



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on March 7, 2011

Published in the issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 27, No. 05

The Toll of U.S. Foreign Aid

Massive street protests erupted in Tunisia in late December, which ended the 23-year reign of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Fueled largely by an Internet-connected youth movement, the protests were partly a reaction to the publication by WikiLeaks of documents from U.S. diplomatic cables that revealed pandemic corruption by the ruling party, as well as government oppression that included arrests of lawyers, journalists, and political opponents. Another spark helped to ignite the revolt was the dramatic protest by Mohamed Bouazizi, who publicly set himself on fire on December 17 because of frequent government confiscation of his produce in his street vendor's business and the government's refusal to issue him the required vendor permits.



AP Images

In the last weeks of January, similar protests erupted across Egypt, forcing 30-year dictator Hosni Mubarak to appoint a new government and pledge not to run for another term when his current term expires in September. Massive protests have also spread to the Islamic nations of Jordan, Yemen, and Algeria. A movement similar to those happening in Tunisia and Egypt was put down by the Iranian government last spring, but may rise up again at any moment.

The Islamic dominoes appear to be falling, and a growing wired-in and educated Islamic middle class has made these protests for freedom possible. But what made these protests necessary? The simple answer is that the protests were necessary because the U.S. government propped up those corrupt regimes with massive amounts of foreign aid through the years. All of the governments mentioned above (except Iran) have been 30-year dynastic dictatorships backed by piles of U.S. foreign aid cash. The same U.S. foreign aid that backed the falling corrupt regimes is likely to reduce U.S. influence in those countries' new governments to zero.

Egypt

The State Department's *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* released last year claims that foreign aid giveaways are designed "to harness our civilian power to advance America's interests and help make a world in which more people in more places can live in freedom, enjoy economic opportunity, and have a chance to live up to their God-given potential." But the recent events in the Islamic world have highlighted the reality that foreign aid has historically been used to suppress freedom and has reduced the moral influence of the example of the U.S. Constitution around the world. Various news outlets have echoed precisely what David Reiff of *The New Republic* reported February 4: "U.S. military aid to Egypt — which averages \$1.3 billion annually, and which this week allowed Egyptian police and paramilitaries to bombard protesters with volley after volley of tear gas made by



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Combined Systems International of Jamestown, Pennsylvania — may be grotesque in the objective sense because Washington has provided the Egyptian armed forces with such weapons platforms and systems as F-16 fighter aircraft, Abrams Main Battle Tanks, Apache attack helicopters, anti-aircraft missile batteries, and much else.”

The instruments of oppression used against freedom demonstrations in recent months have all been American-made and paid for by U.S. taxpayers. And this has been the case for decades. Rieff — no opponent of foreign aid in theory — concluded of aid to Egypt, “This is not only a moral scandal, it is a geo-strategic blunder of huge proportions.”

America has given Egypt \$1.3 billion per year in military aid since the 1978 Camp David Accords, along with a comparable level of “development” aid, though development aid has been reduced in recent years. The “take” by the 30-year Mubarak regime from the U.S. taxpayer has been more than \$60 billion, the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid over the same period.

American aid to Egypt has purchased over the past three decades a highly authoritarian regime that, according to classified U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, engages in “routine and pervasive” torture and police brutality. Those same secret U.S. diplomatic cables justified subsidizing the oppressive regime on the basis that aiding the dictatorship purchased peace between Egypt and Israel and won U.S. military overflight access. U.S. diplomats stressed in the cables: “Since our Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program began almost 30 years ago, our strong military relationship has supported peace between Egypt and Israel and ensured critical Suez Canal and overflight access for U.S. military operations.”

Tunisia

U.S. military aid also helped to train the oppressors of the people of Tunisia. According to the website of the U.S. embassy in Tunisia, the U.S. government offered the following military aid to the Ben Ali dictatorship:

- 8.5 million dollars in Foreign Military Finance (FMF) support in 2006. FMF is an ongoing program which helps to sustain and modernize Tunisia’s military forces and equipment and enhances our overall military cooperation programs.
- The U.S. Department of Defense and the Tunisian Ministry of Defense cooperate as well in training and bilateral exercises including the U.S. Department of Defense “International Military Education and Training” (IMET) program which has trained over 3,600 Tunisian military officers/technicians since its inception in the mid-1980s. In 2005, 64 Tunisian military personnel were trained through the IMET program, at a value of \$1.85M.
- Over the past several years, the Diplomatic Security branch of the U.S. Department of State sponsored a series of anti-terrorism training courses for Tunisian security officials. Over 300 Tunisian security officials have participated in courses including training in such areas as crisis response, explosive incidents countermeasures, airport security training, and anti-terrorism.

Of course, anti-terrorism training has a dual use: putting down democratic demonstrations. And the U.S. State Department gave this aid despite its own report that concluded “security forces tortured detainees to elicit confessions and discourage resistance” and the fact that the government was a one-party state: “Tunisia is a republic with a strong presidential system dominated by a single political



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party. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has been in office since 1987.... The ruling party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), was the sole legal party for 25 years — including when it was known as the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD) — and still dominates political life.” The U.S. embassy nevertheless noted of the Ben Ali regime that “Tunisia is an important ally in the global war against terrorism.” “President” Ben Ali reportedly left the country January 14 after a month of ever-increasing protests, despite the words of encouragement, weapons, and training from the U.S. government.

Jordan

Jordan has also erupted in massive upheaval, with protestors demanding political and economic freedoms. According to the State Department’s own 2009 *Human Rights Report*, Jordan is a dictatorship led by a hereditary king, Abdullah II bin al-Hussein. Hussein is descended from the Islamic Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah. The report notes that the Jordanian “constitution concentrates executive and legislative authority in the king.” Therefore, “the government restricted citizens’ right to change their government.... Torture remained a widespread practice ... [and the] government controlled access to certain Internet content.”

Yet Jordan, with a population of just six million, has been the recipient of more than half a billion dollars in U.S. aid annually since 2002, including both military and “development” aid. That’s about \$100 for every man, woman, and child in the country — every year.

Yemen

President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been “President” of Yemen since the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. He was the “President” of Northern Yemen before that, beginning in 1978. The U.S. State Department’s 2009 *Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports* notes that the Yemeni government exhibits thorough “corruption, fraudulent voter registration, and administrative weakness. There were reports that government forces committed arbitrary and unlawful killings. Torture and poor conditions reportedly existed in prisons. Prolonged pretrial detention, judicial corruption, and executive interference continued to undermine due process. Arbitrary arrest and detention increased.”

And yet the State Department openly admits “the United States works with government officials.” That work includes military aid to support “stability” for the existing dictatorship, according to the U.S. State Department: “Defense relations between Yemen and the United States are improving rapidly, with the resumption of International Military Education and Training assistance and the transfer of military equipment and spare parts. In FY 2009 U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for Yemen was \$2.8 million, International Military Education and Training (IMET) was \$1 million, and Non-Proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) was \$2.5 million. In FY 2009 Yemen also received \$19.8 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), \$11.2 million in development assistance, and \$67.1 million in Section 1206 funding.” The State Department describes Yemen as “an important partner in counterterrorism efforts, providing assistance in the military, diplomatic, and counterterrorism finance arenas. Yemen has stepped up its counterterrorism cooperation efforts with the United States, achieving significant results and improving overall security in Yemen.” But of course, the “security” and “stability” that the U.S. aid actually promoted was for Abdullah Saleh’s hold on power over the Yemeni people. Yemen, a poor nation, has also seen massive protests against Abdullah Saleh’s regime.



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Afghanistan Foreign Aid Led to 9/11

Foreign aid served as a cornerstone of making possible the September 11 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Military aid for the Afghan rebels against the Soviet Union in the 1980s helped bring the Taliban warlords to power. While *Time* magazine claimed in 2003 that Osama bin Laden was personally a recipient of Mujahedeen-bound U.S. taxpayer-provided weapons, this is unlikely. There wasn't any need for bin Laden to receive U.S. weapons, as he did little actual fighting and his role in Afghanistan was one of a supplier of weapons and materiel, using his own ample private funding from his family fortune in Saudi Arabia. But the CIA and bin Laden did fund the same Afghan rebel groups under Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and others that eventually became the Taliban.

Hekmatyar reportedly received \$500 million in U.S. weapons and aid, funneled through the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI. And other rebel groups that became part of the Taliban also received U.S. weapons. And these same Taliban groups that emerged as victors in the Soviet-Afghan war became the same Taliban that sponsored bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization after bin Laden's group was expelled from the Sudan in 1996.

Tea Party favorite and freshman Kentucky Senator Rand Paul has proposed as part of the solution to the federal budget crisis that the federal government should end all foreign aid, telling CNN's Wolf Blitzer that the "American people agree with me that when we're short of money, where we can't do the things we need to do in our country, we certainly shouldn't be shipping the money overseas." A Reuters poll released earlier that week demonstrated 73 percent of the American people want to cut or eliminate foreign aid.

Neoconservative commentator David Frum — a fervent supporter of foreign aid — candidly admitted on his blog during the Egyptian protests, "The point of foreign aid is not economics; it is geopolitics: It is intended to shape a recipient country's behavior and, quite literally, buy American influence." Frum, like the Obama administration, advocates that billions in aid continue to flow to Egypt because such largesse will increase the U.S. role as a power-broker just as the Egyptian people are about to throw off the corrupt regime.

Of course, the foreign aid "investment" in foreign dictators around the world has often led American politicians and pontificators to cling to the dictators long after the people of their countries have any use for them. Such has been the case with the Obama-Biden administration and the Mubarak regime in Egypt. A week after massive Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square made worldwide headlines, Secretary of State Clinton and Vice President Biden told Americans they were sticking with the dictator. "I would not refer to him as a dictator," Biden said on PBS' *NewsHour* on January 27. Meanwhile, Clinton told David Gregory on NBC's *Meet the Press* that "President Mubarak and his government have been an important partner to the United States" and that the government was exercising "restraint" in its dealings with the demonstrators, even as beatings, shootings, and murders mounted. But reality did eventually set in. On February 6, long after it became obvious that a transition of power from Mubarak was going to happen anyway, President Obama finally told Fox News' Bill O'Reilly about Mubarak, "What we've said is you've got to lead to a transition now."

That's not to say the Obama administration has allowed too much reality to enter the public debate. The Obama administration's immediate plans include ramping up foreign aid giveaways. The State Department's *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* calls for creation of a host of new job



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positions and agencies, including “creating an Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights” and a “Coordinator for Cyber Issues,” establishing “a Bureau of Policy, Planning, and Learning” and a “Bureau for Counterterrorism,” and appointing “a Global Food Security Coordinator” and “a new Bureau for Energy Resources.” The phrases “abolish” and “phase out” for other agencies or officers already tasked with similar foreign aid and foreign manipulation appear nowhere in the document.

Considering the bloody history of foreign aid, and the current prospects of some major political blow-back caused by U.S. government past backing of dictators with foreign aid money, Senator Rand Paul may have expressed only part of the problem with foreign aid. Americans are paying the monetary cost of foreign aid out of their wallets, but they are also paying another — higher — cost for the ill-will that our foreign aid has created for America abroad. Even if the federal government were enjoying an embarrassing budget surplus, as it did during much of the 19th century, Americans still couldn’t afford the cost of foreign aid.

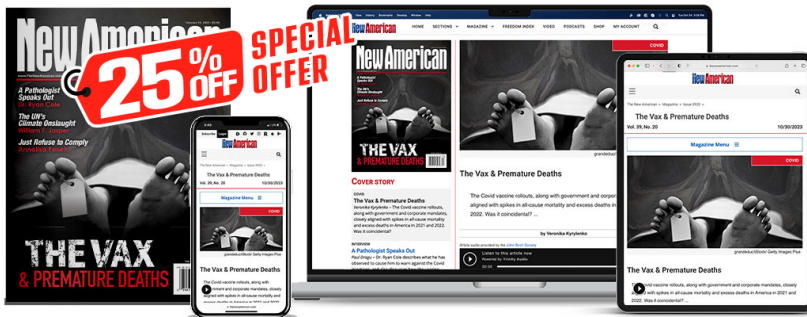


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