

## **What Do We Learn about the U.S. and Egypt from the Diplomatic Cables?**

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To date, there have been 87 U.S. diplomatic cables from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo published by Wikileaks between 28 January and 03 February 2011. While the review that follows does not exhaust all of the information contained in those cables, it does provide a comprehensive grasp of many of the most important recurring patterns and concerns in the cables dealing in particular with democratic reform and human rights. One way in which the U.S. Embassy routinely summed up the Mubarak regime, in reports prepared for visiting U.S. officials, was thus:

“Mubarak...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. But his reluctance to lead more boldly on these fronts and on domestic reform has diminished his and Egypt’s influence.”

Allied. Unresponsive. Troubling. Risky. And then eventually, expendable.

### **The U.S. Was Very Aware of Its Partner’s Human Rights Abuses**

The U.S. was very familiar with the depth and extent of its ally’s abuse of its own citizens. Writing in 2009, Ambassador Margaret Scobey wrote to the Secretary of State that, “Police brutality in Egypt against common criminals is routine and pervasive....security forces still resort to torturing Muslim Brotherhood activists who are deemed to pose a political threat,” but the Egyptian government had stopped denying that torture occurred and reportedly some police officers were convicted of torture and murder. Another cable refers to the state’s prosecution of an officer with the State Security Investigative Services (SSIS). Nonetheless, Ambassador Scobey affirmed: “Torture and police brutality in Egypt are endemic and widespread.” Referring to the 06 April 2008 strike organized via Facebook, the Egyptian government arrested a Muslim Brotherhood member and tortured him, to scare other April 6 Movement members. Otherwise, the government “is more reluctant to torture Islamists, including Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members, because of their persistence in making public political statements, and their contacts with international NGOs that could embarrass the regime....the exception to this rule is when MB members mobilize people against the government in a way the regime deems threatening.” The cable expresses skepticism about the alleged firings of abusive officers, in the context of a “culture of police brutality,” and indicates that they may have been fired for other reasons. The cable concludes that the Egyptian government “has not begun serious work on trying to transform the police and security services from instruments of power that serve and protect the regime into institutions operating in the public interest, despite official slogans to the contrary.”

There is substantial evidence, it must be said, of ongoing U.S. concern about its partner’s human rights violations, and attempts to get Mubarak’s regime to reform, over a period of years. One implication is that failure to do so would render Mubarak’s hold on power increasingly unstable, making him an unreliable partner in the “Global War on Terror.”

### **Democratic Reform, The Problem of Bloggers**

The U.S. government was abundantly aware that the Egyptian regime would not undertake serious democratic reforms. The cables confirm this. Of particular interest in one cable is that the U.S. cites this as a reason why Mubarak was becoming a less reliable partner, increasingly incompetent domestically: “the regime’s domestic house is not in order...the real story here is a vacuum of leadership on domestic policy,” noting that repression was chosen as the way out of domestic political conflict, and the cable cites a “litany of mis-steps.”

The U.S. turned to building connections with other sectors of Egyptian society, for example, funding the emergence of “new actors” (unregistered NGOs). This was privately but directly condemned by Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as indicated in one cable. Indeed, so alarmed was the Egyptian government that in private talks, Abdel Rahman, the head of state security, accused the U.S. of funding “communists and extremists.”

Concerning President Mubarak’s impending trip to Washington in 2009, to meet with President Obama, a U.S. Embassy cable states that Mubarak “understands that the [Obama] Administration wants to restore the sense of warmth that has traditionally characterized the U.S.-Egyptian partnership. The Egyptians want the visit to demonstrate that Egypt remains America’s ‘indispensable Arab ally’.” The cable reveals that “Mubarak continues to state that in his view Iraq needs a ‘tough, strong military officer who is fair’ as leader,” and finds this to be a “telling observation,” that, “we believe, describes Mubarak’s own view of himself as someone who is tough but fair, who ensures the basic needs of his people.” Mubarak repeatedly stresses that he fears any reform will open the door to revolution, such as the case of Iran in 1979, or the advent of Hamas in the Palestinian elections.

About the 2011 elections, the Americans said of Mubarak that “it is likely he will run again, and, inevitably, win.” National Democratic Party insider and former minister Dr. Ali El Deen Hilal Dessouki relegated democracy to a “long term goal,” even describing the political system as “pharaohic.”

The U.S. Embassy was well aware of a range of Egyptian government attempts to “suppress critical opinion,” by taking action against journalists, bloggers, and even a poet, flooding the courts with lawsuits against them based on fabricated charges. The Emergency Law was used to block a court-ordered release of a blogger. One cable notes: “In a blogging environment often critical of the government, the GOE has selectively moved against certain bloggers.” One cable concludes that “Egyptian democracy and human rights efforts...are being stymied.”

“Egypt’s bloggers are playing an increasingly important role in broadening the scope of acceptable political and social discourse, and self-expression,” says one cable, and Egyptian bloggers work as human rights activists, although this has been diminished by various government crackdowns and the turn to other social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. While usually targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, the government “has also used the Emergency Law in some recent cases to target bloggers and labor demonstrators.” But, according to Interior Ministry State Security Director Rahman, the Muslim Brotherhood is the “mother of all extremism and terrorism in Egypt and the world.”

One cable highlights how the U.S. Embassy called on the State Department to intervene with Google to get YouTube to reinstate access for a prominent Egyptian human rights blogger, reputed by some to be Wael Abbas.

### **No Chance for a Popular Uprising?**

In what might be the grossest miscalculation ever on the part of the Mubarak regime, we encounter an easy dismissal of the possibility for domestic upheaval. An insider in the National Democratic Party and a former minister told the U.S. Embassy that, “widespread politically-motivated unrest...was not likely because it was not part of the ‘Egyptian mentality.’ Threats to daily survival, not politics, were the only thing to bring Egyptians to the streets en masse.”

U.S. Embassy officials were only slightly more astute and attentive. Speaking of the 2008 Mahalla workers’ “riots,” and asking “Is this the start of something?” one cable concluded: “We think it is possible that Egypt will witness further spasms of limited violence, but these are likely to be isolated and uncoordinated, rather than revolutionary in nature.” The Americans acknowledged that “while there are currently no angry demonstrators on the streets of Cairo,” the situation was changing fast, and was “more tense than even a few months ago.” The Americans noted “widespread bitterness about spiraling prices, seething upset about government corruption, disdain for the Mubarak government’s perceived pro-US and Israel posture, and working class economic woes,” which they found “bubble up in virtually every conversation.”

In Mahalla the Americans found something very unfamiliar: fearless Egyptians cursing the regime openly, observing that “a new organic opposition force bubbled to the surface, defying current political labels, and apparently not affiliated with the MB [Muslim Brotherhood].” They concluded: “This may require the government to change its script.” Mubarak did not. Indeed, the Americans pointed out that “another result of Mahalla is that Mubarak will even more strongly resist both economic and political reform initiatives.” However, the regime clearly feared for its security and continued U.S. support: “On April 15, Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit, meeting with the Ambassador, cited the Mahalla incident as a strain and added that he hoped that the United States would be supportive of Egypt during this difficult period.” The cable adds: “even supposedly quiescent Egyptians have their limits,” and quotes a taxi driver, “God willing, such riots will occur in Cairo soon; the only thing stopping us is fear.”