

# Bush administration defends US military aid to Egypt

Rick Kelly  
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The Bush administration has adamantly defended its annual outlay of nearly \$2 billion in military and economic aid to Egypt in response to a Congressional debate on the issue. The White House has insisted that US strategic interests in the Middle East would be harmed by any reduction in its assistance to Egypt's dictatorial regime.

Egypt, led by President Hosni Mubarak, receives more US aid than any other country save Israel. Washington provides \$1.3 billion in annual military aid, a sum which amounts to 80 percent of the Egyptian military's budget. Additional economic aid, which is tied to the country's ongoing pro-business economic reform, is also directed to Mubarak each year.

The US alliance with Egypt provides another demonstration of the hypocritical character of the Bush administration's claim to be supporting democracy in the Middle East. After Washington's initial pretext for the US-led invasion of Iraq—its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction—was exposed as a fabrication, the war was then justified on the basis of spreading democracy throughout the region. This has since been used as a rationale for threats of further aggression against countries such as Iran and Syria.

Egypt demonstrates that whether a country is targeted for regime change or embraced as a valued ally has nothing to do with the internal conditions of that country or the democratic credentials of its government.

Mubarak has ruled Egypt with an iron fist since 1981. His regime has a long record of arresting and torturing its opponents, censoring the press and other publications, and suppressing independent political activity. It nevertheless remains one of Washington's most highly valued allies in the Arab world because for more than three decades it has backed American interventions in the region and generally lined up behind Washington's pro-Israel foreign policy.

On May 17, State Department officials defended the Egyptian alliance on behalf of the Bush administration before the congressional House Committee on International Relations. The committee is currently holding hearings on

the level and efficacy of the US aid program to Egypt.

David Welch, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, testified that the American "strategic partnership with Egypt is in many ways a cornerstone of our foreign policy in the Middle East."

He went on to list the various areas in which Egypt had backed US policy in the region, "from their IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] Board of Governors' vote to report Iran to the [UN Security Council] for its non-compliance with its international obligations to President Mubarak's personal efforts to hold the Syrian regime responsible for its destabilising behaviour in the region."

Welch also stressed Egypt's support for US objectives in Sudan and its role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as guarding the Egypt-Gaza border and pressing the new Hamas-led Palestinian government to recognise Israel and renounce violence.

Welch's State Department colleague, Michael Coulter, said that the US alliance with Egypt was "one of the pillars of our foreign policy in the Middle East, and our military assistance is a key element of that strategic partnership."

He described Egypt's role in the Iraq war as "invaluable." Mubarak gives the US military free passage through Egypt's air space and ensures priority passage for American navy vessels through the Suez Canal. According to US figures, Egypt granted airspace access to 36,553 US military aircraft between 2001 and 2005.

Coulter also referred to Egypt's role in assisting the US occupation of Afghanistan. Mubarak has helped US reconstruction projects and has dispatched military equipment to the Afghan National Army, which acts as a proxy force for the occupying authorities.

The two State Department officials also referred to Egypt's role in the so-called war on terror, though they refrained from mentioning the country's role in the Bush administration's "extraordinary rendition" program. Washington has utilised Egyptian security forces to secretly detain, torture, and interrogate alleged terrorists.

The House Committee on International Relations'

hearings are being held in response to an ongoing debate within the US political establishment over the efficacy of the alliance with Egypt. There is mounting concern that Mubarak's brutal suppression of his political opponents is hindering US objectives in the region by further discrediting the Bush administration's claims to be promoting democracy.

Ever since Mubarak secured another six-year term in last year's rigged presidential election, he has moved to shore up his deeply unpopular regime through state repression. He cancelled local council elections due to be held this year out of fear of seeing the ruling National Democratic Party routed, extended the repressive Emergency Law for another two years, and imprisoned liberal oppositionist Ayman Nour on trumped-up fraud charges.

Egypt's security forces have repeatedly attacked anti-government demonstrators. In the most recent incident, thousands of riot police and pro-government goons last week attacked protestors in central Cairo. The demonstrators, aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kifaya protest group, had rallied in support of two judges who are being prosecuted for their condemnation of government vote-rigging in last year's legislative election.

Men and women, including a number of journalists from Reuters and *Al Jazeera*, were hit with truncheons and beaten unconscious as they lay on the ground. The number of reported arrests varies between 100 to 255 people; 47 later initiated a hunger strike after their gaolers threatened to torture them.

As with previous government repression in Egypt, the Bush administration's response was to merely express its "concern" and to urge political reform. But others within the US ruling elite called for punitive measures. A *Washington Post* editorial on May 4 ("Backpedalling in Egypt") asked: "Why does the administration continue to give nearly \$2 billion each year to a government that mocks President Bush's democracy initiative?"

The newspaper called for aid to be channelled away from "the corrupt regime that persecutes those who favour a freedom agenda" and towards the country's liberal reformists.

The debate within Washington revolves around the tactical question of how to best advance the interests of US imperialism in the Middle East. As Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said on May 17, "The time has come to seek greater returns from our investment in Egypt."

A report issued by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) last month called on the secretaries of state and defence to conduct periodic reviews of the effectiveness of US military aid to Egypt and impose more stringent

conditions and benchmarks. The document called for greater emphasis on "interoperability." This refers to the technological and logistic coordination of Egypt's military forces with US operations in the region.

"The GAO study proves what we have long suspected: the Egypt program is meant more as a political entitlement program, with no real performance standards," Democratic congressman Tom Lantos, who requested the report, declared. "This is a massive military entitlement program on auto-pilot."

While the Bush administration has said that it will consider proposals to tie its aid program to additional benchmarks, it has made clear that it is not considering a reduction in the level of money given to prop up the Mubarak regime. So long as Egypt is prepared to do the US's bidding in the region, Washington is prepared to turn a blind eye to the government's repressive rule.

President Mubarak's son last week secretly visited Washington and briefed senior administration officials on the situation in Egypt. The discussions were revealed only by *Al Jazeera* sources and later confirmed by the White House. Gamal Mubarak, who is widely believed to be preparing to succeed his father as president, met with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and national security advisor Stephen Handley.

"There was no tension at all," Egyptian ambassador Nabil Fahmi told the *Washington Post*. "They listened to his explanation of what was happening."

A White House spokesman added that President Bush "dropped by to greet Mr. Mubarak and convey his best regards to his father, President Hosni Mubarak."



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