Sick Man on the Nile

by David Schenker (/experts/david-schenker)

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This week, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak brought his son Gamal to Washington to attend the kick-off of renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Back in Cairo, the unprecedented family visit will no doubt reinforce the widespread belief that Mubarak is planning a hereditary succession in the Arab republic. It will also confirm, for many, the rampant speculation that Egypt's president of nearly 30 years is gravely ill.

Since March, when Mubarak paid a lengthy visit to a European hospital specializing in oncology, reports have been circulating that the president is suffering from pancreatic cancer. Recent photos showing the once robust man cutting an uncharacteristically gaunt figure do little to dispel the rumors. Regardless of his diagnosis, the octogenarian's tenure in office would appear to be nearing an end.

Mubarak's passing from the political scene will mark the end of an era. It will also mark a nadir in Egypt's regional stature.

Fifty years ago, under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Cairo was the undisputed military and diplomatic power in the Middle East. Nasser's speeches mobilized crowds; his army toppled foreign governments.

Today, a once respected and feared Egypt is but a shadow of its former self. Mubarak appears tired and sick. Meanwhile, facing profound challenges at home and its first political transition in nearly three decades, Cairo has largely retreated from regional politics in favor of focusing on internal matters. On almost every front, Egypt evokes a waning regional power.

There are some bright spots. In recent years, Cairo has experienced an annual GDP growth of nearly 7 percent, and even posted impressive numbers during the global economic downturn. But the dynamism ends at the frontier.

Mubarak's White House cameo notwithstanding, it's been years since Egypt has exercised significant diplomatic clout in the Middle East. Cairo's diplomacy has proved especially anemic with its Palestinian neighbors.

Egyptian officials, for example, state they would "not accept the establishment of an Islamic emirate" in Gaza. For the past three years, Cairo has tried to broker an agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas to forestall this outcome.

But that's all been to little avail. This lack of sway among Palestinians would have been unimaginable years ago. Just recall the 1995 signing of the Oslo II accords. When then Palestinian ra'is Yassir Arafat balked at initialing the maps, Mubarak reportedly convinced Arafat to do so by ordering him to "sign you dog!"

Cairo's approach to the seeming dissolution of its southern neighbor, Sudan, has proved equally ineffective. Whether out of indolence or resignation, despite its professed desire to thwart an Islamic state in Gaza, Cairo appears indifferent to a similar prospect in Khartoum. In any event, notwithstanding the slaughter in Darfur, Egypt is said to only have some 4,000 troops stationed in Sudan and seems ambivalent about the impending division of its southern neighbor.

The most striking example of Egypt's diminished stature, however, concerns Cairo's access to water. The Nile River is the lifeblood of Egypt, providing nearly all of the state's water, and per a 1929 agreement, Egypt receives nearly 70 percent of the river's flow and veto power over all water projects in upstream riparian states. Recently, though, this Egyptian dominance of the Nile has come into question as members of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) have begun to agitate for a more equitable arrangement.

The fact that Cairo can neither persuade -- nor intimidate -- NBI member states Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania to continue the present arrangement speaks volumes as to Egypt's standing in Africa. With its population predicted to surge to 100 million by 2025, water could well constitute yet another Achilles heel for the state that Greek historian Herodotus once called "The Gift of the Nile."

For Egypt, none of this is good news. But for Washington -- which has since 1978 relied on Cairo as its key Arab partner -- the weakening of Egypt is yet another blow to an already shaky U.S. regional security architecture. Indeed, with Ankara moving away from its traditional alliance with Washington and a diminished Cairo looking inward, the Obama administration today has no militarily formidable Muslim partners to help counter the threat posed by Tehran.

But the impact of an increasingly diminished ally in Cairo goes beyond the crisis with Iran. When Egypt was strong, its powers of persuasion helped Washington articulate and promote policies advancing the causes of regional moderation and peace with Israel. Now that Egypt can no longer play this role, it will be harder for the U.S. to accomplish many of its policy goals in the Middle East.

Of course, the decline of Egypt is only the latest in a series of problematic developments for Washington in the region. The recent re-orientations of the Turkish and Lebanese governments away from the west and a strengthening Iranian-Syrian axis should constitute a clarion call to action for the Obama administration. Unless Washington does something dramatic to reverse it, the weakening of Egypt will constitute another example of diminishing American power in the region.

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