

EGYPT AND AMERICA: FREE AT LAST?

By
John Duke Anthony

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(March 29, 2001) For several years in succession, it is around this time that Egypt's national leaders figure prominently on the American foreign policy establishment's radar screen. A high-powered delegation of Egyptian business leaders from the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt has been in town all week for meetings on Capitol Hill and with various venues of the Executive Branch.

Among the Chamber's objectives are progress towards an Egyptian-U.S. free trade agreement, increased American foreign direct investment in Egypt, retention of current U.S. economic assistance levels, and expanded ties across the board between the two countries' private sectors.

In addition, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, fresh from the Arab summit in Amman, where he was elected Secretary General of the League of Arab States, has just arrived in Washington and will meet with "Gulf Wire's" publisher, Dr. John Duke Anthony, later today. President Hosni Mubarak is expected on April 2 for meetings with President Bush and Members of Congress.

In this special report, Dr. Anthony underscores Egypt's multifaceted contributions to the modernization and development of its fellow Arab countries and the Islamic world, and its role in enhancing the prospects for peace and prosperity in the Mideast. He makes the case that the importance of Egypt in the diplomatic arena, and its influence as a center of Arab and Islamic culture and thought, ensure that it will continue to have a major impact on regional affairs for decades to come.

It is often forgotten that U.S.-Egyptian relations have not always been as close and cordial as they have since the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt two decades ago. Indeed, many Arabs along the entire political, social, and economic spectrum have long felt that U.S. officials have tended to filter the U.S.-Egyptian relationship through the lens of the U.S. relationship with Israel.

Be that as it may, Dr. Anthony notes that, for the first time since Egypt became a republic, American-Egyptian ties have the potential to thrive mainly on their merits. This is not to deny that various Egyptian and U.S. policies and interests in the period ahead are likely to be bereft of differences. Cases in point include matters pertaining to the Palestinians' Al-Aqsa Intifada, Sudan, the quest for a region free of weapons of mass destruction, and issues related to the ongoing regime of sanctions against Iraq.

But despite these differences of analysis and policy, the official positions of Cairo and Washington overall are increasingly grounded in a similar worldview that acknowledges a multitude of common opportunities and challenges and a mutuality of benefit. As a result, Egypt and the United

States are deepening and broadening what has clearly become a "special relationship."

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"Time marches on," or so the saying goes. But even in the run-up to heads of state meetings, such as the one slated for this month in Washington between Presidents Bush and Mubarak, human attitudes and good ideas don't always keep pace.

Prior to the onset of the new millennium, there were extended periods when the nature and extent of Egyptian-U.S. relations often seemed encased in unmeltable ice. Indeed, U.S. diplomats posted to Cairo from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s were often, 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 primary reason was Israel and its U.S. domestic supporters - a formidable fact of life in American politics - who were hostile to Egypt on account of its having resisted the partition of Palestine that favored the new Jewish State at the time of its inception and because peace between the two was nowhere in sight.

Although Egypt in the 1950s offered its hand in friendship to America, the gesture was not returned. For U.S. policymakers, an additional determinant was President Nasser's leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement of developing countries that wished to avoid identification with either end of the ideological divide that formed the battleground of the Cold War. This made him suspect in the eyes of American officials, who held the view that, "If you're not with us, you're against us." With goodwill absent, the atmosphere in Washington was not receptive.

As Time Goes By

And then, there was another time, equally as long, when the relationship was exactly the opposite. From the late 1970s onward, American officials decided that the time had come to elevate the U.S.-Egyptian relationship to "exceptional."

The principal reason again was Israel - Egypt had made peace with it. Following the 1979 Camp David Peace Accords, Cairo-Washington relations not only thawed, they thrived. In the process, the international, regional, and bilateral strategic status of Egypt, as seen by American and Israeli officials alike, changed from a liability to an asset.

Second Time Around

Even so, the broad parameters of this second, more recent relationship are frequently still determined and defined by how key American policymakers

view the situation as it affects Israeli priorities and requirements, on one hand, and the often quite similar views of Israel's American supporters, on the other.

No amount of presidential hand shaking, eloquent speeches, or flowery official communiqués highlighting how the relationship has grown in stature and maturity can conceal the fact that many view U.S. policies toward Egypt, and numerous other Middle Eastern nations, as largely Israel-centric in their formulation and implementation.

What many Egyptian and other Arab leaders long to see is a U.S. policymaking process that, beyond protecting and projecting 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." And not only does such an approach stand logic on its head, it potentially jeopardizes American-Egyptian and other U.S. bilateral and multilateral relations with countries representing 270 million Arabs and 1.2 billion Muslims.

Turning a Corner

Where is the Egyptian-U.S. relationship now?

One could easily be tempted to conclude that, following this month's scheduled meeting between Presidents Mubarak and Bush, both sides are comfortable with letting bygones be bygones. But old patterns persist, and the phenomenon of an Israel-driven agenda influencing the formulation of American policies towards Egypt and numerous other Arab and Islamic countries continues.

Despite this, something new is afoot. For Americans and Egyptians alike, and, most importantly, for the two of them together, the view ahead looks different and brighter than 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, not just through the lenses of a third party.

Stubborn Facts

No knowledgeable American will deny that Egypt's position and role in regional and international affairs is one of enormous importance. Nevertheless, much of the discussion and debate in Washington that focuses on Egypt is unfortunately related to a perception of Egypt as an object, as a nation that, in the eyes of some, needs to be influenced and cajoled, and, in the eyes of others, constrained and controlled.

But increasingly, more and more American leaders regard Egypt as just the opposite. They view and understand Egypt as an actor. As such, they see it as a country in many ways like any other in the sense that it has its own particular mix of national interests and imperatives, and, in this instance, an extraordinary array of human and natural resources for advancing those interests in tandem with its American and other partners.

But 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 U.S. policies and interests are identical. Indeed, the differences in viewpoint between them on matters pertaining to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the on-going 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 four significant cases in point.

Rather, what is far more important in the bilateral relationship is that Cairo and Washington's official positions are increasingly grounded in similar perceptions of reality, a similar worldview. This view acknowledges a multitude of common Egyptian and American opportunities and challenges. Although sometimes in conflict, they 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 the world beyond their shores remains their joint commitment to achieving Middle East peace and stability.

Remove either the peace or stability components from the calculus of any American-Egyptian strategic equation, and the regional and broader international picture would be dim, indeed, portraying a world in which neither Egypt nor the United States could hope to maximize their respective potentialities.

But 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 between Cairo and Washington are several-fold. They include, most importantly, the intermittent round of talks between Israelis, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians, with Egypt and the United States as interested onlookers and sometimes mediators seeking a comprehensive and lasting settlement of one of the world's most protracted international conflicts.

But the joint quest to leave a legacy of Arab-Israeli reconciliation and of peace for the Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians repeatedly ravaged by war, dispossession, and discrimination is not confined to the states concerned. 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-U.S. special relationship remains their respective commercial and economic needs and interests.

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, continue to underscore the pivotal role that Egypt's Suez Canal plays in facilitating much of the world's material well-being.

The Canal, like any link in a global strategic communications system, has proven to be of equal international importance in time of war as well as peace.

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, the second most populous of the 55 African countries, and the fourth most populous among the 56 Islamic countries.

The orientation of Egypt's citizenry vis-à-vis the Mediterranean basin, other Arab countries, the broader Middle East, and the Islamic world is also important. And so is Egypt's position and role among the already sizeable and growing family of 135 countries committed to economic reform and membership, together with the United States and other leading industrialized powers, in the World Trade Organization.

In each of these international arenas, Egypt plays an influential role like few developing nations. It does so through its web of bilateral relationships that, in extent, exceed that of any other Middle Eastern 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. They contribute towards a continuity from which much of the world derives considerable benefit.

Although Egypt, like any other country, is not always able to have its way, Cairo's official views are seldom, if ever, neglected or dismissed out of hand. Among the reasons for this is that one out of four Arabs worldwide is an Egyptian. Another is that Cairo is the cultural capital to many millions of non-Egyptian Arabs.

In addition, as co-founder of the Cairo-based League of Arab States, Egypt hosts the Arab world's most inclusive political forum. 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 the world's nearly 150 developing countries.

If Peace Would Break Out...

Thus, whether or not peace breaks out in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt's role in bilateral, regional, and multilateral issues of concern to much of

humanity will remain important for years to come. Even now, increasing numbers of policymakers and historians throughout the world have come to appreciate the significant roles that Egypt played in the twentieth century's march of progress.

Among specialists in particular, there is widespread recognition of Egypt's multifaceted contributions to the modernization and development of its fellow Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world. And strategists and geo-politicians alike acknowledge Egypt's more recent role in enhancing the prospects for peace and prosperity in one of the world's most strategically vital regions.

In the United States, there is ample evidence that these and other changes in public and private sector attitudes toward Egypt are likely to continue to bear fruit at the level of the two countries' leadership and at the people-to-people level as well. This is why, for some time now, when one now reads or hears about the U.S.-Egypt relationship, it is often preceded by the word "special."

Dr. John Duke Anthony is President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, a Washington, D.C.-based non-government and nonprofit educational organization dedicated to educating Americans about the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.