

SPRINGTIME IN WASHINGTON: MUBARAK'S VISIT

By

John Duke Anthony

(April 24, 2001) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Washington recently to meet with U.S. President George W. Bush. The occasion was the first official visit of any Arab head of state to the White House since Bush was elected.

The timing of the visit was propitious. It transpired at a moment of mounting concern by the two countries' leaders about a range of bilateral and regional issues of importance to both.

The ongoing implications of the Palestinian Al-Aqsa Intifada ranked high on the agenda. So, too, did various aspects of Egyptian-American and broader Arab-U.S. ties. Both sets of issues were discussed at length. In addition to conferring with his counterpart, President Mubarak also met with Bush Administration officials, Members of Congress, business and public affairs leaders, and the media.

Adding salience to the visit was the fact that it came close on the heels of the most recent Arab summit in Amman. The summiteers elected Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa to become the new Secretary General of the League of Arab States, the Arab world's foremost regional organization.

Moussa, no stranger to the U.S. foreign policymaking establishment, joined Mubarak in many of the meetings in Washington. Many were keen to probe what might be the implications of his mandate to implement structural and political reforms within the League.

Issues and Interests

The following highlights of the visit are gleaned from my participation in one of the visit's events and from discussions with those who accompanied President Mubarak.

On matters pertaining to Middle East peace and stability, President Mubarak was at pains to communicate several points. Overriding all the others was the need for the United States to reconsider and, if at all possible, reverse its stated intent to be less engaged than the Clinton Administration had been in its efforts to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Mubarak emphasized that he spoke on this issue not only for Egypt. He stressed the point that his views were in accord with those expressed at the Amman summit and of Christians and Muslims throughout the Arab and Islamic world, as well as of many in Israel.

Mubarak and members of his delegation said they understood the Administration's political desire to want to place some distance between itself and the policies of its predecessor. However, they made the point that the willful act of distancing oneself from a conflict as volatile as this one, like other actions and inaction, was bound to bring negative consequences in its wake.

Any diminution in U.S. actions and commitment to resolve the conflict, they emphasized, would constitute a setback to the prospects for a just peace. As such, it could not, in all candor and fairness, be considered a viable policy option.

The Egyptian president underscored what was rapidly becoming obvious to his hosts: that even the early intimations by Secretary of State Powell and others that the U.S. intended to adopt a lower profile vis-à-vis the conflict had resulted in damage.

Indeed, however well-intentioned the objectives behind the statements by Powell and other Administration officials may have been, the effect had been the opposite, provoking disbelief and uncertainty and heightening further anxieties throughout the region.

What was worse, they pointed out, was the impact of such remarks on Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon. In what they noted was an ominous signal of what lay ahead, Sharon expressed satisfaction with what he, too, understood would be the United States' inclination towards a more hands-off orientation towards the conflict.

If anything, the Egyptian leaders argued, the new U.S. policy position emboldened Sharon's determination to proceed with his intent to crush the Intifada militarily, and to do so without so much as offering the Palestinians any alternative to ending their internationally sanctioned legal right to resist Israel's occupation of their land.

Given the range of American interests at stake in the region, members of President Mubarak's team confessed to being dumb-founded. They found it hard to imagine how such statements, with their far-reaching implications for regional peace and stability, could have registered lower on the Richter Scale of American statesmanship and international responsibility.

That nothing in the Administration's stances vis-à-vis the conflict contained any compelling reason for Israel to cease its colonization of Palestinian land was, to many members of Mubarak's delegation, more than puzzling. It seemed tantamount to a U.S. unwillingness to call Israel to account for its threats to U.S. interests, its defiance of long-standing U.S. policies, and its refusal to adhere to basic principles of international law, in particular UN Security Council ("land for peace") Resolutions 242 and 338.

American Resolve

President Mubarak was also keen to advance a related theme: that the United States place special emphasis on the need to obtain not just any peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but *a just* peace. He and others in his delegation made it clear that much rode on the outcome of whether America would be able to manifest the requisite steadfastness in working effectively to bring the conflict to an end.

The caliber of the Bush Administration's international leadership with regard to this issue, Mubarak's advisers pointed out, would, therefore, remain under close scrutiny. As such, they emphasized, the present is no time for the United States to back away from its claim not only to be the sole country acceptable to both sides, but, also, the only one that is truly capable of helping the parties to reach a final settlement of the issues in dispute.

"What would be welcomed," one member of Mubarak's entourage quipped, "is for the president to heed the advice that Mrs. Thatcher gave his father when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 -- 'Now don't go wobbly on me, George.' Indeed, what is most needed is for a comparable display of American resolve, of staying power, of a capacity for sustained and effective leadership."

"How could one argue otherwise?" he asked. "If the U.S. were seriously to opt for a 'time out' -- or were it, in effect, to opt for a cop-out by saying 'we can't allow ourselves to be placed in a position where we are more interested in peace than the parties themselves' -- it is not a question of whether the potential for the consequences would be tragic -- they *will* be tragic," he said.

Coupling an appeal to the Administration that it do whatever is necessary to bring an end to one of the world's longest unresolved international conflicts, Mubarak renewed Egypt's pledge to help shoulder the burden.

An Honest Broker

To this end, Mubarak and his advisers stressed that of greatest importance is the need for the United States to implement its pledge to play the role of an honest broker. Nothing less, they reasoned, would be credible.

Members of the delegation had an interesting twist on this theme. One pointed out that, over the past 54 years, international responsibility for bringing an end to the conflict has undergone a profound transformation. He noted that, since the initial November 1947 UN General Assembly Resolution 181 that recommended the partition of Palestine, the baton for achieving a satisfactory settlement of the conflict has continued to pass from one set of hands to another. From the General Assembly, it has passed to the UN Security Council, to Four Power Talks, to Two Power Talks and, now, at American insistence, to the United States, the world's superpower, assigning itself the primary, if not the sole, responsibility for brokering peace between the parties.

Other members of Mubarak's team did not take issue with the wisdom or efficacy of the American position in this regard. However, they were of the view that only by being *an honest* broker could the United States realistically hope to accomplish its goals of achieving a balanced peace, enhancing respect for the principles of international law, and strengthening adherence to the norms of international legitimacy. Nothing less, they indicated, would be likely to increase the extent to which the United States is taken at its word in saying what it means – and being believed when it says that it means what it says.

Cairo's Credibility

Among the Americans participating in talks with the Egyptian delegation, all agreed on one thing. It was that few if any other Arab country's leaders could have expressed their views on these and a range of related issues as forthrightly and effectively as President Mubarak and his advisers.

The reasons are several. First, one out of four of the world's 280 million Arabs is an Egyptian. Second, in addition to serving as the headquarters of the Arab League, Egypt's diplomats continue to play a formidable role in numerous other regional and global organizations. Third, Egypt also continues to occupy a unique status as the Arab country longest in a peace treaty relationship with the Jewish State.

Fourth, dating from long before the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference that launched the peace process that now lies in tatters, Egypt has repeatedly intervened in support of dialogue and diplomatic détente between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In this regard, it was significant that President Mubarak indicated that Egypt would continue to do so for as long as it takes to achieve an accord that will end the conflict.

Fifth, Egypt retains its powerful pull upon the emotions of many millions of non-Egyptian Arabs who appreciate its position as a center pole of Arab culture, Islamic learning, and regional political leadership. Sixth, Egypt's ongoing global geo-strategic and military as well as economic and commercial importance continues to be underscored by its control of the Suez Canal, one of the world's most vital maritime arteries. Seventh, Egypt, together with Syria and the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries, is at the forefront of efforts to fashion what Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa and others refer to as a "new Arab order," designed to replace the one that was shattered in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Early Indications of Results

Indications of the impact of Mubarak's messages and appeals to reason thus far are mixed. However, the evidence is that at least two of his requests were immediately accepted. One was that the U.S. reverse its decision to recall the team of American officials that had been working with Israeli and Palestinian leaders on security matters in the Occupied Territories.

In this, there was ground for renewed hope that the United States would continue to pursue confidence-building measures designed to benefit both sides. Both sides viewed this as a significant breakthrough, the more so as it was accomplished in an atmosphere that was rapidly being drained of any grounds for optimism.

Secondly, Mubarak gained Bush's backing for a joint Egyptian-Jordanian proposal aimed at restoring a more general dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians at the highest level. What made the proposal appealing to the American president was that it was at once multi-faceted, far-reaching, and even-handed. For example, it called for a cessation of violence by Israelis and Palestinians alike and for Israel to lift its siege of Palestinian towns and villages and to withdraw its tanks from civilian areas.

The proposal also called for an end to Israel's unilateral closure of the Occupied Territories that has had the effect of preventing thousands of Palestinians from traveling to their jobs in Israel, and it urged both parties to implement previously signed agreements. The latter provision was made in reference to the Palestine Authority's earlier promise to collect arms from Palestinians. It was made clear that the same provision applied to Israel's obligation to carry out a third troop withdrawal – the one that should have been completed two years ago -- from the Occupied Territories.

Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdallah's proposal also called for a resumption of Israel-Palestinian peace talks from where they had left off in Taba, Egypt on the eve of Israel's elections. Furthermore, they stressed the need to implement agreements and understandings reached then and at Sharm al-Shaikh, Egypt last fall pursuant to the Oslo Accord's commitment to the launching of final status negotiations no later than 1999.

* * *

No one harbored any illusions about the proposal's prospects, as the issues to be ironed out in final status negotiations between the parties remain numerous and complex. They include, as one member of Mubarak's team pointed out, "the parameters of an independent Palestinian state, inclusive of the status of Jerusalem; questions pertaining to borders, security, and water; and the Palestinian refugees' rights to repatriation and compensation.

"But in the immediate term," added another of Mubarak's advisers, "they also include an end to the continuation of Israel's policies of building yet more illegal settlements on Palestinian land, of the Israeli Defense Force's laying siege to Palestinian towns and villages in the Occupied Territories, of collectively punishing entire communities, of bulldozing Palestinian homes and orchards, of assassinating Palestinian leaders, and all the rest."

Israel's Refusal and Escalation

However, an early indication of what lay ahead, and, indeed, what has already transpired, was that no sooner had the Mubarak-King Abdallah proposal been offered than it was, in effect, rejected by Israel. Sharon, for example, took particular umbrage at the call for the launching of final status negotiations.

Sharon said, in effect, that the prospect of his government entering into such negotiations with the current Palestinian leadership in the near future was not in the cards. He indicated that, at most, he would be prepared to offer the Palestinians nothing more than a series of interim agreements and, even those, he insisted, would be entered into only in an "incremental" fashion.

However, the Israeli premier gave little hint, other than a reversion to Palestinian acquiescence in the continued Israeli occupation of their land, as to what the substance of any such agreements might contain. Neither did he offer a compelling reason as to why he was insisting that any agreements arrived at be incremental as opposed to singular, comprehensive, and final. And he could not have been clearer

in stating that he would not pursue such agreements at all in the absence of a total cessation of Palestinian violence.

In the eyes of those knowledgeable of what transpired in the talks, far more revealing of what the Sharon government had in mind were developments that occurred immediately before and during President Mubarak's visit. One was Sharon's decision, the day after the Amman summit ended, to escalate the size and scope of his determination to crush the Palestinian resistance by resorting to the use of Israel's superior military force.

The second development, which occurred during the midst of the Egyptian president's visit, was the U.S. decision to veto an important United Nations Security Council resolution. Members of Mubarak's entourage were unanimous that the United States did itself and Israel no favor by blocking yet another UN effort aimed at achieving a peaceful and diplomatic resolution of the conflict.

Compounding their disappointment were the explanations, shared with this analyst, that U.S. officials offered in defense of the veto. "It had to do with domestic political reasons," said one of the American policymakers who met with the delegation. Said another, "It was because the resolution was not balanced; we had no choice."

Heightening the degree of official Egyptian disappointment had to do with the humanitarian thrust of the resolution that the United States vetoed. The proposal contained provisions similar to those that the United States had supported recently in the cases of Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor.

The resolution called for a UN civilian force to monitor the situation as it pertained to the largely unarmed Palestinian civilian population in the Occupied Territories. The purpose: to afford better protection to civilians in the face of what the UN Secretary General and innumerable other international observers had said was excessive use of armed force against civilians by the Israeli Defense Force.

As one Egyptian commented, "Given the gravity of this particular issue, and the fact that a disproportionate number of children and other civilians continue to be killed and wounded by American weapons, certainly a strong case could be made that a different course of action was required.

"Just this once," he asked, "why couldn't the U.S. have elected to abstain rather than prevent something positive? After all, the resolution was acceptable to the majority of the Security Council members, none of which seeks in any way to endanger Israel's legitimate security needs."

In the end, Egyptian efforts to persuade the Administration to view the situation through other than Israel-centric lens proved unsuccessful.

Olympic Champion of U.N. Vetoes

Members of Mubarak's team were further dismayed that the U.S. veto was its first in four years and the 72nd veto that the United States has cast in the history of its membership in the United Nations. The number includes the more than 40 occasions when the United States vetoed a resolution so as to protect Israel from varying forms of censure for its violation of the UN Charter and specific UN Resolutions. The total constitutes a UN record and exceeds by a substantial degree the number of vetoes cast by all other members of the UN Security Council combined.

The implications of this point for major American interests and key foreign policy objectives in the Middle East were not lost on the Egyptian visitors. As one commented, "How does the United States gain by preventing the democratically expressed will of the majority, including that of most of its major allies, in a matter of such importance to the prospects for regional peace? What possible benefit could there be to anyone other than America's adversaries? Where's the value in the United States being viewed as the

Olympic champion of measures that thwart the democratic process and political will of the world's highest deliberative body?"

Bilateral Issues

Two of the main bilateral issues discussed were Egypt's continued interest in forging a free trade agreement with the United States, on one hand, and its hope of being able to retain current levels of U.S. economic and defense assistance, on the other.

An important outcome of the meetings with officials at the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Office of the U.S. Special Trade Representative, as well as many U.S. corporate leaders, is that there remains widespread U.S. public and private sector support for an American-Egyptian free trade accord.

However, with regard to another bilateral issue, there was an unexpected development that suggested the possibility that an important dimension of the relationship could become either more contentious than before or at least laced with new and different kinds of challenges.

A Clouding in Congress?

This second bilateral issue has to do with Egypt's standing in the eyes of key segments of the United States Congress. For example, Members of the House of Representatives' powerful Committee on International Relations picked the timing of President Mubarak's visit to address an issue that had not previously been raised since the 1979 Camp David Accords.

In so doing, the Congressmen used language that closely paraphrased words provided them by the Israeli lobby. For example, the Committee's Ranking Minority Member, Democratic Congressman Tom Lantos of California, called openly for a reconsideration of the grounds for American military assistance to Egypt.

Lantos claimed that the reasons for such support had ceased to exist. In his view, and that of his colleagues who echoed his and the Israeli lobby's position, Egypt no longer faces any military threat.

No Military Threat?

In response, Egyptians pointed out that the uncertain situation in neighboring Sudan, one of the sources of the Nile River and hence of Egypt's lifeblood, remained a major concern, one fraught with potentially dire implications for Egypt's legitimate national defense needs.

They also emphasized that there are hardly grounds for comfort with regard to the regional defense situation near other Egyptian borders. In support of their viewpoint, they pointed out that U.S. officials shared their concerns. Indeed, the Administration has repeatedly expressed concern that the circumstances surrounding the resistance to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, left unchecked, could spread to Egypt and other neighboring countries.

In addition, the Egyptians emphasized that that the cumulative infusion into Israel of massive amounts of American-manufactured state-of-the-art weaponry over the years, and continuing until the present, coupled with the refusal of the United States to enforce its own laws against Israel's unauthorized use of such weaponry against civilians, made all of Israel's neighbors feel militarily insecure and uncertain of the Jewish state's ultimate intentions.

U.S. Defense Department officials and others, for the most part, immediately saw this Israeli lobby-orchestrated attempt by elements in the Congress to pour cold water on arguments in support of Egypt's

legitimate defense needs for what it was. Most regarded it as a transparent tactic that Israel had used to some effect before.

The Imbalance of Power Politics

The purpose, in the eyes of American, Egyptian, and Israeli specialists alike, is to keep Egypt off balance. It is a carefully crafted device to ensure that Egypt remains uncertain of the nature and degree of American support it can count on receiving for the immediately foreseeable future, or, at least, for until such time as the Palestinians cease their resistance to the Israeli occupation.

Several Egyptians expressed the view that driving the Israeli lobby's behavior on this issue is the following. Israel, they argue, is concerned about Egypt's increasingly pivotal involvement in a broad range of issues related not only to Palestine and the ongoing Al-Aqsa Intifada. Israel also views with mounting alarm Egypt's leadership in Arab summits and within the League of Arab States.

Those who accompanied the Egyptian president to Washington say that it remains to be seen whether the Israeli lobby and its Congressional supporters will succeed in dealing a setback to the American and Egyptian quest to strengthen and expand their bilateral relationship.

In the words of one concerned Egyptian, "The effect of Israel's congressional surrogates' placing us on a de facto "watch list" in terms of what we do and do not do in support of Israeli interests, and in our policies towards the Palestinians, the Lebanese, the Syrians, and the rest of the Arab world, will be watched closely not just by Egyptians but by those among America's other Arab friends and allies in the region.

"We have a saying," he said, "that, 'If your friend is weak, you, too are weak.' Many will look to see if America, for whatever reason, decides, at Israel's behest, to weaken us, and, in the process, to weaken itself as well."

In any event, several members of Mubarak's entourage concluded that a controversial and potentially inflammatory Israel-centric interest was added to the agenda of Egyptian and U.S. interests during the President's visit.

Media Bashing

A sign that additional issues and interests in the bilateral relationship might become either more contentious, or possibly laced with new and different kinds of challenges than before, had to do with the degree of media bashing unleashed against Egypt during President Mubarak's visit.

Some of America's most prominent newspapers, for example, took the occasion of President Mubarak's visit to print full-page advertisements sharply criticizing Egyptian policies. In one version, the ads called for the government to end its alleged discrimination against the country's Coptic Christian minority. In another, Mubarak was attacked for "allowing" the printing of anti-Israeli caricatures in Egypt's media.

The ads claimed that the "official tolerance" of such caricatures was symptomatic of a pervasive insincerity, at the highest levels of the Egyptian government, in maintaining a peaceful relationship with the Jewish state.

Pointing out that such media blasts were not the first of their kind, members of Mubarak's official team took such barbs in stride. One asked, "Do Americans favor a free press -- one in which these and other kinds of shortcomings often 'come with the package' in their own and other media, as they do in ours -- or not?"

Another asked, "Is one supposed to ignore the fact that the U.S. and Israeli media have tended to depict Egyptians and other Arabs and Muslims in the most base form of racist and other pejorative caricatures for as long as anyone can remember?"

On balance, American and Egyptian officials involved in the visit regarded the media blasts as a side issue, while acknowledging that the fact the mainstream media in which the attacks on Egypt appeared were widely read by a broad spectrum of Washington officialdom was certainly not helpful.

"...And the Other Guy?"

In addition, the results of Egypt's (and Jordan's) hope that the United States will press Israel to move swiftly to the long-promised final status negotiations remain inconclusive. If anything, the evidence thus far tends toward the negative. Indeed, Sharon's insistence that the overriding short-term goal must be for the Palestinians to end the violence before anything else can be done is the rub.

More than one member of Mubarak's team characterized such a precondition as fundamentally lacking in feasibility. "Sharon's stipulation of his terms for resuming any peace talks," said one, "practically guarantees that the proposal's terms would be rejected."

On the face of it, the requests put forth by Sharon and various American officials that the Palestinians end their resistance to the Israeli occupation as a pre-condition for renewed peace talks begged the question, as put by one of Egypt's highest officials.

"And what about the other guy?" he asked. "Where is the commitment to get the Israeli Defense Force to stop using excessive force against a largely civilian resistance to the Israeli occupation? Are there to be no sanctions against Israel's use of American-manufactured tanks and assault helicopters against Palestinians resisting Israelis who are taking their land?"

"How can the United States remain silent in the face of Israel's state-sponsored terrorism in the form of its avowed policy to assassinate Palestinian leaders? Isn't it U.S. policy to impose sanctions on countries that, as a matter of official state policy, authorize assassinations, which is about as violent an act of terrorism as one can imagine?"

"As for Washington's policy of enforcing a range of sanctions against a list of 'rogue regimes,' as defined by their alleged or actual support for terrorism, what's keeping the United States from adding Israel to the list? If this is not a case of the United States applying a double standard, one for Arabs and another for Israelis, what is?"

"And where is its commitment to get Israel's armed settlers, who are illegally in possession of Palestinian territory in the first place, to cease their provocative acts against the indigenous inhabitants who are doing nothing more than exercising their right to resist the occupation of their land? In short, how can one realistically expect the Palestinians to cease resorting to whatever means necessary to protect their rights in the absence of Israel placing any curbs on either its settlers or the Israeli army?"

"Surely no one expects the Palestinians to acquiesce to the vigilante tactics of armed settlers, often with the tacit compliance of the Israel Defense Force, in their unlawful occupation and expropriation of Palestinian territory. Put yourself in their situation: where is the incentive for them not to resist?"

"It is one thing," a member of Mubarak's entourage argued, "for American officials to demand that the Palestinians cease opposing the power that has taken so much of their land and that dominates myriad facets of their daily life. It is quite another to expect that this will happen in the absence of the United States or Israel offering the Palestinians a realistic alternative. There has to be a viable substitute to the

continued repression, discrimination, and denial, by one of the world's most powerful armies, of the occupied people's right to live in peace and dignity in their own independent state."

A Preliminary Balance Sheet

If Egypt's leaders failed to make any discernible headway in convincing the United States to pressure Israel to provide meaningful incentives to the Palestinians, neither did they succeed with regard to another issue. That is, as members of other Egyptian delegations have done on numerous previous occasions, members of this one, too, reiterated the hope that the United States would prevail upon Israel to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty with a view to working towards the day when the Middle East would be a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery. But there is no evidence that Egypt was any more effective for having made the effort to do so this time around than on numerous previous occasions.

Yet, in acknowledging the lack of progress on this issue, one of the delegation's members reflected on the matter philosophically. He said, "Look, we are not naïve. We knew from the beginning that this would take a long time. But we continue to advance the idea for a specific reason.

"We do it because we are serious in looking forward not only to the day when regional peace comes, but beyond it. We are working for the day in which such a zone of peace will prevail not only between ourselves and the Israelis, but between ourselves and others, too, most especially Turkey and Iran."

*

*

*

Successes and setbacks combined, the Mubarak visit concluded with what appeared to be three clear-cut, albeit limited, gains for both. First, the Bush Administration acknowledged Egypt's hard-won and out-sized role in Arab and Islamic affairs. Second, the Mubarak team renewed its recognition of America's central role in advancing the prospects for a just, durable, and comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis. And, third, the leaders of both countries agreed that they have no choice but to work hard to place their relationship on a firmer foundation not just for the present and the future, but, also, for the sake of their broader more regionally-focused objectives as well.