



# Why Is Egypt's Military Using Strong-Arm Tactics?

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Egyptian security forces last week raided the offices of human rights organizations, including several backed by the U.S. government, further straining relations between the countries. Jeffrey Brown discusses ongoing upheaval in Egypt with Georgetown University's Samer Shehata and The Council on Foreign Relations' Steven Cook.

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### JEFFREY BROWN:

We look at the situation now with Samer Shehata, a professor at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, and Steven Cook, senior fellow for Middle East studies with the Council on Foreign Relations. Both have recently been in Egypt.

Welcome to both of you.

STEVEN COOK, Council on Foreign Relations: Thank you.

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### JEFFREY BROWN:

Steven Cook, if you look generally, what is going on? Picking up off that piece, what is going on to motivate the military with these strong-arm tactics?

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### STEVEN COOK:

Well, I think the piece touches on three things that the military wants out of the transition period, none of which conform to the democratic demands from Tahrir Square last year.

The military wants to hold on to its economic interests, which are vast, as the piece pointed out. It has a different view of stability and social cohesion in Egypt than the kind of cantankerous debate free-for-all that you're seeing in Egypt right now.

And, most importantly, Egyptian armed forces wants to retain its role as the source of legitimacy and authority in Egypt. In a democracy, the people are the source of authority and legitimacy. So, it's clear that what they're trying to do is salvage as much as they can from the previous regime, while taking account of some of the demands from Tahrir.

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### JEFFREY BROWN:

And, Samer Shehata, is there a way, is there path to do that, in other words, to hold on to some power, but to cede to some of these things that people seem to be demanding?

SAMER SHEHATA, Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies: Well, people in Egypt right now are talking about this. And they're talking about a deal possibly being done by the civilian political forces with, not the military overall, but really the 24 or 22 — we don't know how many — generals who are really in charge, what's called the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, a deal that would essentially provide them three things, as Steve mentioned, first, lack of accountability for financial crimes and other crimes that were possibly committed in the many years they have been in power.

There have been over 150 people who have been killed since Mubarak stepped down on their watch by regime violence against domestic protesters. They don't also want, as Steve mentioned, civilian control of the military. They don't want a civilian as the minister of defense.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

They are not going to cede that.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

They are not going to cede that. And I think that's probably unlikely in the short term.

And the third thing they don't want is economic transparency, because clearly they control significant segments of the Egyptian economy, and they benefit from that. So a deal is being talked about right now, of course, not openly, that would provide these kinds of — some guarantees for them to exit. And, of course, time is running out.

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**RAY SUAREZ:**

Now, what of these raids last week on these international organizations, particularly American organizations?

First, tell people what these organizations do in Egypt. And why would the military go after them?

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**STEVEN COOK:**

Well, the three most prominent that were raided, the American ones that were raided were the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and Freedom House.

And they are there to, one, observe the elections that are ongoing — we're in a prolonged election period in Egypt right now — and also to carry out training programs, election observing, party formation, capacity building, all those kinds of things that these groups are well known to do well around the world. And they are actually in part federally funded. They get their money from the National Endowment for Democracy, which is funded in part by the Congress.

The military undertook raids against these organizations, as well as a number of others, arguing that they are operating illegally in the country and that the Egyptian ones are illegally taking foreign funding. The irony is, of course, as your lead-in piece pointed out, the military takes \$1.3 billion from the United States on an annual basis.

It's hard to figure out exactly what the military strategy is here, to be completely honest with you. The military has said over and over again that it is preparing the way for democracy. They should then see these organizations as asset, rather than as foes.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Well, is there a strong anti-U.S., anti-foreign sentiment that they're trying to play to? I mean, is there the possibility that they play to the people in that sense? And might it work?

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Well, before we go there, some of these organizations are Egyptian organizations.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Right.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Right, Egyptian organizations that try to ensure the independence of the judiciary, for example.

But getting to your question, yes, there is a serious skepticism towards foreign organizations operating in Egypt among some segments of the Egyptian population, not everybody. And many believe or see this as potentially foreign meddling in Egyptian domestic politics.

Now, it needs to be said that this is an old tactic of the Mubarak regime that was, you know, on display for many, many years and used for political benefit. So, I think less and less people believe that, but, nevertheless, as a result of Egypt's past and history, there is this concern or sensitivity to foreign intervention.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Now, the U.S. government expressed outrage right away. And you mentioned the \$1.3 billion that the U.S. gives every year to the military.

Is that leverage? I mean, clearly there's leverage, but how strong — how much power does the U.S. have to control things there?

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**STEVEN COOK:**

We are in a situation where we have diminished leverage over the Egyptian armed forces, because, first of all, that \$1.3 billion is the same \$1.3 billion that we started giving the Egyptians in 1985.

If you do the math, it's worth 40 or 50 percent of what it once was. The Egyptian armed forces has been angry at Congress' repeated attempts to dock that aid for human rights abuses, bad elections, the kind of crimes that went on during the Mubarak period.

And, finally, there is a significant lack of trust between the United States and Egypt, despite all of the talk about a strategic relationship. So, what this actually in a broader perspective represents is part of the long goodbye between Egypt and the United States.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

The long goodbye, meaning?

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**STEVEN COOK:**

The long goodbye, meaning that, ultimately, however things play out in Egypt, whether it's a blossoming democracy or some kind of reconstituted authoritarian regime, there is going to be a divergence between the United States and Egypt over the long term.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Both sides? Both sides?

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**STEVEN COOK:**

Both sides, absolutely.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Do you see that?

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Well, I think that a democratic Egypt, certainly, that's — policies, foreign policies and regional policies, reflect the wishes of the Egyptian people, and not Mr. Mubarak, is certainly going to be much more pro-Palestinian, for example, much more critical of U.S. policy in the region, whether it's boots on the ground or a hostile policy towards Iran and so on.

So, yes, a democratic Egypt will have an independent foreign policy. And that will cause some friction with the United States. The United States has gotten a great deal — quote, unquote — over the last 30 years, the only country whose nuclear vessels have had passage through the Suez Canal, intelligence-sharing, military cooperation and essentially a pliant Egypt.

And, of course, that is going to change if there's democracy. And it should change.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

So, what kind of discussions are going on here in Washington among U.S. policy-makers?

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**STEVEN COOK:**

Well, overall, there is a determination to see this through in the hope that Egypt ends up a more democratic and open place.

But there is a tension at the heart of this, because our primary interlocutors are the military. The military has served Washington's interests over...

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

They're the people we still know best.

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**STEVEN COOK:**

And they're the people we still know best and they're the people that we're continuing to work with, because those interests have not gone away.

I don't think policy-makers have exactly worked out the tension between these two things. And that's why we are kind of being taken along with the news cycles in Egypt, rather than having a specifically proactive policy towards achieving certain goals.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Final last word on that?

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Well, I think there's also a realization that American influence in the Middle East more generally, in Egypt specifically, has declined significantly. There's no question about that.

You can feel it in Egypt. I mean, when Mr. Obama made a statement criticizing the use of violence a week ago or so, it appeared on page three of the Egyptian papers. In the past, that would be above the fold and so on. So, it's Egyptian actors who are the primary people shaping Egypt's future. And that's also as it should be.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

All right, Samer Shehata, Steven Cook, thank you both very much.

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**STEVEN COOK:**

Thank you.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

You're welcome.

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