The United States and Egypt:

Stress and Distress

by **Kenneth Pollack (/experts/kenneth-pollack)**

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Brief Analysis

President Clinton's rather terse "thank you" to Hosni Mubarak following the signing of the Hebron agreement in contrast to the warm praise for Jordan's King Hussein is only the latest sign of tension in the U.S.-Egypt relationship. While this partnership has always had its share of problems, the two sides appear to be moving farther apart on a range of critical issues. Perhaps the most disquieting aspects of Egyptian policy apart from the peace process concern Cairo's troubling ties to the region's "rogue" states and reports of its efforts to enhance its ballistic missile capability. In contrast to the close cooperation which characterized U.S.-Egypt relations during the Gulf War, these differences have the potential to erode the foundation of the U.S.-Egyptian strategic relationship.

Iraq: Despite Mubarak's personal hatred of Saddam Husayn, Egypt has become decidedly unhelpful to U.S. efforts to contain Iraq. During the protracted negotiations over UN Security Council resolution 986 the "oil-for-food" deal Egypt distanced itself from U.S. and British efforts to ensure that the resolution was strictly enforced and Cairo has been unreceptive to calls in the Security Council for strengthening the hand of the UN Special Commission charged with hunting down Iraq's remaining weapons of mass destruction. When the United States helped engineer Egypt's appointment to the Council to hold the "Arab seat" in place of Libya, hopes were high for U.S.-Egyptian cooperation on key issues, like Iraq. So far, that has not been the case. Moreover, because of Cairo's status as the only Arab state on the Security Council and its historic closeness to Washington, U.S.-Egyptian differences on Iraq make it easier for other countries to part company with the United States on this vital issue.

Egypt also regularly opposes Washington's independent initiatives to compel Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions or to punish Saddam for his violations. In September, when the United States took military action against Saddam's invasion of the Kurdish-held city of Irbil, Egypt not only refused to support the U.S. response, but Egyptian officials termed the U.S. action a violation of international law and took the occasion to express their strong support of Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite Iraq's past atrocities against the Kurds and UN Security Council resolution 688, which extends UN protection to human rights in Iraq, Foreign Minister Amr Moussa went so far as to aver that the future of Kurdistan should be left solely to Baghdad to decide. More recently, Cairo quietly backed an unsuccessful initiative by the United Arab Emirates to win pan-Arab support for the repeal of UN sanctions on Iraq. According to press reports citing Egyptian diplomatic sources, Egypt also began talks aimed at the eventual

resumption of normal diplomatic ties with Baghdad, which were severely restricted after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Only when Kuwait warned of economic retaliation did Cairo back off, prompting a hurried note from Moussa assuring the Kuwaitis that Cairo had no intention of restoring ties with Baghdad.

Libya: Egypt has emerged as Muammar Qadhafi's most important advocate on the international scene. When evidence emerged in 1995 that Libya was building a new chemical warfare production facility at Tarhuna, Mubarak toured the site (or at least what the Libyans claimed was the site) and gave public assurances that Libya was innocent of the charges. Instead of joining the Security Council in insisting that Tripoli hand over the Pan Am 103 bombing suspects, Cairo has urged the Security Council to instead accept Libya's insufficient counter-offer. Along the way, Cairo has repeatedly advocated easing sanctions on Libya, one aspect of which the ban on air travel Egypt violated when it permitted Qadhafi to fly to the Arab summit meeting in Cairo last June.

Sudan: Although Khartoum has tried to kill President Mubarak and has colluded with Iran to foment unrest inside Egypt, Cairo has gone out of its way to avoid meaningful action against Sudan, undermining the international community's response to Khartoum's unacceptable behavior. Indeed, Sudan has "crossed all Egypt's red lines," in the words of the semi-official al-Ahram, but Mubarak nonetheless hosted the Sudanese delegation to the June Arab League summit and Egypt has refused to support all but the most innocuous Security Council sanctions against Sudan.

Proliferation: Egypt has reportedly struck a deal with North Korea for Scud-C ballistic missiles with a range of 500 km. Although the missiles themselves will only marginally enhance Egypt's strategic arsenal (Egypt already possesses Scud-B missiles with a 300 km range that can hit any target in Israel), the deal is especially damaging because it comes at a time when fighting proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missile delivery systems is a top U.S. priority. Egypt's Motives: Egypt has long had an independent streak in its foreign policy, but why it has decided to define itself apart from Washington on these issues now is not obvious. One answer seems to be found in a change in Cairo's strategy to assert leadership in the Arab world. Whereas the Egyptians previously believed that the best way to exert their preeminence was to lead the other Arab states toward improved ties with the United States and peace with Israel, Cairo now apparently believes that exercising leadership means being able to stand up for "Arab rights" against Israel and the United States. Similarly, Egypt may believe that condoning the behavior of Iraq, Libya and Sudan leaves these regimes beholden to Cairo. Thus, yesterday's "rogue" states are now portrayed as prodigal sons who should not only be forgiven and brought back into the Arab fold, but must be protected from foreign (i.e., Western) bullies.

A key second issue that appears to be driving Egypt's foreign policy is concern over domestic stability. Mubarak has always been highly attuned to Egyptian public opinion and he apparently believes that reflecting popular will, rather than trying to shape it (as Sadat tried), is his best course. As a result, the proverbial man-in-in-the-street has an ever louder voice in the counsels of the government. This has been manifested in two ways. First, in contrast to the past, when Cairo was content to placate public opinion with vitriolic statements that bore little relationship to its moderate foreign policy, Egyptian policies today actually reflect much of that hyperbole such as its bid to rehabilitate Iraq as a way to achieve a chimerical Arab unity. Second, Egyptian foreign policy is increasingly hostage to the need to prevent any deterioration in Egypt's domestic political and economic situation. Thus one reason Egypt has resisted the U.S.-led effort to impose sanctions on Khartoum is that Cairo worries that heavy international pressure on Sudan could cause the state to collapse into chaos, which might then spread to Egypt. Similarly, Egypt's coddling of Qadhafi reflects in part its hope that Libya will provide jobs for unemployed Egyptians and so alleviate one of the greatest sources of Egyptian popular discontent. Here, it is unclear which should be more troubling to the United States: the fact that Egyptian popular opinion is driving Cairo toward a more confrontational foreign policy, or that the regime believes the domestic situation is so volatile that it must recast its foreign policy to protect against internal dissent.

Outlook: This last point illustrates Washington's dilemma. On the one hand, the Administration would like to make it clear to Cairo that repeatedly poking the U.S. in the eye is not the best way for Egypt to assert inter-Arab leadership; on the other hand, because it is unclear just how anxious Mubarak is over his domestic stability, it is equally unclear how Cairo would react if Washington were to demand that Egypt stop acting like a gadfly. Given that most foreign observers have noted a decline in internal unrest in Egypt in the past year, it is difficult to know whether Egypt's domestic situation is truly the inspiration for its more pugnacious foreign policy, or simply an excuse. So far, Washington has let pass most of Egypt's obstreperousness because Cairo's support of (or at least absence of active opposition to) U.S. initiatives on the peace process and Gulf security remains crucial to their success. Egypt also has benefitted from fortunate timing, with frequent regional crises forcing the United States to set aside its ire and secure Cairo's support in handling the issue of the moment. However, this pattern is unlikely to continue forever. Overall, a consensus seems to be emerging in policy circles that the United States has been "too lenient" with Egypt. But since the shift in Cairo's foreign policy has been purposeful, not aimless, it is uncertain whether Cairo will be willing to return to its more moderate policies of the past, even if the U.S. takes a more insistent approach. Consequently, as the second Clinton Administration deals with critical Middle East policy issues, Egyptian persistence in confounding U.S. objectives may lead senior officials to a more fundamental reassessment of the basic economic and security components of this relationship.

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