

Mubarak Comes to Washington

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Brief Analysis

On August 18, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak travels to Washington for a White House meeting with President Barack Obama. The trip -- Mubarak's first visit to the United States in six years -- marks the culmination of a six-month effort by the Obama administration to hit the reset button with Cairo. After years of tension resulting from the last administration's focus on human rights and democratic development, the traditional U.S.-Egyptian bilateral "bargain" has been effectively restored. In exchange for cooperation on key mutual interests -- the peace process and the Iranian threat -- Washington appears to have shelved longstanding concerns over internal Egyptian governance. While the new dynamic may help mitigate some regional crises, the political and economic challenges Cairo faces will not age well, particularly as the state enters its first period of leadership transition in twenty-eight years.

Background

After the September 11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration sought to fundamentally alter its strategic partnerships in the region, beginning with Egypt. As then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice said during her 2005 Cairo speech, "For sixty years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region . . . and we achieved neither." While the administration expected -- and received -- continued cooperation on issues of mutual national security interest, a greater emphasis was placed on a broad range of reform efforts. In back-to-back State of the Union addresses in 2005 and 2006, President Bush called on President Mubarak to "show the way toward democracy in the Middle East."

In Egypt, the Bush administration backed up its rhetoric with a focused effort to restructure bilateral economic assistance to better serve the interests of both countries. By 2004, Washington and Cairo had concluded a memorandum of understanding linking aid to specific benchmarks of financial sector reform. During its second term, the administration focused on political reform, attempting to again leverage foreign assistance to effect change. In 2006, the administration allocated \$50 million of Egypt's economic aid to democracy promotion and refused to allow Egypt to determine which civil society organizations would be eligible for the U.S. assistance.

The impact of the Bush administration's very public governance push was twofold. First, the mood of the relationship soured, due primarily to "U.S. interference" in allocating or placing conditions on what Cairo perceived as "its money." Second, the constant pressure from the United States yielded a brief period of political opening in 2005, during which Egypt held its first competitive presidential elections, independent Egyptian media had breathing space, and Egypt's judges asserted themselves. Despite the frictions created, however, no significant Egyptian request on other national security concerns was rejected.

Continued Governance Problems

According to Freedom House and other human rights organizations, the Mubarak regime's record on human rights and democracy since 2005 has steadily deteriorated. Since 2006, Cairo has instituted severely repressive measures against the Muslim Brotherhood, a crackdown -- which coupled with a worsening economic situation -- that has contributed markedly to social unrest. This summer, Egypt has been plagued by a wave of strikes protesting workers rights and salaries, in numbers not seen in decades. A bread crisis last year compelled Mubarak to order the army to bake and distribute bread -- a task it continues to perform.

Even outside the context of Islamists, rule of law also remains problematic. For many Egyptians, the high-profile case of Mirvat Abdulfatah, a thirty-six-year-old pregnant woman murdered in front of witnesses by a policeman in October 2008, is emblematic of a lack of accountability. The convicted officer received just one year in prison for the crime, instead of the maximum seven-year sentence.

Perhaps the most egregious step backward, however, was the incorporation of key elements of the Emergency Law into the Egyptian constitution during

the 2007 constitutional amendment process -- which established criteria for presidential candidates -- ensuring that only Mubarak's son, Gamal, could run. Both the Islamists and the secular opposition are already on record opposing Gamal's candidacy.

The Bright Side: Mutual Interests

Despite this worsening human rights picture, relations between Cairo and Washington have steadily improved since Obama's election. Cairo, for its own national security reasons, has recently taken a series of steps on a broad range of issues the Obama administration perceives as advancing mutual U.S.-Egyptian interests.

Palestinian politics. Egypt has been working for months to convince Hamas to join a Palestinian national unity government, a prerequisite in Cairo's mind for restarting peace negotiations. When it became apparent this summer that Damascus -- one of Hamas's leading patrons -- was playing an unproductive role in the unity talks, Egypt made efforts to undermine an initiative to foster political rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Egypt has worked to increase pressure on Hamas by preventing the transfer of funds and weapons into Gaza. This past spring, Egyptian police interdicted some \$12 million that Hamas was attempting to smuggle into Gaza. Israeli media sources also suggest that lately Egypt is playing a more robust role in cracking down on smuggling tunnels.

Countering Iran. In April 2009, Cairo announced the arrest of twenty-five members of a forty-nine-person Hizballah cell that was allegedly smuggling weapons to Hamas, targeting Israeli tourists in the Sinai, and conducting preoperational planning against Suez Canal shipping. Egyptian authorities claimed the cell was tied to Tehran and depicted the plot as an Iranian gambit to destabilize the state: "Iran is attempting to reach Egyptian lands and arrive at the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, a clear message to the Western world, and Israel, and Egypt, and all of the Arabs," stated Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit.

But the most obvious manifestation of Egypt's stand against Iran has been its overt support for the transit of Israeli warships through the Suez Canal. Earlier this summer, Cairo allowed an Israeli dolphin-class submarine to travel from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, followed a short while later by the Israeli missile cruisers Hanit and Eilat. This development was by no means unprecedented -- Israeli naval assets have long been permitted to pass the canal. But the timing of these latest deployments, as well as the publicity surrounding them, suggests a burgeoning Egyptian strategic coordination with Israel against Tehran.

The Administration Responds

Each step taken by Cairo on these critical issues has advanced Egyptian national security interests. Although these measures were not taken as a favor to the United States, the Obama administration has reciprocated by eliminating nearly all rhetoric on governance and by returning to the status quo ante on foreign aid to Egypt. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made no mention of the subject during her Sharm al-Sheikh speech in March 2009, and when asked about human rights in Egypt during an interview with al-Arabiya, she responded, "We all have room for improvement. The United States ... is moving to remedy some of the problems that we have had. We view human rights as very important ... and so we want to enlist others to make progress." In a dramatic shift from the Bush-era practice, the Obama White House has likewise not protested a single arrest in Cairo --or anywhere else in the Arab world. Moreover, the administration has promised additional aid in future years while slashing funding for democracy promotion in Egypt by more than 60 percent and assistance to civil society in particular by more than 75 percent.

Most importantly for a country that has seen its influence and image in the Arab world erode during the past three decades, President Obama rewarded Cairo with a presidential visit and inaugural address to the "Muslim World," playing to Egypt's conceit as the heart of the Arab, if not Muslim, world. Although he mentioned democracy in an anodyne manner during the Cairo speech, the president failed to refer directly to Egypt or to challenge the Arab world in the same way he challenged Africans just one week later in Ghana.

Conclusion

President Mubarak comes to Washington during the dog days of summer, with the capital a virtual ghost town. Nonetheless, that the presidential summit is actually taking place demonstrates a dramatic about-face in U.S.-Egyptian relations since Obama's election. The meeting also represents a qualified achievement for Cairo: the Obama administration may be turning to Egypt in response to the cool, even dismissive, reaction to the administration's many initiatives from Saudi Arabia, the preferred partner of the Bush administration.

For Washington, the summit's success will be more difficult to measure. Beyond potentially hosting yet another Sharm al-Sheikh peace conference, the administration's expectations of Egypt remain unclear. Egypt remains a strategic partner in a troubled region, but Egypt itself is also troubled, facing enormous socioeconomic challenges. The administration should be praised for restoring positive atmospherics to the relationship, but it need not remove core governance concerns for fear of losing Cairo's cooperation on Hamas and Iran. Egypt will continue to act in its own self-interest. With a transition in Egypt in the offing, President Mubarak's visit would be the right time to reintroduce governance issues into the bilateral agenda in a serious, if less public, way. Egypt's long-term stability, influence, and relevance are at stake.

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