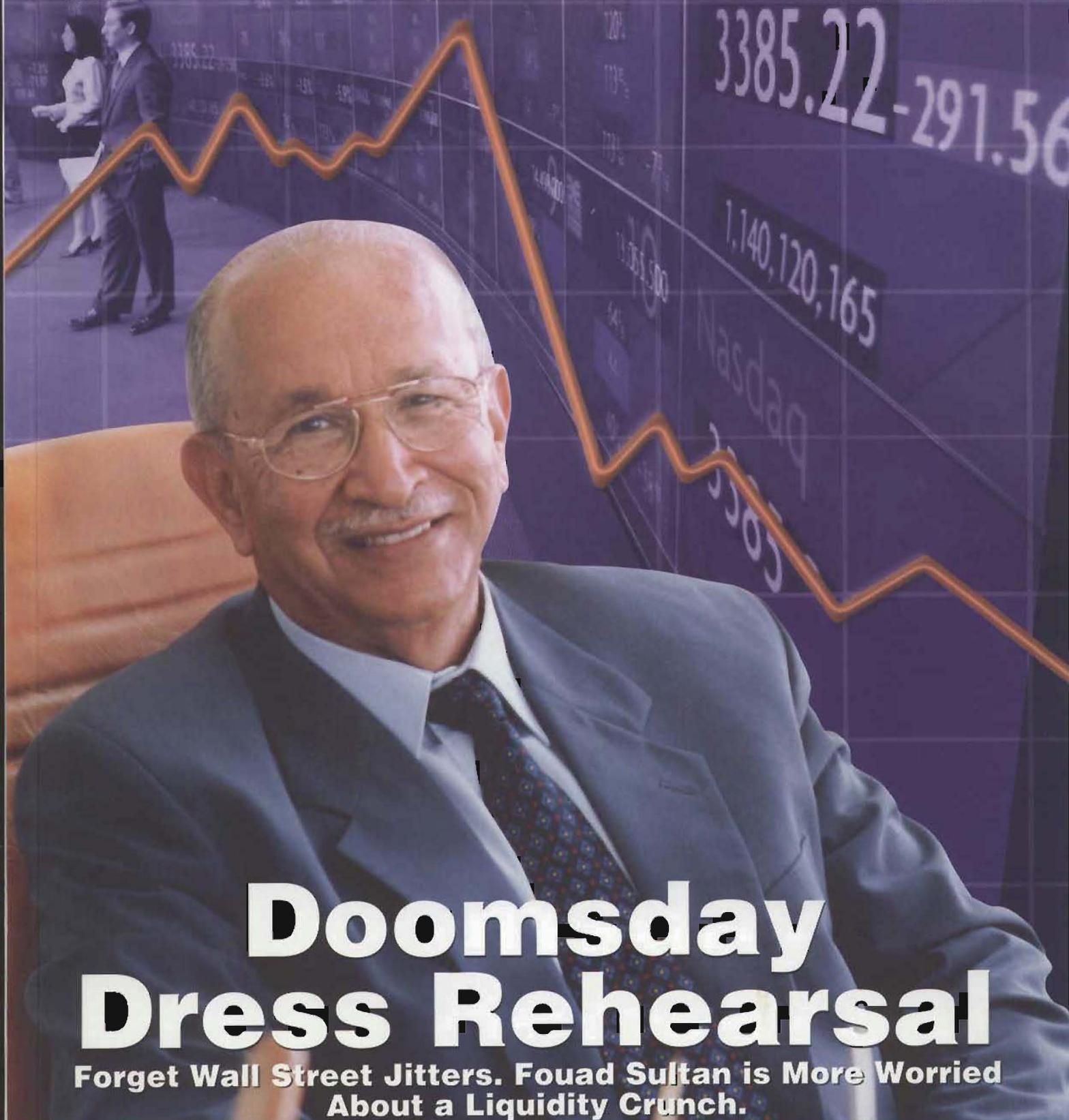


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EGYPT AND AMERICA: “FREE AT LAST?”

By John Duke Anthony

“Time marches on,” the saying goes. But even in the afterglow of heads of state meetings, such as the one last month between Presidents Clinton and Mubarak, human attitudes don’t always keep pace.

Prior to the onset of the new millennium, there were extended periods when the nature and extent of Egyptian-US relations often appeared as though they had been encased in unmeltable ice. US diplomats posted to Cairo from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s were, as a matter of policy, discouraged from trying to elevate America’s relations with Egypt to a level that was anything more than normal.

The reason was Israel. The evidence is abundant in the oral histories recorded by American Foreign Service officers who were posted to Egypt. These histories are now available for use by scholars and researchers through the offices of the American Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

And then, oddly enough, there was another time, equally as long, but now possibly drawing to a close, when the relationship was exactly the opposite, even if the constancy and weight of influence wielded by one of its components was not. Indeed,



Presidents Hosni Mubarak (l.) and Bill Clinton in the Oval Office at the White House.

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from the late 1970s until just recently, American officials decided that the time had come to elevate the US-Egyptian relationship to “special” and “exceptional.” The principal reason again was Israel.

In the earlier era, the Egyptian-American relationship was heavily influenced by the extent to which Cairo, in the eyes of US decision-makers, measured up to what, for many, was a single, all-embracing criterion. The criterion was the extent to which Egypt supported or criticized Israel’s overall foreign policies, on one hand, and Israel’s treatment of the Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians

whose lands it had seized in the June 1967 war, and to this day continues to occupy, on the other.

The latter era, in play since the 1979 Camp David Peace Accords, began to melt the previous ice age in Cairo-Washington relations. In the process, the strategic status of Egypt, as seen by American and Israeli officials alike, changed from a liability to an asset.

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President Mubarak met with US Congressional leaders including (from left) House minority Leader Dick Gephardt, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, House Majority Leader Dick Arme, and Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle at the US Capitol.

defined by how much of Washington officialdom views the situation as it affects Israel. No amount of presidential hand shaking, eloquent speeches, and flowery official communiqués highlighting how the relationship has grown in stature and maturity can conceal that fact. From the perspective of peripheral vision, many US Government decision-makers continue to deliberate about what US policies towards Egypt should be with one eye towards how such policies might affect Israel, on one hand, and, although seldom stated, the Jewish State's American supporters, on the other.

It is no secret that the fact that US policies toward most Middle Eastern nations remain so predominantly Israel-centric in their formulation and implementation is a matter of ongoing consternation to Egypt and virtually all the other countries in the region. What Egypt and other Middle Eastern states long to see is a US policymaking process that, beyond projecting and protecting America's own interests, also reflects the legitimate needs and concerns of all the region's polities. To proceed otherwise, as one former diplomat posted to Egypt has said, is "morally wrong, strategically wrong, and bad for American interests."

Others note that such an approach to policymaking is not only illogical, it also fails to provide due diligence to the implications for American bilateral and

multilateral relations with countries representing 270 million Arabs and 1.2 billion Muslims.

TURNING A CORNER?

Where is the Egyptian-US relationship now? In light of the highly successful state visit to Washington last month by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, one could easily be tempted to conclude that both sides have agreed to let bygones be bygones. However, in this, one must be cautious. At the end of the day, reality brooks no illusions.

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In other words, it is not as if the phenomenon of an Israel-driven agenda dominating the formulation of American policies towards Egypt is dead and gone. The truth is exactly the opposite. The past lives on. Old patterns persist.

But, despite this, something new is afoot. Egypt and America have turned a corner. For Egyptians and Americans alike, and, most importantly, for the two of them together, the view ahead looks different, and far brighter, than the one before. For the first time since Egypt became a republic half a century ago, the American-Egyptian relationship now has a greater chance than ever to thrive and be viewed and assessed on its merits. One can finally begin to evaluate the relationship's benefits without having to filter them through the lenses of a third party.

What are some of the dimensions of this new view, this promising potential, and how did they emerge? What are their implications for Egyptian and American interests and policies?

STUBBORN FACTS

From the American side, no one denies that Egypt's position and role in regional and international affairs is one of enormous importance. Yet much of the discussion and debate in Washington that focuses on Egypt still centers on how it relates to key US

foreign policy objectives with reference to Israeli priorities and requirements. This is and will continue to be a formidable fact of life in American domestic politics.

In this sense, there is no doubt that many American policymakers continue to view Egypt as an object, as a nation that needs to be influenced and cajoled, if not also constrained and controlled. Yet, increasingly, more and more American leaders are seeing Egypt as just the opposite. They view it as an actor to be reckoned with in its own right. These leaders find Egypt to be a country, like the United States and most other nations, with its own particular mix of national interests and imperatives, and with an extraordinary array of human resources and other assets at hand for use in advancing those interests in tandem with its many American and other friends.

What is new and potentially profound, in terms of its implications for the bilateral relationship and for overall American and Egyptian interests and policies, is that this second, more recent, school of thought or understanding is now ascendant. The view from Cairo is becoming more and more similar to the view from Washington, and vice versa.

This is not to say that all Egyptian and US policies and interests are identical. Indeed, the differences in viewpoint between them on matters pertaining to the Arab-Israeli diplomatic process, on what to do about Sudan, and on the goal of making the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their means of deployment, are but three significant cases in point.

Rather, what is far more important in the bilateral relationship is that the official perspectives of Cairo and Washington alike are increasingly grounded in similar perceptions of reality – a similar worldview. This view acknowledges a multitude of

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common opportunities and challenges between Egypt and the United States. These sometimes conflict with but more often complement a broad range of the two countries' respective goals and objectives.

OUT-SIZED ROLES IN TANDEM

The first of the numerous and multifaceted commonalities that typify evolving American and Egyptian attitudes toward world affairs remains their joint commitment to achieving Middle East peace and stability. Remove either the peace or stability attributes from the calculus of any American-Egyptian strategic equation, and the regional and broader international picture would be far less appealing. What the picture would portray is a world in which neither Egypt nor the US could hope to maximize their respective potentialities.

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And the damage and limitations would not stop there. Because both countries play out-sized roles in regional and world affairs, their allies and working partners would not be able to reach their potential either.

The manifestations of this hallmark commonality – America's and Egypt's joint pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace – are several-fold. They include, most importantly, the intermittent round of talks between Israel and its Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian neighbors, with Egypt and the US as interested onlookers, if not anxious, would-be brokers. In this regard, one thing is certain: most of the parties concerned seek a comprehensive and lasting settlement of one of the world's most protracted international conflicts.

LEAVING LEGACIES

But the joint quest to leave a legacy of peace for the Palestinian and other Arabs repeatedly ravaged by war, dispossession, and discrimination is not confined to the immediate neighborhood. It extends to other regions and other peoples as well. Indeed, American and Egyptian soldiers

have stood shoulder to shoulder in search of a durable peace in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, the Sinai, and Somalia.

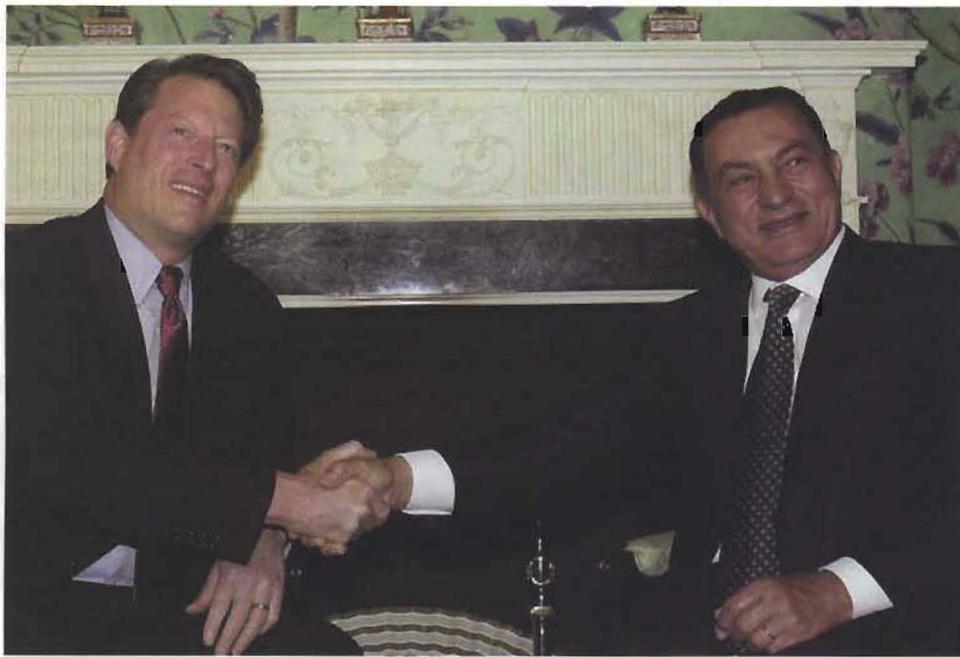
The second ingredient in the new and burgeoning Egyptian-US special relationship remains anchored in their respective commercial and economic needs. For example, America's increasing prominence in the international marketplace, on one hand, and Egypt's enthusiastic embrace of the imperatives of privatization, enhanced foreign investment opportunities, and economic globalization, on the other, continues to underscore the pivotal role that Egypt's Suez Canal plays in facilitating much of the world's material welfare.

For both Egypt and the US, and for their allies and partners as well, the Canal, like any commercial corridor of magnitude, has a dual role. In this instance, it has proven to be of equal international importance in time of war as well as in peace. The successful effort to bring an end to the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and the internationally concerted action that led to the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, are two examples. In both cases, the Canal was a vital link in the strategic lines of communications leading to and from the Gulf. Then as now, the Canal has played an essential role in restoring and maintaining peace, stability, and in providing a credible deterrence against would-be adversaries in a sub-region that is vital to world economic growth.

STRATEGIC COMPLEMENTARITIES

The third component in the range of American and Egyptian strategic complementarities is the Egyptian people. It is not just the sheer number of Egyptians – 70 million strong and growing – that is important. And it is not just the fact that Egypt is the most populous Arab and Middle Eastern nation, one of the three most populous of the 55 African countries, and the fourth most populous among the 56 Islamic countries. It is also the nature and orientation of Egypt's citizenry vis-à-vis the Mediterranean basin, other Arab countries, the broader Middle East, and the Islamic world. And it is Egypt's position and role among the already sizeable and growing family of nations committed to economic reform and participation in the globalization of international markets.

In all five of these international arenas, Egypt plays an important role like few other developing nations. It does so through its web of bilateral relationships that, in extent, exceeds that of any other Middle Eastern



Vice President Al Gore (l.) with President Mubarak at Blair House in Washington, DC.

country by a substantial measure.

CAIRO'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Egypt also plays such a role multilaterally. The prominence and achievements of its diplomats and other foreign affairs practitioners within virtually every regional and global organization of significance are well known and, in themselves, a contribution of continuity from which much of the world derives considerable benefit.

From one decade to the next, Cairo's formidable input and comment on cutting-edge foreign and other policy issues in all these fora has accumulated a record and a reputation for excellence in diplomacy that other non-Western nations would be hard-pressed to match. Certainly few would

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deny that the nature of Egypt's engagement and influence in the policy, programmatic, project, and related work of international organizations are without parallel among developing countries.

The zest which Egypt's diplomats bring to the international table of politics and diplomacy can be likened to the steady drumbeat of a country whose government is wedded to the notion that democracy is not a spectator sport, and that, if one seeks results in the world of public affairs, absence is not an option — one has no choice but to participate and to do so proactively on a daily basis.

To be sure, Egypt, like any other country, is not always able to have its way. Sometimes it loses or is dealt a major setback, although less so in recent years than in years past. Even so, Cairo's official views are seldom, if ever, neglected or dismissed out of hand. Among the reasons is that one out of four Arabs worldwide is an Egyptian.

Another is that, to many millions of non-Egyptian Arabs, Cairo is their cultural capital. In addition, as co-founder of the Cairo-based League of Arab States, Egypt is the headquarters for the most inclusive regional political forum for the Arab world's 22 countries. Add to these national and international attributes Egypt's niche as home to the Islamic world's most renowned and, indeed, the world's oldest seat of learning at Al-Azhar, and the combination is one without parallel among

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the world's nearly 150 developing nations.

Thus, whether or not peace breaks out in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt's role in bilateral, regional, and multilateral issues of ongoing concern to much of humanity is likely to remain important for years to come. In the future, historians will likely look back and view an Egypt that was substantially different from the one that was perceived by an earlier era's strategists and policymakers whose focus upon Egypt was clouded by concern for the interests of other countries. In so doing, there is ample reason to believe that historians will come to appreciate more than they have to date the important roles that Egypt played in the twentieth century's march of progress.

In addition, there is little doubt that they will acknowledge Egypt's multifaceted contributions to the modernization and development of its fellow Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world, on one hand, and, on the other, its pivotal role in enhancing the prospects for peace and prosperity in one of the world's most strategically vital regions.

Dr. John Duke Anthony is President and CEO of the National Council on US-Arab Relations, a Washington, DC-based non-government, nonprofit educational organization dedicated to educating Americans about the Arab world. He first visited the Arab world in 1963, when he was an exchange student and lived with an Egyptian family. ■



President Mubarak and First Lady Suzanne Mubarak arrive at Andrews Air Force Base at the start of his official visit.



Mubarak with US Secretary of Commerce William Daley.

Mubarak shakes hands with Virginia Governor James Gilmore, accompanied by US technology leaders, at PSINet, a state-of-the-art global web hosting facility. Mubarak expressed his commitment to develop Internet technology and access in Egypt.



President Mubarak in the US



Mubarak with World Bank President James Wolfensohn.



Religious tension during President Mubarak's meeting with President Clinton in the White House: Egyptian Muslims wave flowers and flags during a demonstration behind barricades while Egyptian Christians hold a rally of their own across from the White House as US Park Police separate the two groups.