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U.S. Urgently Needs to Reset Its Bilateral Relationship with Egypt

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Egypt's transitional military regime threw down a direct challenge to the Obama Administration on Monday when government prosecutors announced that 43 people, including 19 Americans, will stand trial for allegedly interfering in Egypt's internal politics. Egyptian officials claim that they illegally funded political groups in Egypt's parliamentary elections, while the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) insist that they provided Egyptians only with technical assistance to help them take part in the elections. The Americans, including Sam LaHood (son of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood), who is the country director for the International Republican Institute, have been banned from leaving the country and could soon be brought to trial.

Hostages in the Struggle for Freedom. One of the lawyers for those charged claimed that the NGO officials have become pawns in a struggle between the Egyptian and American governments over aid policy. That is certainly the case. However, in actuality, they have become hostages in a much larger struggle: the struggle for freedom in Egypt against an unholy alliance between Egypt's transitional military government and the Islamist political parties who will soon assume power.

Both groups oppose Western concepts of democracy, and the transitional government officials—including Faiza Abou el-Naga, who initiated the witch hunt—seek to ingratiate themselves with the incoming Islamist-dominated government in order to preserve their privileged position under

the new regime. The anti-Western Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and other Islamist political parties dominated Egypt's parliamentary elections and are slated to call the shots in post-Mubarak Egypt.

The liberal urban elite who led Egypt's "Facebook revolution" last February were overwhelmed by better-financed and better-organized Islamist parties that manipulated religious symbols to appeal to Egyptian voters, particularly the one-third of the electorate who are illiterate. As The Heritage Foundation warned before the fall of President Hosni Mubarak last February, the Muslim Brotherhood was the predictable winner of any immediate elections and will steer Egypt away from the United States and the West.¹

Now Cairo has taken action to persecute NGOs that were tolerated in Mubarak's Egypt. And the new government may exploit the situation to put on show trials to discredit secular and liberal Egyptian political parties that now form its chief opposition. If it persists in this course, the consequences—both internally and in terms of external relations—will be devastating for Egypt's future.

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Time to Get Tough with Cairo. The actions of the transitional government are so outrageous that they have provoked a rare moment of bipartisan support in Washington for a recalibration of U.S. policy regarding Egypt. To intimidate Egyptians who still strive for freedom, the regime has chosen to make an example of three respected American NGOs that have assisted Egyptian civil society groups: Freedom House, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute. As weak as the Obama Administration has been with regard to advocating for religious freedom and human rights in Egypt, it has finally been provoked and is at least threatening to withhold \$1.5 billion in U.S. aid to Egypt.

According to the fiscal year 2012 foreign operations bill, before obligating any funds to Egypt, the State Department must certify that “the Government of Egypt is supporting the transition to civilian government including holding free and fair elections; implementing policies to protect freedom of expression, association, and religion, and due process of law.” As things stand now, Egypt’s military government in no way qualifies for such certification and should be made to pay the price.

The Obama Administration should:

- **Take quick and decisive action to free the hostages in Egypt.** It should freeze U.S. foreign aid to Cairo and give Egypt’s new leaders an ultimatum: free the American hostages or permanently lose U.S. foreign aid and any American help in refinancing Egypt’s burdensome national debt.
- **Step up U.S. support for building a free civil society in Egypt.** U.S. policy should become more assertive. Of particular importance is supplying the Egyptian people with up-to-date, accurate news and information about the actions of their government. A planned, cost-saving merge of the U.S. government’s Middle East Broadcasting Network (which broadcasts to Egypt on satellite TV and radio) with Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia should be reconsid-

ered. Facilitating the free flow of information is a necessary prerequisite for building a free society in Egypt. Washington should also leverage U.S. foreign aid to ensure that Egypt’s new government respects the freedom and human rights of women and religious minorities, particularly Egypt’s embattled Christian minority.

- **Condition U.S. foreign aid on continued Egyptian compliance with its peace treaty with Israel.** With Egypt moving in the wrong direction, Syria in turmoil, and Iran pushing for nuclear weapons, Israel needs the U.S. more than ever. Recent statements regarding Israel’s intentions to bomb Iran from Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta send the wrong signal to Israel’s enemies that such support may be waning. The Obama Administration should clearly state that continued U.S. aid depends on Egypt abiding by its legal commitments to fight terrorism and respect the terms of its 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

Take off the Kid Gloves. The Obama Administration should take off the kid gloves and firmly warn Egypt’s transitional leaders that they will pay a heavy price for their crackdown on NGOs that support freedom, human rights, and the rule of law in Egypt. The prospective loss of \$1.5 billion in annual assistance and American opposition to new loans from international lending institutions may exert a powerful influence in persuading Egypt’s new leaders to discontinue their politically motivated prosecutions.

Egypt faces an increasingly bleak economic future without substantial foreign assistance, and Cairo’s new rulers know that they are unlikely to stay in power for long unless they can improve Egypt’s faltering economy.

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1. See James Phillips, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Lurks as a Long-Term Threat to Freedom,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 3138, February 8, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/02/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-lurks-as-a-long-term-threat-to-freedom>.