

## Obama in Cairo: Another Step toward Rapprochement?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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 Brief Analysis

**P**olicyWatch #1523 is the second in a two-part series on President Obama's trip to Egypt on June 4 and examines the likely impact of the visit on U.S.-Egyptian relations. **Part one** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3059>) focused on the president's much-anticipated speech to the "Muslim world."

On June 4, President Barack Obama will deliver his much-anticipated address to the "Muslim world" from Cairo. The administration's choice of Egypt as the venue for this important speech -- and the fact that Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak had, until a family tragedy, planned to visit Washington on May 26 for the first time in six years -- highlights the change in trajectory of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. During the Bush administration, U.S.-Egyptian relations reached their nadir; today, Washington and Cairo are on the verge of rapprochement. Improved ties come as Washington is seeking better coordination with its Arab allies in countering Iranian nuclear and regional ambitions, and as Cairo nears its first political transition since 1981.

### Background

During the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton administrations, President Mubarak was a regular fixture in Washington, typically visiting once if not twice a year. This pattern continued in the first years of the Bush administration, but after the September 11 attacks and the onset of Bush's Freedom Agenda, bilateral relations deteriorated.

Differences emerged early over the 2000 arrest, conviction, and incarceration of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen and democracy advocate, for "defaming Egypt." In 2003, the Bush administration conditioned \$130 million in U.S. assistance on Ibrahim's release. Under pressure, Mubarak released Ibrahim from jail but has not visited Washington since. In August 2008, Ibrahim was again convicted of damaging Egypt's reputation, this time in absentia. Another point of contention was the January 2005 arrest of presidential candidate and Mubarak critic, Ayman Nour. Following his arrest, then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice postponed a planned visit to Egypt. When she did eventually visit Cairo in June 2005, she gave a "major policy speech" on democracy.

The end of the Bush administration changed the atmosphere. In an apparent goodwill gesture toward the Obama administration, in February 2009 Egypt released Nour from prison two years early. The White House reciprocated this gesture by inviting Mubarak to Washington and announcing on May 8 that Obama would deliver his address in Cairo. Then, last week, an Egyptian court overturned Ibrahim's 2008 conviction, clearing the way for his return to Egypt.

### Growing Coincidence of Interest

The timing of the rapprochement reflects the convergence of interest on several issues of importance to both Cairo and Washington.

Iran. Tehran's progress toward a nuclear weapon and its provision of materiel and ideological support for moqawama, or resistance, across the region is of grave concern to Washington and its moderate Arab allies, specifically Egypt. Cairo has had problems with Tehran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but tensions have spiked of late. During the Israeli military campaign in Gaza in January 2009 -- when Egypt refused to open its border with Gaza to relieve pressure on Hamas -- an organization associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps put a \$1.5 million bounty on Mubarak's head, a threat posted on the Iranian government's Fars news agency website.

More recently, in April, Egypt announced the arrest in November 2008 of dozens of Iranian-backed Hizballah operatives in the Sinai. Cairo accused the operatives of channeling weapons to Hamas, targeting Israeli tourists, and planning operations against Suez Canal shipping.

While Washington and Cairo share an assessment of the Iranian threat, they differ on strategy. The administration has been silent on Egypt and Morocco's bold responses to Iranian subversion, heightening Arab concerns about the U.S. approach. Washington's Arab allies likely see this as a missed opportunity to rally support in Europe, China, and Russia for a tougher policy.

Hamas. Washington and Cairo share a common concern about the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas. The Obama administration has stated that it wants to revitalize Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, a goal undermined by Hamas's control of Gaza. Although a Palestinian national unity government might jump-start these negotiations, it could also set the stage for Hamas's electoral victory over the more-moderate Fatah next January.

For its part, Cairo views the Iranian-backed Hamas on its border as a significant threat, not only to the peace process but also to Egyptian stability. Cairo's concern is similar to Jordan's in that the violent ideology espoused by Hamas -- a Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) -- might spread to the

Egyptian branch of the organization, which years ago foreswore violence. In the aftermath of the Hizballah arrests, Egyptian MB statements of sympathy for and identification with the Shiite terrorist organization have proven especially troubling to Cairo.

Egyptian succession. Mubarak is eighty-one and said to be in good health, but uncertainty about succession is a preoccupation in Egypt. Indeed, in March 2008, a Cairo court sentenced the editor of al-Dustour newspaper to six months in prison for "publishing false information and rumors" about Mubarak's health. Should the Egyptian president anoint his son, National Democratic Party (NDP) deputy secretary general Gamal Mubarak, as his successor, it could be problematic. Given current regional challenges, both the United States and Egypt have an interest in seeing a smooth and, if possible, transparent transition of power in Cairo.

#### Ongoing Governance Issues

While prospects for the bilateral relationship appear promising, the governance problems in Egypt that underpinned the Bush-era deterioration remain. Recently, much of the condemnation has been focused on the controversial government decision to destroy some 400,000 pigs as a preventative measure against swine flu. The step was criticized by the UN World Health Organization as unproductive and condemned by Egypt's long-suffering Coptic community, which derives its livelihood from the hogs, as yet another act of government-sponsored persecution.

Despite the release of Ayman Nour, and issues of government competence and religious freedom aside, Egypt continues to be a rather repressive environment. Government harassment and interference with registration procedures for the April 2008 municipal elections were so severe that the MB, which had intended to field 10,000 candidates for 53,000 seats, boycotted the contest. At the same time, the government took further steps in parliament in 2008 to limit press freedom and enhance the government's ability to sanction media outlets by withdrawing licenses.

Meanwhile, and perhaps predictably, during his three-year incarceration, Nour's pro-reform al-Ghad party fell into disarray; as a result of his conviction, he himself was disbarred and is no longer eligible to hold public office. By discrediting and marginalizing Nour, the Mubarak regime effectively removed its only secular democratic political rival.

One bright spot in this otherwise bleak landscape was the unexpected conviction on May 21 of Hesham Talaat Moustafa in a Cairo criminal court. Moustafa, one of the richest men in Egypt, was accused of murdering his Lebanese paramour, Suzane Tamim. His trial was watched closely in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, not only because of its salacious, tabloidlike quality, but as a result of its political and legal implications. Moustafa was a member of Egypt's Shura Council -- the upper house of Parliament appointed by Mubarak -- and is a leading member of the NDP, serving on its policies secretariat.

#### Conclusion

Governance issues have been assigned a lower profile -- if not priority -- in the Obama administration's dealings with Cairo. No doubt, the administration has taken a less confrontational approach. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Egypt in March -- less than a month after her department's annual Human Rights Report characterized Egypt's respect for human rights as "poor" -- she avoided public mention of the issue. At the same time, however, the administration has taken the very real and substantive decision to reduce funding for democracy promotion in Egypt by 70 percent.

By not adopting Bush's Freedom Agenda, the Obama administration has paved the way to a return to Washington's traditional relationship with Cairo. Given the need for an Egyptian leadership role in the Arab opposition to Iranian nuclear ambitions, at least in the short term, Washington's decision would seem to make sense. As a long-term policy, however, the downgrading of governance issues on the U.S.-Egyptian bilateral agenda has some potentially serious consequences, not least of which would be a crisis of confidence among Arab democrats in Washington's commitment to promoting democratic values. More ominously, should the trend of bad governance continue in Egypt, it would likely be accompanied by a corresponding increase in the popularity of Islamists.

When Obama gives his June 4 address in Cairo, it will be difficult to avoid the topic of democracy. But Washington will approach the topic cautiously. The administration neither wants to risk derailing the nascent improvement of bilateral relations nor to pressure Egypt as it approaches its first period of political transition in nearly three decades. The challenge for Washington will be how to balance the critical need for robust U.S.-Egyptian coordination on Iran and Hamas with the longstanding U.S. support for democratic development.

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