

US reaffirms support for Egyptian junta amid conflict over NGOs

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Last week high-ranking US officials made clear that, despite the Egyptian military junta's criticism of US-funded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Egypt, no cut-off of US military aid to Egypt is being considered. Washington thus reaffirmed its long-time support for the Egyptian army.

At the beginning of the week, US President Barack Obama called on the US Congress not to touch the US aid package to Egypt.

On Thursday the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, told Congress that cutting off aid would be against US interests, declaring: "We do have a very close partnership with them [the Egyptian junta]. They grant us great overflight rights, they grant us priority passage through the Suez Canal. I mean, we get things for our aid that truly we need."

These comments come after a months-long standoff between Washington and the Egyptian junta, after the junta raided US government organizations that fund Egyptian NGOs last December. These include the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and Freedom House. Heavily armed security forces arrested NGO workers and confiscated laptops and documents.

On Saturday Egyptian state media reported that the trial of 43 people, including at least 16 Americans, would begin on February 26. The American defendants face a travel ban, and some are currently staying in the American embassy in Cairo. The highest-profile defendant is Sam LaHood, the director of the IRI in Egypt and son of US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

Egyptian authorities charge the accused persons and groups with conducting illegal political work in Egypt and receiving illegal funding.

In recent weeks commentators often spoke about an

emerging "crisis" in Egypt-US relations over the NGO dispute. Whatever these tensions, the comments of Obama and Dempsey make clear that these tensions are subordinate to the counter-revolutionary collaboration of US imperialism with the Egyptian military junta.

Since the beginning of the Egyptian revolution the US worked closely with the Egyptian military—first in a failed attempt to crush the protests against President Hosni Mubarak, and then to help the junta that came to power after Mubarak's downfall to try to crush any attempt to mount a "second revolution."

Egypt has been the main Arab ally of US-imperialism in the region since the Camp David peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979. Both countries are leading recipients of US military aid, with Egypt receiving \$1.3 billion yearly. As the US prepares a military confrontation with Syria and Iran, its strategic alliance with the counter-revolutionary Egyptian junta is decisive.

To hide this reactionary alliance, the Egyptian junta has tried to disorient opposition in the Egyptian working class to its collaboration with US imperialism by staging a limited conflict with Washington over the NGOs and appealing to anti-American sentiment.

When mass protests erupted in January 25 of last year, the Mubarak regime blamed "foreign entities" for fomenting chaos and strife in Egypt, and the junta continued this campaign. In October Egyptian Minister for Planning and International Cooperation Fayza Abouelnaga, a longtime minister under Mubarak and one of the leading persons behind the anti-NGO campaign, stated that the US and Israel use these groups to "create a state of chaos and work to maintain it in Egypt."

She said that the US and Israel "could not directly create a state of chaos and work to maintain it in Egypt,

so they used direct funding to organizations, especially American NGOs, as a means of implementing these goals.” She continued, “The 25 January revolution events came as a surprise to the United States [...] and it lost control over it after it turned into a revolution of the entire Egyptian population. That was when the United States decided to use all its resources and instruments to contain the situation and push it in a direction that promotes American and also Israeli interests.”

Underlying these claims is a basic lie: the revolution broke out as a result not of foreign meddling, but of revolutionary opposition in the Egyptian working class to Mubarak and his US backers. However, the junta’s investigations have further exposed the close ties between US imperialism and “civil society,” liberal, and petty bourgeois “left” groups inside Egypt.

These ties came to public attention last year, when US officials revealed that it was spending tens or hundreds of millions of dollars backing “independent” trade unions, NGOs, and other pro-US groups (see: “The counterrevolutionary role of the Egyptian pseudo-left”).

The issue of foreign funding has always been a vexed issue in US-Egyptian relations. In the 1990s, as when the work of NGOs increased, the Egyptian government issued some laws to lay down conditions for NGO work in Egypt. At first the US government largely respected these laws, but in 2005 the administration of President George W. Bush decided to distribute money directly to unregistered NGOs. Abouelnaga criticized the US government at the time, but ultimately Cairo bowed to its main backer in Washington.

When Barack Obama took office in 2009 he aimed to improve relations with the Mubarak dictatorship. According to Michele Dunne, an expert on Middle East affairs formerly working at the US State Department, the Egyptian government proposed “to go back to the old way of handling NGO grants” to “remove tension from the relationship.” Only smaller sums from the human rights and labor funding arms of the US government went to unregistered groups.

The Obama administration shifted its approach again, however, after the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution. While working closely with the junta to contain the Revolution, it also increased funding with an aim to gain back its control over Egypt. On Thursday

Abouelnaga revealed before the parliamentary committee on human rights that not officially registered civil society organizations have received some \$175 million between March and June 2011.

On Saturday the biggest state owned daily newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported that “pro-democracy” organizations increased efforts and spending after the January 25 Revolution in order to “serve specific political tendencies and countries’ agendas.” Other media reports claim the IRI aimed to support Egypt’s pro-Western liberal and “left” political parties to counterbalance the Islamist Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

While the reports are still somewhat murky, the US government is clearly using its NGOs to work closely with petty-bourgeois “left” groups and “independent” trade unions to promote the interests of US imperialism and suppress political opposition in the Egyptian working class.

The arrest of Ahmed Ali during the crackdown on NGOs exemplifies this close connection. Ali is a member of the petty-bourgeois “left” Revolutionary Socialists working as a researcher in the Budgetary and Human Rights Observatory (BAHRO). The BAHRO receives funding of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an organization directly funded by the US government.



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