



Written by [James Heiser](#) on February 14, 2012

State Dept. Seeks “Special Fund” for Arab Spring

While the purported reforms brought on by last year’s “Arab Spring” appeared to be floundering in Egypt, the Obama administration is preparing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to advance those same reforms throughout the Islamic world.

According to a [news story](#) from Bloomberg, a “special \$700 million fund” to support the “Arab Spring” is part of the State Department’s proposed \$51.6 billion budget for fiscal year 2013:



The administration is proposing to trim assistance to Europe, Eurasia and Central Asia in order to bolster spending in areas given higher priority by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The Middle East would gain, with the creation of a special \$770 million fund to support political and economic reform in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

“This budget follows a year of transformational change in the world,” Thomas Nides, the department’s deputy secretary for management and resources, said today.

In the assessment of critics, Nides’ words simply highlight the fact that whatever good may have been accomplished in the various uprisings last year took place without special State Department funding. But the new budget also comes at a time when the political situation in Egypt is increasingly unstable. News of the “special \$700 million fund” comes in the aftermath of news that the Egyptian government is preparing to prosecute 40 individuals — including 19 Americans — for allegedly receiving foreign funds to support their involvement in the nation’s political system, without informing the government of such funding. For Americans affiliated with the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) — organizations that [have been described](#) as “democracy-promoting groups loosely associated with America’s two major political parties” — and who may soon face legal action at the hands of the Egyptian government, the timing may be seen as particularly unfortunate. The decision to formally and substantially increase the State Department’s involvement in the “reform” process could be perceived as sending an ill-timed signal.

The United States has already announced that it is considering ending U.S. military aid to Egypt — aid which has flowed into the Egyptian military at a rate of \$1.3 billion per year since 1987. According to Bloomberg, the extension of military and other aid to Egypt is linked to permitting such foreign involvement:

The budget includes funding for Egypt, despite the current dispute over U.S. staff of nonprofit



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groups being threatened with felony and misdemeanor charges for not registering or for engaging in political activity.

The budget calls for \$1.3 billion in assistance to the military, \$1.8 million in military education and another \$250 million in economic assistance. U.S. lawmakers have threatened to cut off funding until Egypt lifts the charges and lets the Americans return home.

“There’s bipartisan support, once we get these issues resolved, to support Egypt,” Nides said.

But the scope of State Department largesse extends far beyond Egypt: “The State Department budget calls for \$4.8 billion in spending in Iraq — including \$2.7 billion to support the embassy there and three consulates plus public outreach programs — and for \$4.6 billion for Afghanistan, including \$2.1 billion to support ‘the expansion of diplomacy’ and the ‘extraordinary costs of security in a conflict zone.’”

According to [a report from CNSNews](#), the \$770 million “special fund” — a fund which is separate from foreign aid and support for various embassies — will be used in connection with a total of 11 nations:

They include countries where transitions are underway after violent upheavals — even though uncertainties and concerns about future directions persist (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen); countries and territories where reforms have been proposed and to various degrees implemented but existing regimes remain in place (Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Lebanon and the Palestinian self-ruled territories); a country embroiled in a civil war (Syria) and one whose government has shown no sign of meeting citizens’ demands for change (Iran).

The department’s budget request declares that, as a strategic goal by the end of FY2013, it will “support continued progress toward or lay the foundations for transitions to accountable electoral democracies in 11 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that respect civil and political liberties and human rights.”

Such a fund divided between efforts in so many nations could be criticized as both “too little” and “too much”: “too little” in the sense that it is a relatively small appropriation (in terms of governmental spending, anyway) with a rather large agenda. Critics would also say that the fund is “too much” in that it continues support for a nation-building agenda which has shown few signs of success and which is beholden to ideological — rather than national — concerns. And the pursuit of such an agenda in at least one nation where the United States still does not even maintain an embassy — Iran — could be open to the criticism that such funds better serve the government’s interest of presenting dissent as a product of foreign interference rather than actually giving meaningful aid to such dissidents.

Whether pursued with hundreds of billions of dollars and countless thousands of troops — as has transpired in recent years in Iraq and Afghanistan — or through token funds following a “year of transformational change,” the nation-building agenda continues from one administration to the next. According to CNSNews, Deputy Secretary Nides declared, “The Arab spring has come. ... We need to make sure we have the tools and the flexibility in which to fund these initiatives.” The nebulous nature of such “tools and flexibility” aside, one might wonder whether one may credibly maintain that the “Arab Spring” which was supposedly a popular uprising actually relies upon token support from the State Department for its ultimate success or failure. While such a notion might be gratifying to the Washington elite, a far different reality exists on the streets of Cairo and Alexandria.



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