WikiLeaks: Cables reveal connivance of US government with Mubarak dictatorship

David Walsh
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WikiLeaks released US State Department cables Thursday that add details to the picture of official US collaboration with the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak, now under siege by an outraged population.

Whatever President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and a host of American government figures may claim, the WikiLeaks cables reveal that the US government has been fully aware of the systematic repression carried out by the Egyptian regime. Aside from pro forma complaints, Washington was indifferent to the latter's crimes.

The seven cables date from the period June 2006 to January 2010—i.e., under both the Bush and Obama administrations—and make clear that the change in administration had no impact on either US or Egyptian government policy.

The first cable, sent June 21, 2006 by Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone, reports that, "In a notable break with past practice," Egyptian government prosecutors were moving to prosecute a State Security officer on torture charges. The action was intended as a sop to human rights organizations complaining about the free rein given the secret police by the Mubarak government to terrorize the population.

Ricciardone notes that personnel working for the State Security Investigative Services (SSIS) had "not previously faced prosecution for abuse of detainees. This has led Human Rights Watch and other respected observers to complain of 'a culture of impunity' within the elite Egyptian security services regarding investigation, prosecution, and punishment of personnel for torture and abuse."

The ambassador explains that prosecutors in East Cairo had referred an SSIS captain to trial "for the alleged torture resulting in death of detainee Mohammed Abdul Qader El-Sayed. According to press reports and materials published by human rights organizations, El-Sayed died on September 21, 2003," after an interrogation that began September 16. "El-Sayed's corpse bore marks consistent with torture, including severe bruising about the head and body and electrical burns on the genitals. We do not know why El-Sayed was detained."

In a background cable addressed to FBI Deputy Director John Pistole on October 28, 2007, on the occasion of Pistole's impending visit to Cairo, Ricciardone urged the latter to raise "the proposal that Egypt share with us fingerprint records of suspected terrorists [many of them torture victims, no doubt], to enter into the FBI's global fingerprint database. This would greatly advance our practical law enforcement cooperation." Business as usual.

The US ambassador explained, "Mubarak, who turned 79 in May, remains a symbol of stability in the Middle East. As ever, he sees Egypt's interests on the most critical regional issues--terrorism, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Sudan, Iran—as largely congruent with ours."

In the next paragraph, however, Ricciardone acknowledged that "Mubarak has retreated from many of his earlier promises on political reform. Meanwhile, former opposition presidential candidate Ayman Nour remains sick and imprisoned. Government detentions of democracy activists continue, and this year the government has begun to clamp down on free speech by prosecuting editors, journalists and bloggers. Mubarak now makes scant public pretense of advancing a vision for democratic change." Ricciardone added that "Egypt's police and domestic security services continue to be dogged by persistent, credible allegations of abuse of detainees."

A December 10, 2007 cable from the Cairo embassy sheds light on the sort of cynical game the Egyptian regime, with the passive assistance of the US government, played with human rights organizations looking into

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torture and abuse.

The message describes a meeting between Human Rights Watch's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Joe Stork, and General Hassan Abdel Rahman, Director General of the SSIS—a meeting organized by the US ambassador.

According to the cable, Stork characterized Abdel Rahman's position as "we (SSIS) don't do bad things." The secret policeman told Stork "that he commands over 40,000 police officers and … he could count on one hand the number who had committed abuses." Abdel Rahman objected to the use of the word torture, saying it implied something "systemic" and claimed Egypt's security services were "badly maligned." When asked about the harassment of NGOs, Abdel Rahman asserted such police operations were necessary because those organizations were run by "anarchists" and people with prior arrests who needed "monitoring."

The Human Rights Watch deputy director indicated to US embassy officials that he had "made no substantive progress."

In an April 13, 2009 "scenesetter" for FBI Director Robert Mueller, the new US ambassador, Margaret Scobey, asserted blandly: "We continue to promote democratic reform in Egypt, including the expansion of political freedom and pluralism, and respect for human rights."

She noted that "Egypt's police and domestic security services continue to be dogged by persistent, credible allegations of abuse of detainees." This was not, however, an obstacle to US ties to the Mubarak regime. In fact, Scobey bragged that US ties with Egypt's police and security services—whom Mueller planned to visit—"remained solid."

Scobey noted that "Over the past five years, the government has stopped denying that torture exists, and since late 2007 courts have sentenced approximately 18 police officers to prison terms for torture and killings. In March, a court sentenced a police officer to 15 years in prison for shooting a motorist following a dispute."

She added, "The Interior Ministry uses SSIS to monitor and sometimes infiltrate the political opposition and civil society. SSIS suppresses political opposition through arrests, harassment and intimidation. In February following the Gaza war, SSIS arrested a small number of pro-Palestinian activists and bloggers, and detained them for periods of a few days to several weeks."

A "scenesetter" for Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Michael Posner (the former Executive Director and then President of Human Rights First), in January 2010, authored by the US Chargé d'Affaires in Cairo, Matthew Tueller, provides an overview of the Egyptian situation.

Although Tueller uses careful, diplomatic language, some of the reality comes through, one year before social upheaval would erupt in Egypt. He writes that "the government continues to suppress the political opposition, retaliate against journalists and bloggers, and restrict religious freedom. As the 2010 parliamentary and 2011 presidential elections approach, President Mubarak continues to resist taking steps that could weaken his hold on power, and significant political reform has had little traction."

The chargé d'affaires noted that "In private discussions, Mubarak and other senior leaders argue that without strong authorities to combat religious extremists, the stability of Egypt would be at risk." In its rhetoric, the US government rejected this view. In practice, it accepted and abetted it.

In the section of his report dedicated to police brutality, Tueller comments "While the GOE [Government of Egypt] and its supporters claim that police brutality is unusual, human rights lawyers believe it continues to be a pervasive, daily occurrence in prisons, police stations and Interior Ministry State Security (SSIS) headquarters. Activists assert that the police and SSIS have adapted to increased media and blogger focus on police brutality by hiding the abuse and pressuring victims not to bring cases."

In a comment on events whose significance was probably lost on Tueller, he took note of "Egypt's on-going wave of strikes and labor unrest. Although Egypt's labor law requires that striking workers receive the approval of a GoE-affiliated 'general trade union' before striking, a requirement that most strikers ignored, strikes generally proceed with minimal GoE interference. … Labor activism focuses on economic issues, and it is unclear whether Egypt's labor movement will take on a more overtly political role."

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