

Egyptian junta declares state of alert after storming of Israeli embassy

By Johannes Stern
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The US-backed military junta in Egypt has responded with large-scale violence after protesters stormed the Israeli embassy in Giza, near Cairo, on September 9. Units of Egypt's Central Security Forces (CSF) mounted a crackdown on demonstrators in front of the Israeli embassy Friday night, killing three protesters and injuring more than 1,000.

The CSF launched their attack after dozens of protesters had managed to break through the wall surrounding the embassy building and enter the lobby of the embassy.

Protesters reportedly threw items and documents out of the windows, including "confidential" material showing close ties between the Egyptian and the Israeli regimes. This collaboration, which is deeply unpopular among Egyptians, was an issue during the revolution from the start.

Popular anger against the Zionist state mounted after the August 18 killing of six Egyptian soldiers during a border raid by the Israel Defense Forces. There have been several protests in front of the embassy in recent weeks demanding the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador.

Two Israeli diplomats and six Israeli guards were reportedly inside the embassy as protesters entered the building. They hid in a secure room behind a steel door. An Egyptian special commando went to the embassy to evacuate the diplomats after Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Levanon called a member of the military council.

Egyptian special forces later brought the ambassadorial staff, including Levanon and his family, to the airport where they left on an Israeli Air Force plane. Only the deputy Israeli ambassador remained in Egypt; he is currently staying at the US embassy.

The protests at the embassy and the attack happened

after thousands of protesters marched to the Israeli Embassy on Friday after a day of peaceful mass protests against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on Tahrir Square in Cairo and in other major Egyptian cities. After six months of military rule and a week of renewed mass strikes, there is a strong feeling among workers that social and political oppression continues largely unchanged from the period before the overthrow of US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak.

Confronted with a new upsurge of the working class, which was the main social force in ousting Mubarak, the junta is deeply concerned. Already before Friday's protests the SCAF issued threatening statements against demonstrators. In its 74th communiqué it warned that "excesses against the armed forces, its facilities or other governmental facilities would be a national security threat that will be firmly dealt with and the culprits punished." The council also issued six directives for Prime Minister Essam Sharaf's government to follow immediately.

Amongst them were calls to take action against "satellite television networks that incite violence and protests," calls "to halt all strike actions," and calls to enforce the junta's anti-strike law.

Only shortly after the CSF attacked protesters, the junta declared a state of alert and called for an emergency meeting consisting of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, members of his cabinet, and the SCAF.

Later on Saturday, Egyptian Minister of Information Osama Heikal gave a statement on television summing up the meeting. He announced that "deterrent actions" would be taken, stressing that one of the main actions will be the full application of the emergency law.

He also said that Egypt remains committed to international treaties and agreements—obviously

alluding to the peace treaty with Israel. Then he asked Egypt's political forces to "take responsibility for their role in the current laxity in security and morals."

On Sunday the Egyptian state-owned daily *Al-Ahram* reported that military police have already arrested 130 protesters who allegedly were amongst the people storming the embassy. According to the Cairo-based news agency MENA, they will be referred to an Emergency State Security Court after interrogation.

Security forces also raided the offices of *Al Jazeera* in Cairo on Sunday; the channel has reported live on clashes between the police and protesters at the Israeli Embassy.

The Egyptian junta is clearly seizing upon these events in its efforts to disorient and repress the rising struggles of the working class, to maintain its hold on power. In an interview with the satellite channel *Al-Arabiya*, Heikal claimed that the "January revolution had been a genuine, peaceful revolt that sought to bring down and replace the old regime. The current events in Egypt aim to destroy the country and induce chaos."

Heikal knows that this is a lie. The Egyptian Revolution was not peaceful, as more than 1,000 protesters have been killed by the military regime so far. The junta and the interim government are extensions of the Mubarak regime, defending the interests of the tiny and wealthy Egyptian ruling elite and its imperialist backers. The junta has arrested thousands of workers and youth, trying them in military courts and cracking down on protests and strikes.

Accounts of the crackdown on the Israeli embassy protest make clear the close collaboration between the Egyptian junta, US imperialism and the Israeli state—which faces mass protests against social inequality in Israel itself. It seems that Egyptian security forces only began their attack after the US and Israel intervened. According to the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta called the head of the Supreme Council, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, demanding an end to the embassy attack.

"There's no time to waste," Panetta reportedly told Tantawi in a call at 1 AM, warning of a tragic outcome that "would have very severe consequences."

Before calling Tantawi, Panetta reportedly had received a call from Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud

Barak with a plea to intervene. Other news sources reported that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and various other senior Israeli officials followed the unfolding events in Jerusalem via a live-stream of the surveillance cameras installed in the embassy. Reportedly there were also talks between Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama.

On Saturday, Netanyahu thanked the US and the Egyptian governments and its special commandos for their aid in a televised press conference. He stated that the Middle East is undergoing a "historic earthquake" and drew a comparison to the situation after World War I, when the region was largely divided between British and French imperialism along lines laid out in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. Netanyahu stressed that it is necessary to operate calmly and responsibly because "events here happen due to massive undercurrent forces."

He added that Israel will maintain peace with Egypt, improve relations with Turkey and return to direct talks with the Palestinians while advancing its own interests. Its aim is "to prevent a catastrophe for the state of Israel."

This reflects growing concerns in the Israeli ruling class over rising social opposition inside Israel itself, as well as mounting tensions between Israel and Turkey over Israel's war in Gaza and the attack last year on the MV *Mavi Marmara*. (See "Growing tensions between Turkey and Israel")

The Egyptian junta's reaction to Panetta's call underscores that it is neither willing nor able to freeze its ties to Israel. Not only is the Egyptian junta led by generals who have maintained Egypt's pro-Israeli policies for years, but together with Israel, Egypt is the biggest recipient of US foreign aid. Like the Netanyahu government itself, the junta's overriding concern is to repress opposition by the working class to capitalist rule throughout the Middle East.

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