

Egypt's Travel Ban on American
 NGO Workers

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Maintaining leverage in Egypt requires demonstrating a willingness to use it -- particularly when vital U.S. interests are at stake, such as the safety of American citizens.

The Egyptian government's recent travel ban on American democracy workers is the latest -- and most grievous -- attack on U.S.-funded NGOs operating in the country. Six employees are not allowed to travel, including Sam LaHood, the son of U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. Four other non-U.S. citizens are also affected. All ten are employed by either the International Republican Institute (IRI) or the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

Given Washington's acute interest in protecting such organizations and -- most importantly -- the U.S. citizens who work for them, the Obama administration must act swiftly to ensure the workers' safety and demand that the local NGO offices remain open. Failure to do so would invite further crackdowns on pro-democracy groups and make the United States appear weak in the eyes of an Egyptian polity that is increasingly hostile to American interests.

The travel ban represents an escalation in the Egyptian military's crackdown on civil society. Since assuming control last February, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has used state-run media to foster a hostile political environment for pro-democracy NGOs, accusing them of catalyzing instability and portraying as traitors the Egyptian citizens who work for them.

Egyptian police had raided the offices of seventeen such NGOs, including IRI, NDI, and Freedom House, on December 29 of last year. Although the SCAF assured Defense Secretary Leon Panetta that these and similar actions would cease, the inquisition has continued: Egyptian employees of these organizations are still being investigated, and their offices remain closed.

Indeed, the Obama administration's current approach toward the SCAF -- dealing with bad behavior through communication rather than consequences -- is failing. For example, the president spoke with Defense Minister Muhammad Hussein Tantawi on Friday night and, according to the White House, "underscored that

nongovernmental organizations should be able to operate freely." Yet on Saturday, Sam LaHood, IRI's director in Egypt, was prevented from leaving the country.

Previous experience suggests that a stronger U.S. response, such as threatening to withhold at least part of the \$1.3 billion in annual military aid to Egypt, could convince the SCAF to lift the ban. This is precisely what the Bush administration did in 2002, when it successfully pressured the Mubarak regime to release Egyptian American democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim from prison by threatening to withhold \$130 million. Given the SCAF's recent escalation against NGOs, it is time once again to enact this strategy.

Until now, the administration's hesitance to withhold military aid has been understandable: policymakers view such aid as vital to maintaining U.S. leverage, given the longstanding relationship between the American and Egyptian militaries, not to mention the recent election of an Islamist-dominated parliament that will be hostile to American interests. But maintaining leverage requires demonstrating a willingness to use it -- particularly when vital U.S. interests are at stake, such as the safety of American citizens. If Washington does not react vigorously, it will have difficulty preventing the SCAF from extending its bad behavior to other vital areas.

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