

Hope on the Nile

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

In the most interesting development in Egyptian politics in years, former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head and Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei is eyeing an improbable challenge to six-term incumbent president Hosni Mubarak -- or his son Gamal -- in September 2011. While Egyptian law and Mubarak's authoritarian regime will no doubt prevent ElBaradei from getting on the ballot, his flirtation with entering the race has, at least temporarily, energized a demoralized electorate.

ElBaradei has a biography with popular appeal. The son of the former head of the Egyptian Bar Association, ElBaradei served for three terms as the head of the international nuclear watchdog. In addition to winning the Nobel Peace Prize in his role as head of the IAEA, in 2006 he received Egypt's highest honor, the Greatest Nile Collar, awarded by President Mubarak himself, for his service to the Republic.

Since his retirement from the IAEA in December 2009, ElBaradei has been making headlines criticizing governance in Egypt, and in late February, when he returned to Cairo for a 10-day visit after decades working abroad, he was welcomed at the airport by thousands of supporters. During his trip he gave a slew of television interviews condemning the absence of democracy, the slow pace of reform and the need for change in his country.

While he has not announced his intent to run for office, he has pointedly complained about the draconian 2007 constitutional changes that effectively prevent his candidacy. In particular, Article 76 of the amended Egyptian constitution lays out a series of arcane criteria calculated to prevent citizens from competing for the chief executive slot.

For example, in addition to requiring the support of 250 members of parliament or other elected bodies -- all of which are dominated by Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) -- a candidate must be a member for at least five years of a political party that holds at least 3% of the parliamentary seats, and have served for one year as a senior official of that party.

The deck is clearly heavily stacked against all opposition candidates. But it's worse for ElBaradei. A newcomer to politics, he meets none of these conditions and would require a constitutional change to participate.

In power for nearly 30 years and with a potential succession transition to his son Gamal on the horizon, there is little chance that Hosni Mubarak will support a constitutional amendment to accommodate ElBaradei. As one official in the opposition party Al Ghad -- headed by one-time presidential hopeful Ayman Nour -- said, ElBaradei becoming a candidate is as likely as getting "milk from a pigeon," the local expression that means "when pigs fly."

Recognizing this problem, prior to leaving Egypt in February ElBaradei established an opposition umbrella group focused on amending the constitution. Meanwhile, the government-controlled media is attacking ElBaradei on multiple fronts, attempting to discredit him by claiming he's "out of touch" with Egypt and accusing him of being an "American stooge."

"Stooge" seems an odd appellation for ElBaradei, who had a combative relationship with the Bush administration. And it's unlikely that he would get on much better with the Obama administration. Not only did ElBaradei condemn Israel for bombing Syria's nuclear facility in 2007 -- suggesting he would oppose U.S. military action to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon -- in 2009 he declared Israel the "No. 1 threat to the Middle East." Not surprisingly, after the IAEA issued a recent report that was uncharacteristically critical of Tehran, the Iranian foreign minister lamented the departure of ElBaradei.

Despite making waves during his visit, ElBaradei apparently did not cross any of Cairo's red lines. Nevertheless, ElBaradei is sooner or later likely to run afoul of the Egyptian authorities.

When Nour campaigned in 2005 his high profile and incessant disparagement of the Mubarak regime landed him in jail. Fortunately for ElBaradei, his awards and international standing -- not to mention his residence abroad -- will keep him out of prison, but it won't get him on the ballot.

While it lasts, though, his titular candidacy is a reminder of the sclerotic and authoritarian politics that prevail in Washington's leading Arab ally. After nearly 30 years of Mubarak, ElBaradei's potential candidacy represents the desperation of many Egyptians who are hoping for a break with the past.

During a recent interview on Egyptian television, ElBaradei said he recognized that his country would not change from pharaonic rule to democracy overnight. He's right. At the end of the day ElBaradei may not choose to run. If he does, however, like Nour before him, his presidential hopes will be dashed as a Mubarak -- either father or son -- takes office in 2011. In the meantime ElBaradei -- whether in Cairo or from his home in southern France -- will continue to be a useful gadfly and rallying point for a long-suffering opposition in search of a better future for Egypt.

David Schenker is director of the [Program in Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at the Washington Institute. ❖

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