



Egypt Murders Its Citizens With Little Complaint From Washington

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A celebrated ancient empire, Egypt was later ruled by other empires old and new. In 1952 the country went from monarchy to military rule. Until the 2011 Arab Spring explosion, which topped the Mubarak dictatorship, the armed forces kept control through military men turned civilian politicians. Two years later Egypt returned to military tyranny.

In 1972 President Mohammed Anwar al-Sadat flipped the country from Soviet client to American friend and soon made peace with Israel. Washington ignored his domestic repression and rewarded him with generous aid payments. The cash continued to flow to Sadat's successor, air chief marshal turned President Muhammad Hosni al-Sayed Mubarak. He jailed opponents ranging from Islamic extremists to liberal democrats, with little more than formalistic criticisms from Washington.

Mubarak eventually attempted to turn a military dictatorship into a family business, preparing his son as heir. When popular protests broke out in 2011, the generals conveniently decided that they could no longer oppose the people, forcing his resignation. An election was held the following year, inconveniently placing Mohamed Morsi Eissa al-Ayyat, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in office.

Although no dictator – he did not control the military, police, or government bureaucracy, which collectively thwarted his policies – he lost public support by failing to form a broad administration open to all. Moreover, his election was viewed as a dire threat by the leading Persian Gulf dictatorships, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. The two absolute monarchies financed a coup by former general and defense minister Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil al-Sisi in 2013.

The Obama administration refused to call his coup a coup even though he arrested the president, ruling party members, and journalists, suspended the constitution, and crushed popular demonstrations. Proving to be as ruthless as Deng Xiaoping in suppressing the Tiananmen Square and related protests in 1989, al-Sisi killed hundreds of protesters staging peaceful sit-ins in Cairo's al-Nahda and Rabaa al-Adawiya Squares. Also targeted by military snipers were journalists recording the murderous crackdown.

HRW's description of the ruthless operation is harrowing: "Human Rights Watch researchers documented the dispersal of the Rabaa sit-in and found that security forces opened

fire on protesters using live ammunition, with hundreds killed by bullets to their heads, necks, and chests. Human Rights Watch also found that security forces used lethal force indiscriminately, with snipers and gunmen inside and alongside APCs firing their weaponry on large crowds of protesters. Dozens of witnesses also said they saw snipers fire from helicopters over Rabaa Square."

President Barack Obama withheld some aid funds out of embarrassment over the slaughter, but President Donald Trump, who unashamedly called Sisi "my favorite dictator," restored the money. Al-Sisi turned out to be much worse than Mubarak – imposing mass death sentences, jailing tens of thousands, arresting candidates opposing him in elections he called, and closing NGOs that provided some oversight to government abuses. In 2014 I visited Egypt with a lawyers' delegation and we met with courageous activists at the Al-Nadeem Torture Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture. Established during Mubarak's repressive reign, it filed suit against the government and helped victims. Three years later al-Sisi shuttered the organization, and most other private groups that attempted to monitor his manifold crimes.

Al-Sisi's prison state is rated "Not Free" by the group Freedom House, with just 18 points out of a possible 100 for civil and political liberty. Cairo subsists near the global bottom along with Iran, Cuba, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, Vietnam, and several African nations. Charles Dunne, a former U.S. diplomat stationed in Egypt, warned: "Since 2013, Egypt has experienced nothing short of a slide toward totalitarianism, notable among authoritarian states but unique among close US allies."

This phenomenon has been noted by others. Observed Freedom House: "President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who first took power in a 2013 coup, has governed Egypt in an increasingly authoritarian manner. Meaningful political opposition is virtually nonexistent, as expressions of dissent can draw criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Civil liberties, including press freedom and freedom of assembly, are tightly restricted. Security forces engage in human rights abuses with impunity. Discrimination against women, LGBT+ people, and other groups remain serious problems, as does a high rate of domestic violence."

Even the State Department acknowledged the pervasive human rights violations of its well-subsidized client: "Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents and terrorist groups; forced disappearance; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners or detainees; politically motivated reprisal against individuals located outside the country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, site blocking, and the existence of criminal libel laws, which were not enforced; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, such as overly restrictive laws governing civil society organizations; restrictions on political participation; violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons and use of the law to arrest and prosecute arbitrarily such persons; and forced or compulsory child labor, including its worst forms."

Sadly, the abuses never end. In its latest annual report on Egypt, HRW observed: "Egyptians in 2020 continued to live under the harsh authoritarian grip of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government. Tens of thousands of government critics, including journalists and human rights defenders, remain imprisoned on politically motivated charges, many in lengthy pretrial

detention. Authorities frequently used terrorism charges against peaceful activists and harassed and detained relatives of dissidents abroad. Authorities used vague 'morality' charges to prosecute female social media influencers for posts of themselves, as well as gang-rape witnesses following reporting of sexual assault cases online. Media close to the government smeared rape witnesses by publishing private photos and videos online without their consent."

That's not all, however. The regime "disappears" people and arrests their relatives in North Korea-style punishment practices. Critics are held in pretrial detention for years. Activists have been detained for organizing to contest supposedly free elections. Prisoners are killed, or allowed to die, through inadequate medical care. Moreover, added HRW: "Authorities continued to silence journalists, bloggers, and critics on social media amid escalating use of the repressive 2018 cybercrimes law and have blocked hundreds of news and human rights websites without judicial authorization since 2017."

Yet none of these tactics, though terribly oppressive, break new ground internationally. However, unique appears to be Cairo's odious practice of blaming victims for their own murders. The al-Sisi regime apparently is executing prisoners, then claiming that the deaths occurred during shootouts with security forces.

Detailed HRW: "the Interior Ministry announced the deaths of at least 755 people in 143 alleged shootouts between January 2015 and December 2020, with only one suspect arrested. The ministry statements identified only 141 of those killed and used copy-paste language, providing very little detail. Almost all the statements claimed that the alleged militants opened fire first, compelling security forces to return fire. The authorities alleged that all those killed were sought for 'terrorism' and that most belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood."

In fact, government even lies about foreign prisoners. In 2016 the regime claimed that an Italian student studying independent labor unions, disappeared by security forces, was killed in a car accident, even though his body showed evidence of torture, including burns. Next the government insisted that he was murdered by a gang, all of whose members were conveniently killed ... in a shootout with security forces.

After Egypt switched sides to the US and then made peace with Israel, Washington provided the country with \$1.3 billion a year in security assistance, much to buy (American) weapons, along with varying amounts of mostly economic support, in recent years running somewhat above \$100 million annually. After the 2013 coup the Obama administration restricted some transfers, but those limits were later lifted. Now progressives in Congress have attempted to condition \$300 million in aid on improvements in human rights while the Biden administration, which ostentatiously claimed the centrality of human rights to its foreign policy, worked to block those restrictions without including a waiver, which its predecessors have *always used to continue sending* the money to al-Sisi's government.

The administration, then, promoted business as usual with the murderous al-Sisi regime. Mira Resnick, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Regional Security, testified to Congress that "The president himself has underscored the importance of a constructive dialogue on human rights with the government of Egypt," yet, she reported, he opposed conditioning the aid. Which meant any dialogue will be pro forma, designed to fail.

Instead, Resnick emphasized other objectives: "We will continue to pursue this even as we pursue shared security goals on maritime security, on border security, on counterterrorism." The administration gave al-Sisi special praise for helping forge a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. This is the standard excuse for continuing to support even the most brutal and murderous dictatorships. Yet in the foregoing cases Cairo was acting in its interest. There was no reason for the US to pay Egypt for its services. Moreover, with the Egyptian armed services sporting American weapons, the military regime has another strong incentive to stay with the US in the future, bolstering Washington's leverage.

Under pressure, yesterday administration officials indicated that they planned to tie \$130 million to the al-Sisi government ending prosecution of specific individuals and NGOs. However, while that would help Egyptians involved in the handful of cases highlighted by the administration, it would do nothing for tens of thousands of others suffering under systemic repression. Anyway, Cairo could ignore the conditions and still collect more than a billion dollars. This obviously is far from putting human rights at the center of American foreign policy.

Although Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates essentially paid for the coup and help keep the country afloat, Cairo apparently is still sensitive about losing Washington's cash – perhaps more for the impact on its image than finances. Egypt's ambassador to the US played official propagandist and denounced criticism as "lies and falsehoods propagated by people who belong to a terrorist organization." Sadly, the real terrorists are running al-Sisi's government.

If Americans' money was just wasted, underwriting a military caste that uses its political clout to colonize the economy – controlling up to 40 percent of GDP by some estimates – and enrich itself, that would be bad enough. However, Washington is buying future troubles. Dunne warned: "The problem is Egypt's human rights abuses, compounded by poor governance and economic mismanagement, have accelerated domestic instability and terrorism." Just as al-Qaeda head Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri was radicalized in Mubarak's prisons, a future head of al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups might be radicalized in al-Sisi's prisons.

US leverage is limited since the Gulf states could and likely would make up any losses from America. Washington cannot force Cairo to reform. However, at least the Biden administration could stop forcing Americans to fund ostentatious tyranny, making them complicit in murder, oppression, and corruption. Ugly accommodations often were necessary during the Cold War. Not so much now, however.

Biden once insisted that he would provide "no more blank checks for Trump's 'favorite dictator'." It is time for the president to stand up for human rights.

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