

US lawmakers move to block Trump's efforts to cut aid for Tunisia

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Lawmakers in Washington have moved to reverse plans by US President Donald Trump's administration to slash aid for Tunisia.

Trump's budget proposal for 2018 includes a drastic reduction of funds for the US State Department, in part to pay for a planned increase in defence spending. Foreign aid is to be slimmed down considerably across the board, with Tunisia scheduled to receive \$55 million in 2018, after getting about \$140 million in the current fiscal year.

However, the US House of Representatives' Appropriations Committee on July 12 released a bill that seeks cuts in foreign aid that are less severe than those planned by the administration. Under the bill, Tunisia would receive "no less"

than \$165.4 million.

Overall, the House is proposing to cut US foreign aid by \$10 billion, less than the \$17 billion sought by the administration, with military assistance remaining at high levels. "The bill continues strong support for Foreign Military Financing programmes for Ukraine, Georgia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia – at or above current levels," the committee said in a statement. The bill upholds loan guarantees for Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Ukraine.

The bill was released as senior members of Congress vowed to prevent deep reductions in aid. "I can assure you that the Congress of the United States, both Republican and Democrat, will not allow those cuts to take place," US Senator John McCain said July 11 during a Heritage Foundation panel discussion that included Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed.

Separately, Ed Royce, another Republican and chairman of the

House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement after meeting with Chahed that Tunisia was facing the challenge of Islamist extremists who had fought in Libya and Syria and were returning to their home countries.

"It is in the [United States'] national security interests to continue helping Tunisia combat these returning terrorists by maintaining foreign assistance levels," Royce's statement said. An estimated 6,000 Tunisians have joined the Islamic State (ISIS), making the North African country the single biggest source of foreign ISIS fighters.

Chahed told the Heritage Foundation panel that Tunisia needed continued support by Washington to ensure economic growth and to be equipped for the fight against radical groups. "Any discontinuation will send the wrong message to those terrorist groups," he said.

Tunisia has received more than \$865 million in US aid since 2011, the US Embassy in Tunis said. Washington has given economic support, human rights assistance and help in counterterrorism efforts.

Gordon Brown, a former State Department official familiar with Tunisia, said while US aid was not an economic necessity for Tunisia, it constituted a "very important symbolic figure." American loan guarantees and other steps are significant because they signal that Washington has confidence in Tunisia, Brown said.

"The cuts would be seen as a lack of confidence and a slap in the face of moderates in the Middle East," he said.

McCain argued it would be short-sighted to slash support for Tunisia and similar countries because that could destabilise governments and result in foreign policy and security problems for the United States. "Haven't we learned the lesson of Libya?" he asked.

Tunisia's eastern neighbour descended into anarchy after the



Strong commitment. US Defence Secretary James Mattis (L) welcomes Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed at the Pentagon, on July 10.

(AP)

overthrow of strongman Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. Tunisia, on the other hand, has been hailed as a success story because, despite setbacks, the country has built democratic institutions since long-time ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was ousted in the same year. "Tunisia is struggling but winning," McCain said.

Critics said Trump's proposed budget cuts do not fit the president's overall aim of cementing the United States' role as the leading power in the Middle East.

"If the United States wants to lead, we cannot do that by withdrawing," said Hady Amr, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington and a former US government official dealing with aid for the Middle East under Trump's predecessor Barack Obama. "The Trump administration should absolutely be doing everything they can to stabilise the economy of Tunisia."

Even key members of Trump's cabinet appear reluctant to promote foreign aid cuts. In his meeting with Chahed, US Defence Secretary James Mattis "affirmed the strong US commitment for continued support to Tunisia," Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White said.

Fighting and conflicting messages have hounded the Trump administration since it took office in January. "They seem to be a bit unprepared and there appears to be little coordination between the White House and various departments," Amr said. As a result, "the Trump administration has been less cohesive in its messaging than other administrations".

McCain was adamant that the White House would not be able to ram its planned cuts through Congress. "I'm telling you: That will not happen, that will not happen, that will not happen," he said.

Congressional leaders voice support for Tunisia

Mark Habeeb

Washington

Democrats and Republicans in the US Congress do not agree on much but the Republican chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa and her Democratic counterpart both expressed dismay at the Trump administration's proposed cuts to US foreign aid to Tunisia.

US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican from Florida, said at a hearing July 13 that

she was "disappointed" by the proposed cuts to Tunisia, calling the country "one of the very few positive developments in the Middle East in recent years."

"This is not the time to cut and run. It is time to double down on Tunisia," said Ros-Lehtinen, the subcommittee chairwoman, adding that "Tunisia's security and stability are vital" to the United States.

Representative Ted Deutch, the ranking Democrat on the subcommittee and who also represents parts of Florida, agreed with Ros-Lehtinen. "I can't understand why we would pull critical security assistance from countries that are desperately in need of it, like Tunisia," he said.

Trump's attitude at G20 symbolises US disengagement

Viewpoint



Francis Ghilès

Never have the influence of nationalist White House advisers, such as chief strategist Steve Bannon and senior policy adviser Stephen Miller, and the effects of US President Donald Trump's gut instincts been on clearer display than it was during the G20 summit in Germany.

The inability of national security adviser H.R. McMaster, chief economic adviser Gary Cohn, Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to hold the president to America's traditional alliances was there for all to see.

The Wall Street Journal noted that Trump had "shocked Washington," suggesting that he had "finally offered the core of what could become a governing philosophy," one that celebrated tight border controls and strong national and cultural identity and a "determined and affirmative defence of the Western tradition."

Beyond pointing out Trump's erratic behaviour, many observers failed to acknowledge that the United States has been pulling in its horns for some time now.

Only time will tell whether Trump's belief that the United

States should go it alone will make the country stronger or render it weaker, more isolated and less capable of dealing with international challenges.

In the meantime, Russian President Vladimir Putin can only delight at a US president who openly scorns traditional US allies in Europe, diminishes the power of the country that has been the anchor of the international system since 1945 and flip-flops on key issues. He can only delight at the friction between Trump and America's European allies on trade, the European Union, NATO and climate change.

Many in the US Congress had been nervous that Trump would adopt a softer stance on Russia because of his reluctance during last year's presidential campaign to criticise Putin. Although he called upon Russia to halt its "destabilising activities" in Ukraine and sent Tillerson to Kiev to reassure the Ukrainians that they could count on continued US support the day after the G20 meetings, that was one of the rare occasions that he has said anything negative about Russia.

Standing next to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Tillerson made a series of very tough statements, blaming Russia for stonewalling efforts to bring peace to east Ukraine, where more than 10,000 people have died as government forces continue three years on to battle Russia-backed separatists. The question is whether his words carry any weight.

Putin was happy to have "established a personal rapport" with Trump, who said he had agreed to work with Russia to create a cyber-security unit. This announcement provoked a fierce backlash on Capitol Hill.

Senior Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, from South Carolina, described the Putin meeting as "disastrous" and said Trump was hurting his presidency by not "embracing the fact that Putin is a bad guy." Marco Rubio, a Republican senator from Florida, called the mooted agreement "akin to partnering with [Syrian President Bashar] Assad on a chemical weapons unit," a reference to the gas attack that the Syrian regime conducted in March. Influential US Senator John McCain, an Arizona Republican, said Putin could be of enormous assistance "since he is doing the hacking."

Trump, just hours before meeting with Putin, cast doubts on the US intelligence community's judgment on Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US elections. As a former KGB officer, Putin was trained to make people feel good and coerce them into his way of thinking. Trump, helped by his narcissism, was a walkover.

This was the second summit Trump has attended and it is clear that his actions will match his words. The United States is isolated on climate change and how to deal with its long-term threat. He has forced the G20 to back away from its long-standing commitment to reject protection-

Disengagement started after 9/11. Trump's belittling of the G20 symbolises this disengagement.

ism and to remain mute on international migration when refugee issues are more intractable than at any time since the years immediately after the second world war.

The president's pre-summit speech in Poland played well to his domestic conservative audience. It delighted the conservative Polish government but, by encouraging division in Europe, it hardly played well with German Chancellor Angela Merkel who was forced to acknowledge that the G20 summit had achieved nothing. Trump's emphasis in Warsaw that the primary question of our time is the will of the West to survive hardly plays well in China, India or the Arab world but this Manichean rhetoric suits Putin well.

The "axis of evil" conjured by former US President George W. Bush after 9/11 played straight into the hands of al-Qaeda and Iran. More and more European leaders wonder what is left of half a century of American leadership as they come to realise that Trump's behaviour, as erratic as it may be, mirrors what many Americans believe.

Disengagement started after 9/11. Trump's belittling of the G20 symbolises this disengagement, albeit with flip-flops his two immediate predecessors would have considered ill-judged. The world has a bumpy ride ahead.

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