Apache helicopters, provided by the United States, fired on a group of tourists in Sinai, killing eight. April Corley, an American survivor of the attack—her Mexican boyfriend was killed—addressed a briefing on Capitol Hill on Tuesday morning, saying, "It's shocking to me that the U.S. is about to sell another 10 Apaches to Egypt, the very same weapon that attacked our tour group that day. My hope is that President Trump won't sell new Apaches until Egypt takes responsibility for what it did."

U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy has frozen this sale until the Egyptian government agrees to pay Corley's medical bill.

Leahy was among several members of Congress, all Democrats, who spoke at Tuesday morning's briefing, sponsored by the Project on Middle East Democracy and a number of other organizations. "An American government committed to human rights would not be welcoming to the White House, an Egyptian general right at the moment when he is about to become a dictator," said newly elected Rep. Tom Malinowski of New Jersey, who was previously the Washington director at Human Rights Watch.\*

Additionally, a bipartisan group of senators released a letter this week calling on Trump to raise concerns about Egypt's detention of Americans, arms purchases from Russia, and overall deterioration of human rights during his conversations with Sisi.

It's not entirely absurd that something like this could happen. The Trump administration actually did suspend military aid to Egypt for a brief period in 2017 due to unspecified human rights concerns. Aid was restored last year despite no visible improvements in conditions.

For now, Trump seems to be doing his part to make Egypt's dictatorship permanent.