

US Navy and Marines Dispatched to Red Sea: Washington asserts its authority in Egypt

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US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns arrived in Cairo for two days of talks with the leaders of Egypt's new military-backed government, amid reports that the US Navy has dispatched ships and Marines to the Red Sea Coast.

Burns met interim President Adly Mansour and Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi. His visit was marked by mass protests by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and deposed President Mohamed Mursi, chanting "Down with the military regime! Down with the dictator! President Mursi, no one else!"

Last Thursday, Reuters stated that two US Navy ships patrolling in the Middle East had been moved closer to Egypt's coast in recent days, citing Marine Corps Commandant General James Amos' conversation with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

"Egypt is [in] a crisis right now," Amos said. "When that happens, what we owe the senior leadership of our nation are some options."

Amos said the USS San Antonio, an amphibious transport dock, and the USS Kearsarge, an amphibious assault ship, had moved further north in the Red Sea to make the movement of helicopters and other equipment easier. "Why? Because we don't know what's going to happen," he said.

DEBKAFfile, which is close to Israel's Mossad, claimed Sunday that the despatch was aimed at disciplining Israel and "as a deterrent to the generals in Cairo"—placing assault ships carrying 2,600 Marines off the coast that would "step in" if "Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his generals... took their persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood too far."

A genuine concern for the US is the danger that the generals may succeed in transforming popular opposition to their rule into an all-out civil war—either due to the clampdown against their Islamist opponents or, in the longer term, due to the measures they intend to impose on the working class. However, this implies support for the generals, rather than opposition. The Obama administration is in fact playing a pivotal role in securing the regime created by the July 3 coup—diplomatically, financially and now militarily.

Burns' official mission is to urge "an end to all violence and a transition leading to an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government". He would discuss the transition roadmap and "the need to transition to a democratically-elected government as soon as possible, and the immediate need for all political leaders to work to prevent violence and incitement," the State Department said.

To assume the pose of an “honest broker”, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki has supported German demands for an “end to all restrictive measures” against Mursi and other MB leaders. However, the US has still refused to designate the July 3 events as a coup, so that it can continue providing \$1.3 billion in aid to the Egyptian military. Its polite urgings to the military come amid a massive, escalating clampdown.

Senior Brotherhood leader Essam El-Erian has said 240 Morsi supporters, jailed since a deadly clash with army troops a week ago, have had their detentions extended in a closed hearing in prison. He asked, “How could there not be a single lawyer for 240 defendants? This constitutes a serious violation of all the principles of the rule of law.”

An indication of the social forces behind the prosecution of the Brotherhood is the fact that investigators have questioned Mursi and others over their escape from Wadi Natrun prison during the 2011 uprising against Hosni Mubarak.

The US is also ensuring that the regime is adequately financed through its regional allies, the Gulf Monarchies.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait have together pledged \$12 billion in aid to Egypt so far, with \$5 billion provided by the Saudi regime. On Saturday President Barack Obama discussed Egypt with King Abdullah.

Coup leader Al-Sisi clearly felt confident enough to defend his power grab, declaring Friday that Mursi had “entered into a conflict with the judiciary, the media, the police and the public opinion. Then [he] also entered into a conflict with the armed forces,” making comments about the military that “were considered a stab to the national pride.”

Pandering to US interests is a major factor shaping the transitional regime being set up under the auspices of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) as a civilian front.

Interim President Mansour appointed Al-Beblawi, a former finance minister and liberal economist who has worked with international financial institutions, as prime minister. El-Beblawi has named another liberal economist, Ahmed Galal, who has a PhD from Boston University, as his finance minister.

Nabil Fahmy, a former ambassador to the United States, is the new foreign minister.

The junta’s repression is so naked that the Salafi al-Nour party has declined to join the interim government. However, it is backing the regime from outside. “We are outside of the road map, but not outside of the political scene,” Nour deputy leader Bassam Zarqa told *Al Jazeera*.

It was left to Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and leader of the nominally liberal opposition, to take the post of interim vice president for foreign relations and provide a cover for SCAF’s manoeuvres. He has no mandate to speak of, but his role was made clear when Khaled Dawoud, a spokesman for the National Salvation Front, said ElBaradei was no longer the head of the umbrella grouping because “he is now a vice president for all Egyptians.”

Washington has again given its imprimatur to these sordid affairs, describing itself as “cautiously encouraged” by the timeline set down by the military for a new constitution and a new government by early next year.

The constitution being drafted is an anti-democratic monstrosity. Its new provisions include dropping the existing stipulation of a 50 percent share of seats for workers and farmers in parliament and the omission of any protection of the right to strike. The state can also legislate some form of forced labour, if this is deemed necessary. Military trials for civilians are also possible.

Islam and Sharia law as “recognized sources in the doctrines of the people of the Sunna and Jam’aa”—i.e. Sunni Islam—“are the main source of legislation.”

Of equal significance is the type of economic measures being considered, which would ruin vast layers of the population.

Foreign reserves have fallen by almost 60 percent since Mubarak’s fall, leaving just \$14.9 billion in the state’s coffers—the equivalent of just three months of imports. This is to be rectified through a savage assault on working people.

In 2012 al-Beblawi described the Egyptian budget as “abnormal,” being made up of “things we do not make use of.” He suggested targeting not only wages, but also subsidies on fuel and wheat to pay back foreign lenders in a move that will drive millions into penury. Energy subsidies presently make up 33 percent of Egypt’s budget.

A quarter of Egyptians already live below the poverty line. Official employment is at 13 percent—3.5 million, but real youth unemployment probably stands at 82 percent. Fully 21.4 percent of the 27.3 million strong work force are temporary workers, and at least 46.5 percent of those employees work in the unofficial sector with no job security.

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