

Egypt: Morsi's Death Sentence. What was the Role of the US?

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Agence France-Presse whitewashes the US's role in supporting the coup that led to Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi's overthrow and, ultimately, to his recent death sentencing. The news agency informs that the Obama administration expressed "alarm" upon the news that Morsi was condemned to die. It quotes a State Department spokesman criticizing the decision as "not in line with Egypt's obligations under international law". Then there is this:

Ties between Washington and Cairo plummeted after Morsi's ouster, with President Barack Obama's administration freezing annual military aid of \$1.3 billion to Cairo. Most of the aid was unblocked in late 2014.

Which is fiction.

Ties between Washington and Cairo did *not* "plummet" after Morsi's ouster.

The Obama administration did *not* freeze the \$1.3 billion in annual military aid.

I discuss what *really* happened in my forthcoming book *Obstacle to Peace: The US Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Here is the relevant excerpt, with endnotes (read the notes!):

Championing the Status Quo

Obama put forth his best effort at managing perceptions in his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2011. His main theme was the US's support for democracy in the Arab world. As examples, he cited the US's illegal use of force to overthrow the Gaddafi regime in Libya and its support for armed rebels seeking to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria.

Then there was Egypt, where the world had witnessed "the moral face of non-violence" and "knew that change had come". He didn't mention how the Egyptian revolution had forced the US to abandon its three-decades-old policy of supporting the Mubarak dictatorship, or how the policy of supporting the Egyptian military establishment continued unabated.[i]

Indeed, the Obama administration subsequently supported a military coup d'état that overthrew President Mohamed Morsi, who was democratically elected into office in June 2012. Following the overthrow of Morsi on July 3, 2013, despite US law requiring that aid be cut off to any government that takes power through a coup, the Obama administration illegally continued \$1.5 billion in annual aid, mostly for the military.[ii] The Egyptian military proceeded to crack down violently on demonstrators protesting the coup, resulting in a massacre of more than sixty people on July 8.[iii]

On July 25, the White House announced its official determination that the aid would continue. “Among the potential dangers” that government officials perceived with any cut-off of military aid, the New York Times explained, was “a reduction in the ability of the Egyptian military to halt smuggling of weapons to Hamas, which could use them against Israel. The aid program is also a pillar of the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, and Israeli officials have urged the United States not to suspend it.”[iv]

Two days later, the military massacred over seventy demonstrators in Cairo, bringing the total killed since Morsi’s ouster to over 200.[v] Next, the generals threatened to quash sit-in protests taking place in several squares in the city, deemed hotbeds of “terrorism”. [vi] With another massacre looming, the New York Times expressed its support for the US government’s policy, weighing in that “American military aid to Egypt should not be cut off”. [vii] Defending US policy, Secretary of State John Kerry (who replaced Clinton in February 2013) announced that the Egyptian military was busy “restoring democracy”. [viii] The predictable consequence was a third massacre, beginning on August 15 and continuing for several days. As the death toll passed 1,000, the New York Times described it as “a ferocious assault” and “the worst bloodletting in modern Egyptian history.”

The Times astutely noted how “The generals in Cairo felt free to ignore” calls from US officials for the release of political prisoners and diplomatic engagement with the opposition “in a cold-eyed calculation that they would not pay a significant cost—a conclusion bolstered when President Obama responded by canceling a joint military exercise but not \$1.5 billion in annual aid.” [ix] The response to the massacre from the Obama administration was to make clear once more that Egyptian military aid would not be suspended as required by US law, prompting the ruling junta to extend its crackdown to include rounding up “dissenters” like political activists and journalists—“a chilling warning”, noted the Times, “that no Egyptians should feel safe if they dare to challenge authority.” [x]

The massacre finally prompted the Times to call for “immediately suspending military aid and canceling joint military exercises”—a welcome reversal, but too late for the editors to wash the blood from their own hands. [xi] Under growing criticism for its complicity in the generals’ oppression and killing, the Obama administration announced the following month that it would temporarily withhold \$260 million in non-military economic assistance, as well as freeze delivery of military hardware, including Apache helicopters, missiles, tank parts, and F-16 fighter jets—a clear green light for the generals signaling that, while they ought to avoid any further mass murders, the US would continue to provide \$1.3 billion in financing for them to carry on with “restoring democracy”. [xii]

Haaretz relayed the Israeli government’s fear that a cutoff of military aid could affect the 1979 peace treaty, which had “brought Cairo into Washington’s sphere of influence.” Israel had been making the case to the White House “that punishing Egypt for the latest violence between the government and protesters was secondary to preserving the peace deal. ‘As long as the American aid flows to Cairo, the Egyptian regime can ward off criticism against preserving the peace treaty with Israel,’ Israeli officials told their US counterparts.” [xiii] That is to say, as long as the American aid continued to flow to the generals, they could continue to suppress the Egyptian people, whose popular will posed a threat to the status quo. If the people managed to establish an Egyptian government that actually respected public opinion, it might, for example, cease its complicity with Israel in collectively punishing the civilian population of Gaza by permanently and completely open the Rafah border crossing.

Notes:

[i] The White House, "[Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly](#)," September 21, 2011.

[ii] Public Law 112-74, 112th Congress, [Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012](#), Sec. 7008. The law forbids financial assistance "to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d'état or decree". Aid may only be resumed "if the President determines and certifies to the Committees on Appropriations that subsequent to the termination of assistance a democratically elected government has taken office...."

[iii] Kareem Fahim and Mayy El Sheikh, "[Crackdown in Egypt Kills Islamists as They Protest](#)," July 27, 2013.

[iv] Mark Landler, "[Aid to Egypt Can Keep Flowing, Despite Overthrow, White House Decides](#)," *New York Times*, July 25, 2013. Note that the *Times* accepts unquestioningly the false assumption that since the White House said it was okay, therefore the continuation of aid did not violate US law. For further discussion, see: Jeremy R. Hammond, "[Executive Branch: U.S. Law Does Not Require Executive Branch to Execute or Obey U.S. Law](#)," *JeremyRHammond.com*, August 6, 2013.

[v] Fahim and El Sheikh, "Crackdown in Egypt." "[Egypt: Many Protesters Shot in Head or Chest](#)," *Human Rights Watch*, July 28, 2013.

[vi] Kareem Fahim and Rick Gladstone, "[Egypt Vows to End Sit-Ins by Supporters of Deposed President](#)," *New York Times*, July 31, 2013.

[vii] "[Egypt's Dangerous Slide](#)," *New York Times*, July 30, 2013.

[viii] US Department of State, [Secretary of State John Kerry Interview with Hamid Mir of Geo TV](#), August 1, 2013.

[ix] Alastair Beach, "[Egypt's day of shame: Scores killed and hundreds more injured as government declares war on Islamists](#)," *The Independent*, August 15, 2013. David D. Kirkpatrick, Peter Baker, and Michael R. Gordon, "[How American Hopes for a Deal in Egypt Were Undercut](#)," *New York Times*, August 17, 2013.

[x] Kirkpatrick, et al, "How American Hopes." "[Who Will Be Left in Egypt?](#)" *New York Times*, September 12, 2013. The administration took preliminary steps to withhold some economic assistance to Egypt, but not military aid. The White House had requested \$1.55 billion in aid for Egypt for 2014, \$1.3 billion of which was military, all but \$585 million of which had already been deposited in Egypt's account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. See: Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, "[Leaving Military Aid Intact, U.S. Takes Steps to Halt Economic Help to Egypt](#)," *New York Times*, August 18, 2013.

[xi] "[Military Madness in Cairo](#)," *New York Times*, August 14, 2013.

[xii] Michael R. Gordon and Mark Landler, "[In Crackdown Response, U.S. Temporarily Freezes Some Military Aid to Egypt](#)," *New York Times*, October 9, 2013. The *Times* noted that the \$260 million was for "the general Egyptian budget", meaning non-military aid. The *Times* didn't clarify this explicitly for readers, but hinted at it further down the page; e.g., "But in a sign of how the administration is balancing its interests, senior officials said the United States would continue aid for counterterrorism programs.... American officials have long doubted that cutting back military aid would have any

effect on the behavior of Egypt's military-backed government." Etc. See also: Shanker, "Leaving Military Aid Intact."

[xiii] Jonathan Lis, "[Washington cuts Egypt aid despite intense Israeli lobbying](#)," *Haaretz*, October 10, 2013.

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