

[Exporting Tyranny through Foreign Aid](#)

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Will upheaval in the Middle East force the U.S. to rethink its practice of subsidizing repressive regimes?

By John Glaser

Before the successful ouster of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Tahrir Square was filled with chants and handcrafted picket signs pleading with the U.S. to stop funding Mubarak's repressive government. Rubber bullets, shotgun shells, and teargas canisters were collected by the largely peaceful protestors – and [given to news agencies to show to the world](#) – with the names of American military contractors branded on them. The Mubarak regime received approximately \$60 billion in U.S. aid throughout his tenure.

Uprisings in Yemen and calls for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down have been intensifying. Reports in late March of non-violent protestors [being shot with live rounds](#), killing and wounding hundreds, put in question the Obama administration's escalation of support to Yemen. A [June 2010 Amnesty International report](#) published “images of a US-manufactured cruise missile that carried cluster munitions” aimed at “an alleged al-Qaida training camp in Yemen that killed 41 local residents, including 14 women and 21 children.” The bombings were later corroborated to have been launched on presidential orders and in conjunction with the Yemeni government, which has received over \$300 million from the U.S. in the past five years.

In Bahrain in late February, when security forces [opened fire on peaceful demonstrators](#) and began to [enforce martial law](#), similar revelations of U.S. backing came to the fore. The tens of millions of dollars sent to the Bahraini government each year in part help King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa maintain domestic stability – as well as compensate for his country hosting the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, one of the largest military forces in the region.

The recent onset of anti-government demonstrations across the Middle East has placed an integral pillar of U.S. foreign policy into flux. America's consistent, decades-long policy of lavish support for Middle Eastern autocrats is becoming prominent enough in the national debate to shake it from its seemingly unshakable roots.

The maverick Tea Party Senator Rand Paul grabbed headlines in late January when [he told CNN's Wolf Blitzer](#) he would end all aid to foreign governments, including Israel. Other congressional leaders, like [Senator Patrick Leahy, exhibited similar scrutiny](#) for foreign aid when he stated during Egyptian protests that “if [Mubarak] doesn't leave, there will not be foreign aid; I mean, it's as simple as that.”

Texas Congressman Louie Gohmert [complained on the House floor](#) that foreign aid is inconsistent with American values. America “was all about human rights, human dignity, and human freedom,” he said. “And we see that slipping away every time we prop up some brutal dictator.”

Leahy and others have been citing what is called the Leahy Law, enacted in 1997, which prohibits U.S. assistance to foreign military or security forces credibly accused of human rights violations. However, this legislation applies only to programs funded under the Foreign Operations Act and the Defense Department Appropriations Act; it does not apply to drug enforcement and non-Defense Department counterterrorism assistance. These technicalities and the overriding justification of vital national security interests have allowed the government to consistently circumvent the law's injunctions.

Justin Logan, Associate Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, told *TAC* in an interview that “U.S. policy in the Middle East is caught up in a contradiction.” Some elements of U.S. influence have been “trying to promote a wave of democratic revolutions in the region” while others have been trying to keep “the balance of power by giving support to various players.”

In mid-April, [The New York Times reported](#) that “even as the United States poured billions of dollars into foreign military programs and anti-terrorism campaigns, a small core of government-financed organizations” channeled money to democratic movements within these countries. The *Times* quotes Stephen McInerney of the Project on Middle East Democracy explaining that “We didn’t fund them to start protests, but we did help support their development of skills and networking.”

“The money spent on these programs was minute compared with efforts led by the Pentagon,” the report said. And the people in the region “are also aware that the same government also trained the state security investigative service, which was responsible for the harassment and jailing of many of us,” an Egyptian activist told the *Times*.

But other signs of a break with this Washington consensus came after the wave of protests broke out. After the shootings in Bahrain, political pressure and an unusual amount of media coverage on the issue prompted the Obama administration to review its policy. The State Department, in a letter to Senator Leahy, said, “the administration is reevaluating its procedures for reviewing U.S. security assistance and defense sales during periods of domestic unrest and violence and has specifically included Bahrain in this reassessment.” This investigation, [reported the Wall Street Journal](#), “could force the U.S. to cut off aid to specific military units found to be involved in crackdowns on civilian protestors.”

In April, the [Wall Street Journal reported](#) that the Obama administration quietly suspended portions of an aid package set for Yemen “worth a potential \$1 billion or more over several years,” news that came almost a month after [Human Rights Watch publicly urged](#) that “The United States should immediately suspend military assistance to Yemen.”

Brian Katulis, a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, predicts that U.S. assistance to “the security sector will be unsustainable in an Egypt that is even marginally more responsive to popular moods.” This reflects an understanding in Washington that with more democratic control and autonomy in the region, maintaining support for dictators will not be tolerated by the populations.

These are noteworthy developments given how steadfast American support for Arab tyrannies has been over the years. Immediately after World War II, “the Defense Department, the CIA, the State Department, and USAID provided assistance to police and internal security forces in key strategic regions,” said a [2006 RAND Corporation report](#). The flow of aid to successive regimes in the Middle East has been consistent ever since.

In a [June 2010 report for the Congressional Research Service](#), Jeremy Sharp writes that, in addition to counterterrorism, aid to Middle East regimes is an attempt to “encourage peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors,” and serves for “the protection of vital petroleum supplies.” This latter justification was, of course, understood by early post-war national security planners. As a [Top Secret National Security Council briefing](#) put it in 1954, “the Near East is of great strategic, political, and economic importance,” as it “contains the greatest petroleum resources in the world” as well as “essential locations for strategic military bases in any world conflict.”

Continued and in some cases increased foreign assistance after the September 11th attacks had the benefit of giving “the United States leverage on key foreign policy issues, since it can make assistance contingent on cooperation,” says the RAND report. But these assistance programs “can have a

negative effect on democratic development by strengthening a state's capacity for repression" and, as one study concluded "the more foreign police aid given [to repressive states], the more brutal and less democratic the police institutions and their governments become."

This underbelly of foreign policy has typically resided in the shadows when it comes to the national debate. But the democratic fervor and uprisings against U.S.-backed dictatorships in recent months makes this mainstay of American foreign policy difficult for Washington to hide. The crackdowns many of these regimes have engaged in to suppress the popular revolts exposes the U.S. as knowingly behind that suppression, and Muslims in the Arab world have been crying hypocrite. "No system of government," Obama said in his [speech in Cairo in June 2009](#), "can or should be imposed upon one nation by another."

Support for repressive Middle Eastern regimes has to some extent been exposed to the limelight since September 11th. In 2004, early on in the Bush administration's war on terror, the Department of Defense sent [an unclassified report](#) to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld saying, "If it is one overarching goal they [Islamists] share, it is the overthrow of what Islamists call 'apostate' regimes: the tyrannies of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Jordan and the Gulf States" and that "The United States finds itself in the strategically awkward – and potentially dangerous – situation of being the longstanding prop and alliance partner of these authoritarian regimes. Without the US these regimes could not survive."

In this context, the wave of protests sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, putting many U.S. clients in danger of being deposed, has led the media and the public to challenge such support for dictatorship. In a February poll, [Rasmussen reported](#) that 58 percent of American adults and 76 percent of Republicans "believe America should end all foreign aid to Arab countries in the Middle East."

But cemented policies of the federal government going back a half-century don't get eliminated that easily. "I suspect that public opinion with regard to the aid to various countries will not cause or prevent change," Justin Logan told *TAC*. "Aid to Middle Eastern autocracies just isn't a salient issue in American politics, so it is entirely possible for Beltway elites to defy public opinion on the issue, because no one votes or gives money based on it."

And Logan's suspicions have been playing out. In the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's departure, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [announced \\$150 million of aid](#) in his wake, saying "the U.S. is ready to provide assistance to Egypt to advance its efforts." Defense Secretary Robert Gates, on [a recent visit to Egypt](#), met with Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who heads the ruling military council. Speaking for Gates, Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell said he "thought there was support for sustaining military support to Egypt as well as other forms of aid."

Some of the most influential leaders in Congress – Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry, Homeland Security Committee chairman Joe Lieberman, and ranking member on the Armed Services Committee John McCain — [have been pushing for similar aid packages](#) to places like Egypt and Tunisia.

While the regular \$1.5 billion in aid to Egypt has been [officially requested for next year](#), Obama has additionally requested another \$120 million for the Yemeni government in FY 2012. Oman is set for \$12.6 million, Jordan has \$675 million, Tunisia another \$6.5 million, and almost \$3 billion for Pakistan – to say nothing of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel.

In a hearing in front of the House Armed Services Committee, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen [responded to pressure](#) from representatives taking aim at foreign aid and

itching to cut the federal budget. “Foolhardy it would be,” he said, “for us to make hasty judgments about the benefits – tangible and intangible – that are about to be derived from forging strong military relationships overseas.” Mullen urged caution when considering “changes to those relationships – in either aid or assistance.”

In mid-March Texas Congressman Ted Poe [introduced the Foreign Aid Accountability Act](#), which would make aid to each individual country contingent on a congressional vote, instead of the omnibus-style, packaged bill for all foreign aid. “It is time to re-evaluate foreign aid,” Poe says. “The United States sends taxpayer money to 150 of 192 countries in the world. The American people would be shocked to know some of the places where we send their money. Our country simply cannot afford to be shelling out taxpayer money to nations when it is not in the best interest of the United States.”

The customarily sub rosa policy of actively supporting repressive dictatorships by itself produces enough oppression and perverse consequences to justify rescinding it. But considering America’s precarious debt situation and the eruption of the Middle East in revolutionary fervor, our most time-honored tradition of support for Middle East tyrannies may soon have to be modified. The current uprisings are in part a response to U.S. meddling and the end result of the transitions taking place is yet unclear. But the prospect of a Middle East functioning by the consent of the governed may lead to drastic changes for Washington’s modus operandi.

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