

Press Releases: Press Availability With Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry

Press Availability
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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FOREIGN MINISTER SHOUKRY: (In Arabic.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I'm delighted to be in Cairo, my first trip to Egypt as Secretary of State, and to really have very comprehensive discussions about this almost one-half-century relationship between the U.S. and Egypt and our commitment to strengthening this partnership in the years to come. I'm also very pleased to be with Foreign Minister Shoukry, who has become a friend as we have engaged on a number of challenges in the region and to address those jointly and with a great deal of agreement between us as to how those issues need to be addressed. I look forward to my meeting with

President al-Sisi and appreciate his receiving me as well.

We had a very productive discussion on our shared regional and security concerns. We spoke about opportunities as to how to strengthen our ties and, as the foreign minister indicated, mechanisms by which we can deepen those ties and further explore areas for mutual cooperation, first through the strategic dialogue which we've agreed we will have later this year, and then we're going to explore also the possibility of a 2+2 dialogue to even allow us to further enhance these conversations both on a full range of issues of not just security concerns, but political and economic opportunities as well.

I did express to the foreign minister our condolences to the people of Egypt for the violence that they have been suffering from the terrorist attacks perpetrated by ISIS and other terrorist groups. Egypt's been battling this level of extremism for many years, and we continue to be steadfast partners in their response to these attacks throughout this time.

We agreed that we would continue our close cooperation on counterterrorism measures, including our joint commitment to the defeat of ISIS, and Egypt has been a very important member of the Defeat-ISIS Coalition from the beginning. They – Egypt deals with the threats of ISIS themselves and are dealing with it certainly currently in the Sinai.

We also discussed the importance of the protection and promotion of human rights and the vital role of civil society in Egypt. With the presidential elections planned for the end of March, the United States, as it does in all countries, supports a transparent and credible electoral process, and all citizens being given the right and the opportunity to participate freely and fairly.

On Libya, the United States and Egypt support the UN's Action Plan for Libya for credible and peaceful elections in their country. This will promote stability – much-needed stability for Libya and their economy to prosper. As the Security Council affirmed on December the 14th, the Libyan Political Agreement in our view must remain the framework for a political solution throughout Libya's transitional period.

Foreign Minister Shoukry and I also discussed Syria and how we can work together to reinforce the UN-led Geneva political process, which is the only political framework through which this conflict can be resolved. And Egypt has played a very important role in supporting dialogue between opposition representatives and the central government in Damascus.

On the Middle East peace, I reiterated that the Trump administration remains committed to achieving a lasting peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Now, the foreign minister and I also discussed how we can intensify our countries' economic engagement and support our private sectors to generate jobs and prosperity for both of our people, and I acknowledged and welcomed the very important – although we know difficult – steps towards reform that President Sisi has undertaken in order to create a very strong foundation for

future prosperity and economic performance in Egypt, and those have been necessary, although difficult, to be fully – receive the full support of the IMF, and Egypt has met all of those requirements.

We'll do what we can to continue to encourage the economic recovery and we hope that American companies are able to increase their investments in Egypt that will create jobs and opportunities here as well.

The United States, again, commits itself to standing with Egypt, standing shoulder to shoulder in these – in the fight against terrorism, but also standing together to create a more stable region for everyone as well, and I thank the foreign minister for our opportunity to meet and exchange on so many important issues. Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER SHOUKRY: Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: (In Arabic.)

QUESTION: (In Arabic.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think the commitment the U.S. has to Egypt's security in the fight against terrorism should be evident, and both with the release of about a billion dollars of foreign military financing assistance to Egypt to continue to strengthen its capabilities, and also sharing of other approaches to countering terrorism, some of which we can talk about, some of which we can't so easily talk about. But our joint commitment to defeat ISIS is steadfast and there has been no gap between Egypt and the United States in our joint efforts to confront terrorists and extremist – extremism in the region, but most specifically here in Egypt as well.

So I think the Egyptian people should be confident that the U.S. commitment to continuing to support Egypt in this fight against terrorism, in bringing security for the Egyptian people is steadfast, and that will continue, and we had a great deal of exchange today about how we can advance that. And we just mentioned the intent to have a strategic dialogue later this year. All of these are opportunities for us to identify other ways that we can strengthen and support Egypt's fight against terrorism, but also, ultimately, to strengthen the economic development of Egypt as well.

MODERATOR: (In Arabic.) Carol, *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mr. Secretary, given the concerns (inaudible) to run against the president (inaudible) election and who were arrested and disqualified, how (inaudible) do you believe those elections will be? And will the United States consider withholding more military aid from Egypt (inaudible)?

And Mr. Foreign Minister, sir, human rights groups have called this the most repressive era in modern Egyptian history. What did Secretary Tillerson tell you about democracy and civil liberty here in Egypt? And will anything change here in Egypt after your meeting today? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think as I indicated in my prepared remarks, and

I would answer the same: We have always advocated for free and fair elections, transparent elections, not just for Egypt but in any country. And so the U.S. is always going to advocate for an electoral process that respects the rights of its citizens to make the choices the citizens want to make and the full participation of citizens in those elections. And nothing has changed about our advocacy for those types of elections.

FOREIGN MINISTER SHOUKRY: As relates to some of the comments that have been made by certain members of the human rights community and other activists, I would only recommend that you ascertain for yourself the nature and the current situation in Egypt as relates to human rights, and how the Egyptian people view this administration and its efforts to strengthen and protect human rights, and whether there is that sense of restriction that you alluded to. I think it is – it isn't helpful that a certain group projects from a perspective of lack of information, lack of direct association to a society, but it is much, much more important the general conditions, the freedom of press that is available, the variety of television shows, the dialogue and the exchange. Development in the social and political field is an evolutionary process. I think over the last 11 years, the Egyptian people have shown their commitment and their determination and their ability to change their course and to indicate their dissatisfaction. If they deemed that they were dissatisfied, they have been able to change two governments in the last seven years, and they have undertaken legislative elections and know how to protect their rights and to advocate for those rights.

So it's important that I think we recognize that it is the Egyptian people who should determine how they are applying their freedoms and their political activism, and I hope that you will have the opportunity while you're here in Egypt to discuss this with the Egyptians on the street and ascertain from them directly whether they are satisfied with current conditions.

We had a discussion with the Secretary related to Egypt's efforts to develop both politically, economically, and socially, and that we continue to do so out of our desire to see Egypt evolve into a place of – that can fulfill the aspirations of its people, and we will continue to rely on the support that we can depend on from the United States in this regard. These are commitments that this administration is confident it will fulfill, and it is responsible to the Egyptian people to continue to fulfill those commitments, as has been stipulated in our constitution.

MODERATOR: (In Arabic.)

QUESTION: (In Arabic.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think it's important to note that in the announcement President Trump made regarding Jerusalem he also made two very important points as well, one of which was he was not advocating for any change to the status quo as to oversight of the holy sites, recognizing the proper role of existing authorities; and the second is that the final boundaries of Jerusalem are yet to be determined, and that those will be decided among the parties. And those – I think it's oftentimes those two important points seem to have been overlooked in his announcement. And yes,

the U.S. is still committed to the peace process and still believes we have an important role to play in bringing the parties together and seeing a resolution to this. And President Trump is committed to that.

FOREIGN MINISTER SHOUKRY: (In Arabic.)

MODERATOR: (In Arabic.) *Wall Street Journal*, Felicia.

QUESTION: Thank you. Secretary Tillerson, Vice President Pence, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, endorsed what you've described publicly as talks about talks with the North Koreans, and president – South Korea's President Moon said he would go to Pyongyang. Is this the start of a diplomatic process in North Korea?

And then for Foreign Minister Shoukry, the U.S. has in the past raised concerns about Egypt's ties with North Korea. What is Egypt doing to cut those ties?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I'm not sure I could hear the last part of your question.

QUESTION: I was just asking if this – is this the start of a diplomatic process with North Korea?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, as to – as to the Vice President's comments about potentially having talks and whether it's the start of a diplomatic process, I think it's too early to judge. As we've said for some time, it's really up to the North Koreans to decide when they're ready to engage with us in a sincere way, a meaningful way. They know what has to be on the table for conversations. We've said for some time that I think it's important that we have – we're going to need to have some discussions that precede any form of negotiation to determine whether the parties are, in fact, ready to engage in something this meaningful, in order for us to then put together the construct of a negotiation. So we'll just have to wait and see.

FOREIGN MINISTER SHOUKRY: We did discuss with Secretary Tillerson the issues related to North Korea, the Korean Peninsula, and the security of that region. Egypt has had normal diplomatic ties with North Korea, as does many Western and NATO members, and those ties are, in terms of the relationship, limited to representation, and there is almost no existing economic or other areas of cooperation. But we are concerned with the current status with the threats emanating from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, a situation which we deem as threatening to the global nonproliferation regime, one that has to be dealt within our maintaining global security, also the threats of ballistic missile systems to South Korea and to Japan, and we believe that all of these issues must be resolved for the security of the region and the Korean Peninsula. And we will continue to discuss these issues and to take the appropriate measures to deal with these challenges.

Thank you very much.

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