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Subject: U.S. Groups Helped Nurture Arab Uprisings (NYT)

WASHINGTON — Even as the United States poured billions of dollars into foreign military programs and anti-terrorism campaigns, a small core of American government-financed organizations were promoting democracy in authoritarian Arab states.

The money spent on these programs was minute compared with efforts led by the Pentagon. But as American officials and others look back at the uprisings of the Arab Spring, they are seeing that the United States' democracy-building campaigns played a bigger role in fomenting protests than was previously known, with key leaders of the movements having been trained by the Americans in campaigning, organizing through new media tools and monitoring elections.

A number of the groups and individuals directly involved in the revolts and reforms sweeping the region, including the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and grass-roots activists like Entsar Qadhi, a youth leader in Yemen, received training and financing from groups like the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House, a nonprofit human rights organization based in Washington, according to interviews in recent weeks and American diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks.

The work of these groups often provoked tensions between the United States and many Middle Eastern leaders, who frequently complained that their leadership was being undermined, according to the cables.

The Republican and Democratic institutes are loosely affiliated with the Republican and Democratic Parties. They were created by Congress and are financed through the National Endowment for Democracy, which was set up in 1983 to channel grants for promoting democracy in developing nations. The National Endowment receives about \$100 million annually from Congress. Freedom House also gets the bulk of its money from the American government, mainly from the State Department.

No one doubts that the Arab uprisings are home grown, rather than resulting from "foreign influence," as alleged by some Middle Eastern leaders.

"We didn't fund them to start protests, but we did help support their development of skills and networking," said Stephen McInerney, executive director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, a Washington-based advocacy and research group. "That training did play a role in what ultimately happened, but it was their revolution. We didn't start it."

Some Egyptian youth leaders attended a 2008 technology meeting in New York, where they were taught to use social networking and mobile technologies to promote democracy. Among those sponsoring the meeting were Facebook, Google, MTV, Columbia Law School and the State Department.

"We learned how to organize and build coalitions," said Bashem Fathy, a founder of the youth movement that ultimately drove the Egyptian uprisings. Mr. Fathy, who attended training with Freedom House, said, "This certainly helped during the revolution."

Ms. Qadhi, the Yemeni youth activist, attended American training sessions in Yemen.

"It helped me very much because I used to think that change only takes place by force and by weapons," she said.

But now, she said, it is clear that results can be achieved with peaceful protests and other nonviolent means. But some members of the activist groups complained in interviews that the United States was hypocritical for helping them at the same time that it was supporting the governments they sought to change.

"While we appreciated the training we received through the NGOs sponsored by the U.S. government, and it did help us in our struggles, we are also aware that the same government also trained the state security investigative service, which was responsible for the harassment and jailing of many of us," said Mr. Fathy, the Egyptian activist.

Interviews with officials of the nongovernmental groups and a review of diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks show that the democracy programs were constant sources of tension between the United States and many Arab governments.

The cables, in particular, show how leaders in the Middle East and North Africa viewed these groups with deep suspicion, and tried to weaken them. Today the work of these groups is among the reasons that governments in turmoil claim that Western meddling was behind the uprisings, with some officials noting that leaders like Ms. Qadhi were trained and financed by the United States.

Diplomatic cables report how American officials frequently assured skeptical governments that the training was aimed at reform, not promoting revolutions.

Last year, for example, a few months before national elections in Bahrain, officials there barred a representative of the National Democratic Institute from entering the country.

In Bahrain, officials worried that the group's political training "disproportionately benefited the opposition," according to a January 2010 cable.

In Yemen, where the United States has been spending millions on an anti-terrorism program, officials complained that American efforts to promote democracy amounted to "interference in internal Yemeni affairs." But nowhere was the opposition to the American groups stronger than in Egypt.

Egypt, whose government receives \$1.5 billion annually in military and economic aid from the United States, viewed efforts to promote political change with deep suspicion, even outrage.

Hosni Mubarak, then Egypt's president, was "deeply skeptical of the U.S. role in democracy promotion," said a diplomatic cable from the United States Embassy in Cairo dated Oct. 9, 2007.

At one time the United States financed political reform groups by channeling money through the Egyptian government.

But in 2005, under a Bush administration initiative, local groups were given direct grants, much to the chagrin of Egyptian officials.

According to a September 2006 cable, Mahmoud Nayel, an official with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, complained to American Embassy officials about the United States government's "arrogant tactics in promoting reform in Egypt."

The main targets of the Egyptian complaints were the Republican and Democratic institutes. Diplomatic cables show that Egyptian officials complained that the United States was providing support for "illegal organizations."

Gamal Mubarak, the former president's son, is described in an Oct. 20, 2008, cable as "irritable about direct U.S. democracy and governance funding of Egyptian NGOs."

The Egyptian government even appealed to groups like Freedom House to stop working with local political activists and human rights groups.

"They were constantly saying: 'Why are you working with those groups, they are nothing. All they have are slogans,'" said Sherif Mansour, an Egyptian activist and a senior program officer for the Middle East and North Africa at Freedom House.

When their appeals to the United States government failed, the Egyptian authorities reacted by restricting the activities of the American nonprofit organizations.

Hotels that were to host training sessions were closed for renovations. Staff members of the groups were followed, and local activists were intimidated and jailed. State-owned newspapers accused activists of receiving money from American intelligence agencies.

Affiliating themselves with the American organizations may have tainted leaders within their own groups. According to one diplomatic cable, leaders of the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt told the American Embassy in 2009 that some members of the group had accused Ahmed Maher, a leader of the January uprising, and other leaders of "treason" in a mock trial related to their association with Freedom House, which more militant members of the movement described as a "Zionist organization."

A prominent blogger, according to a cable, threatened to post the information about the movement leaders' links to Freedom House on his blog.

There is no evidence that this ever happened, and a later cable shows that the group ousted the members who were complaining about Mr. Maher and other leaders.

In the face of government opposition, some groups moved their training sessions to friendlier countries like Jordan or Morocco. They also sent activists to the United States for training.

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