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U.S. gift of F-16 fighters headed to Egypt, despite Morsi's harsh rhetoric

By Maxim Lott

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Four F-16 fighter jets left the U.S. this morning, bound for Egypt as part of a foreign aid package critics say should have been scrapped when the nation elected a president who has called President Obama a liar and urged that hatred of Jews be instilled in children.

A source who works on the Naval Air Force Base in Dallas confirmed the departure of the state-of-the-art fighter planes to FoxNews.com. Sixteen F-16s and 200 Abrams tanks are to be given to the Egyptian government before the end of the year under a foreign aid deal signed in 2010 with then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a longtime U.S. ally.

Critics, including several in Congress, say it doesn't make sense to follow through with the package, given that new Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, elected last summer, has given decidedly mixed signals about relations with the U.S. While he has toned down his rhetoric since his election, in 2010 - the same year the aid package was struck - Morsi attacked Obama for supporting Israel.

"One American president after another — and most recently, that Obama — talks about American guarantees for the safety of the Zionists in Palestine," Morsi, then a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, said on Egyptian television in reaction to Obama's 2009 speech in Cairo. "[Obama] was very clear when he uttered his empty words on the land of Egypt. He uttered many lies, of which he couldn't have fulfilled a single word, even if he were sincere — which he is not."

In the comments translated by the Middle East Media Research Institute, Morsi went on to urge that children be taught to hate Jews.

"Dear brothers, we must not forget to nurse our children and grandchildren on hatred towards those Zionists and Jews, and all those who support them," he said. "They must be nursed on hatred. The hatred must continue."

Lawmakers told FoxNews.com that even if Morsi has softened his stance, it makes no sense to arm his Islamist government with weapons that could one day be used against Israel or even Egyptians.

"It is appalling that the Obama administration would send F-16s and 200 military tanks to Egypt in the wake of the instability, [and the] anti-American and anti-Israel atmosphere," Rep. Louie Gohmert, (R-Texas), told FoxNews.com.

The U.S. government ordered the planes for Egypt from Lockheed Martin in 2010, as part of an annual aid package that regularly topped \$1 billion. But the very next year, a popular revolution began which ultimately resulted in Mubarak's ouster and imprisonment, and the election of Morsi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. In November, Morsi tried to claim dictatorial powers, but was forced to back down from his claim after massive protests against the move.

Many worry that arming such a volatile Egypt will endanger Israel.

"My hope and prayer is that someone in this administration will wake up and smell the burning of [Israel's] future and rescind the supply of planes and tanks," Gohmert said. "If they do not, then perhaps there will arise leaders within our Congress with newfound courage to stop the lunacy."

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Rep. Vern Buchanan, (R-Fla.), who recently called for ending foreign aid to Egypt altogether, told FoxNews.com the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Morsi government has been sending increasingly troubling signals to Washington, and giving it state-of-the-art

fighter jets is a dangerous idea.

"American tax dollars must not be used to aid and abet any dictatorial regime that stands with terrorists," Buchanan said.

Others note that Egypt's leaders could use the weapons on their own people.

"Tens of billions in U.S. aid has enhanced Cairo's capacity for internal repression," Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, told FoxNews.com.

"U.S. aid accounts for as much as 80% of the Egyptian Defense Ministry's weapons procurement costs... In essence, American taxpayers have been Egypt's major arms supplier, subsidizing the supply of F-16 jet fighters, M1A1 Abrams battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, Apache helicopters, and hundreds of millions of dollars in surplus military equipment."

The State Department did not respond to a request for comment about the pending delivery. But earlier this month, a spokesperson said the Obama administration seeks to "maintain a strategic partnership with Egypt that enhances the security and peace of the region."

But Anthony H. Cordesman, who has served as a consultant for the State and Defense departments and who holds the Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the administration is right to send the planes.

"If you were to suddenly end this partnership with Egypt -- if you were to make Egypt feel that somehow it were not trusted or second-best, what would the security implications be? It certainly would justify or encourage all of the extremist elements that are trying to push Egypt away from both the peace process and the security partnership with the U.S.," he told FoxNews.com.

He said that the cost of providing the weapons is worth it.

"We need to remember that Egypt isn't just important to Israel. It is critical to us, because it controls the Suez Canal. It has been a vital staging point for U.S. operations in the gulf."

Cordesman argued that the F-16 fighter jets are unlikely to be turned against us or our allies, as they are too complex to be used effectively without U.S. maintenance.

"These weapons systems are certainly extremely effective, but no one can sustain them unless that partnership with the United States continues," he said. "The modern software, the computer systems, the munitions that make this weapons system so lethal -- other than us, there are no alternative suppliers. There are European states who can provide parts of the aircraft, but F-16s and most modern systems are basically dependent on U.S. manufacturers."

"In some ways, the more sophisticated the system, the safer it is to transfer," Cordesman said, while noting that there are still risks.

"There's no such thing as an arms transfer that is totally risk-free," he said.

According to a U.S. Air Force description, the planes "maneuverability and combat radius exceed that of all potential threat fighter aircraft."

"The F-16 can fly more than 500 miles, deliver its weapons with superior accuracy, defend itself against enemy aircraft, and return to its starting point," the description states. "An all-weather capability allows it to accurately deliver ordnance during non-visual bombing conditions."

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