

Egypt, the Peace Process, and U.S. Regional Interests

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Brief Analysis

This weekend's effort by Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross to broker a conclusion to the glacial Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on Hebron replaces the mediation effort that never was -- the mission by Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa. Earlier this month, in a sign of growing anxiety over the Hebron stalemate, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accepted an offer by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to take an active role in the Hebron talks. This was a high-stakes gamble by the Israelis: by bringing Cairo inside the tent and giving Egypt a stake in the success of the Hebron negotiations Netanyahu evidently believed that the Egyptians would play a more constructive role than has characterized their peace process behavior in recent months. However, when Mubarak nominated his foreign minister as his special envoy, the Israelis balked. This is because Moussa has for more than a year been perceived as championing a resurgent Nasserist trend in Egyptian foreign policy, which sees Egyptian leadership in the Arab world best exercised in terms of controlling the pace of normalization with Israel and stiffening Palestinian positions in their own negotiations. With Moussa shuttling between Gaza and Jerusalem, Netanyahu evidently concluded that an active and intimate Egyptian role in these sensitive negotiations may be a recipe for deadlock, not success.

The Two Voices in Mubarak's Ear: This episode represents only the most recent in a series of events that underscores the competing streams in Egyptian foreign policy. While two main trends -- simplistically termed Nasserist and Sadatist -- have competed for dominance throughout Mubarak's fifteen-year rule, this competition heated up following the Gulf War. Until then, Egypt had sought to break out of its inter-Arab isolation imposed by other Arabs as punishment for its maverick peacemaking with Israel by seeking to expand the circle of peace and therefore dilute the uniqueness of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty; Cairo's patronage of the PLO throughout the 1980s and efforts to broker Israeli-Palestinian talks in 1990 were emblematic of this policy. The Gulf War, however, offered a different route to regaining the respect of Arab capitals. By contributing the second largest military contingent to the defense of the Arab Gulf, Egypt provided political "cover" for hosting the infidel U.S. troops; Egypt's role in the Gulf ended once and for all any lingering reluctance by those conservative states to recognize Egypt's inter-Arab paramountcy and provided Cairo with a route back to inter-Arab leadership that circumvented the peace process. This opened the door for the expression of two alternative visions of Egyptian foreign policy one that sees Egyptian policy animated by Egyptian power and regional dominance; the other revolving around Egypt's special relationship with the United States and its historic role as trail-blazer in the peace process.

> According to the first approach, associated with Foreign Minister Moussa, Egypt has already gleaned from the peace process everything it wanted: territory, reputation, and influence. Further progress in the process -- even if limited to achievements on the bilateral tracks of negotiations and not even extending to the institutionalization, regional cooperation and economic integration envisioned by many Israelis and Americans -- would only advantage Israel's interests, not Egypt's. Indeed, there is a fear in some quarters in Cairo that a true end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including an Israel-Syria peace, would leave Israel, not Egypt, as the region's dominant power, especially if the terms of peace were not "made in Cairo." In this world-view, what matters to Cairo is control: over the pace of change, over the pace of Israeli-Arab reconciliation, over U.S. interaction with the Arab world. Therefore, peace between Israel and the other Arab parties is desirable only if it leaves Jerusalem's influence in the region sharply constrained and Cairo recognized as having played a decisive role in the outcome. The absence of progress may be better for Egypt than a peace on someone else's terms.

> The other school of thought, associated with Presidential Advisor Osama el-Baz, contends that the key to Egypt's foreign policy remains a close relationship with the United States. The argument here is threefold: first, Egypt still desperately needs U.S. aid and must therefore nurture ties with its patron. Second, because every state in the region wants to stay in the favor of the only remaining superpower (except Iran and Iraq, which are the exceptions that prove the rule), Egypt's efforts to lead the Arab world are best served by cultivating its position as one of America's most important allies. Third, attempting to oppose U.S. diplomacy would inevitably fail and so expose the limitations of Egyptian power.

> The events of the last eighteen months suggest that Mubarak -- after seesawing between the two approaches -- may now be leaning toward the former. Although it would be unfair to blame Egypt for the recent peace process stalemate, Cairo no longer plays the helpful role of "Arab bridge to Israel" and many of its actions have been downright harmful. This goes far beyond the free rein given to the "guided" Egyptian press to lob vitriole against Israel, the Israeli government and even "American hegemony." Egypt has been a partisan for the Arab side in every dispute since late summer, including those over Hebron redeployment, the Hasmonian tunnel, and the subsequent Palestinian riots. While it is not surprising that Egypt would favor the Palestinians in each of these cases, what is disturbing is that there was little effort on Cairo's part to moderate Palestinian demands, to refrain from demonizing the Israelis, or to otherwise appear as a constructive broker. Indeed, when the peace process most needed a positive Egyptian role when President Clinton asked Netanyahu, Arafat, King Hussein and Mubarak to come to Washington in October to resolve the crisis over the tunnel/riots the Egyptians alone refused and questioned the wisdom of the entire exercise. In a series of inter-Arab summits, Egypt may have held fast against a Syrian call for a total freeze on Arab ties with Israel but on virtually all other matters, Cairo has acceded to a lowest-common denominator Arab consensus that constitutes a step backward for the peace process. Egypt's sins have not merely been those of omission either. During the Israeli-Syrian war scare this fall, the Egyptians added fuel to the fire by holding unprecedented military exercises which Defense Minister Tantawi described as simulating a major war with "a neighboring state with 200 nuclear bombs." According to press reports, President Mubarak went so far as to warn Israel that Egypt would come to Syria's defense in the event of an Israeli attack.

> To be sure, the strength of the neo-Nasserist camp in Cairo was enhanced by the new Israeli government's mishandling of relations with Egypt. After giving Netanyahu his stamp of approval during their July 1996 summit, Mubarak evidently felt betrayed when Netanyahu did not follow through with promises to energize the peace process with the Palestinians. But Cairo's words and deeds toward Israel's previous Labor government from its position on the multilateral arms control/regional security talks to its critique of other Arab states for "rushing" to make peace, as Moussa said at the Amman Economic Conference in November 1995 make clear that a negative trend was well-entrenched in Egyptian foreign policy long before Netanyahu took office. Implications for U.S. Policy: What makes

Egypt's often-problematic approach to the peace process especially difficult for Washington is that it represents just one piece of a larger pattern of opposing U.S. interests across a wide spectrum of issues. This ranges from relations with terror-supporting states on Egypt's borders (Libya and Sudan); to criticism of Israeli-Turkish security ties; to support for Iraqi re-integration into the Arab world; to leadership of the anti-U.S. group at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference and Cairo's own questionable policies on ballistic missile proliferation. While important areas of U.S.-Egypt cooperation remain intact, the balance is increasingly tilting against the pro-U.S. trend in Egyptian foreign policy and in favor of what can be termed the Nasserist approach. As the Administration evaluates its priorities for a second term, focusing on Egyptian foreign policy may need to be at the top of its regional agenda, especially given the increasing clout Cairo enjoys in Arab politics these days and the many ways in which Egypt can either confound or advance U.S. interests.

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