

Iraq and the Middle East:

A View from Cairo

Feb 13, 2003



Brief Analysis

US.-Egyptian relations always have been a critical aspect of American involvement in the Middle East. Although Washington and Cairo have disagreed on certain issues, they have nevertheless maintained a significant partnership. As regional tensions mount amid the possibility of war with Iraq and continued violence on the Israeli-Palestinian front, it is important to take a fresh look at this partnership. Recently, the Egyptian government has conveyed its concerns to the United States on two major issues: the potential for war in Iraq and Washington's role in attaining Arab-Israeli peace.

International Consensus on Iraq

In the wake of UN Monitoring and Verification Commission director Hans Blix's recent report on Iraq and Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 6 address to the UN Security Council, many unanswered questions remain regarding Iraq's weapons capabilities and regional intentions. In considering the best means of ensuring Iraqi compliance with international obligations, the United States should be careful to confine its actions to the realm of international legitimacy. Whatever contingency it chooses, Washington should obtain strong international backing and take steps to ensure maximal stability within Iraq.

Like many other countries, Egypt does not want the United States to become involved in a messy military engagement with many risks and uncalculated costs. The people of Iraq have already suffered a great deal and deserve the greatest possible consideration before any action is taken. The United States should allow sufficient time to explore every possible option before moving against Saddam Husayn. A military strike is neither the first nor the last option. The Middle East has exhibited increasing instability since September 11, 2001, and any conflict in Iraq could easily spill over into neighboring countries.

Given that there are no clear-cut post-Saddam scenarios, the Iraq situation merits open discussion between the United States, Egypt, and other Arab states regarding the stability and security of the region. In any case, the United States must strive above all to maintain the national, ethnic, and territorial integrity of Iraq.

Reviving the Arab-Israeli Peace Process

The derailed Arab-Israeli peace process must be put back on track. Egypt does not want to dwell on who is to blame for the violence that has all but consumed the region thus far, but would rather move forward in attempting to break the vicious circle of retaliation between Israel and the Palestinians. All parties must work to restore hope and optimism regarding the prospects for peace. To that end, the United States must make a firm commitment to stand with Egypt and other nations that are engaged in the peace effort, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In particular, the Quartet roadmap must be implemented, and all sides must be held accountable to it.

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak has already invited Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to Cairo to take the first steps in moving his new government toward peace. Because the recent elections have changed the shape of the Israeli body politic, Egypt hopes to initiate a coalition that will push for peace rather than create more obstacles.

Cairo has asked Washington to become similarly engaged, in the belief that it is simply too dangerous to leave the crisis simmering on the back burner. In the absence of hope and careful international involvement, hardliners will likely prevail against the interests of peace.

While extending a hand to Israel, Egypt has also made an effort to prevent radicalization on the Palestinian side, in part by asking Israel to end its enforced curfews, road closures, and targeted killings in Palestinian territories. The situation in the territories is worsening, and it is impossible to predict when another wave of violence might break out.

Given the violence and death of the past two-and-a-half years, it is all the more disappointing that the time was not ripe for a peace agreement at Camp David in 2000. Perhaps if former president Bill Clinton had initiated the talks even sooner, those engaged in the process could have come to an agreement. In the shadow of that failure and the ensuing violence, neither party now sees a partner for peace.

Reconsidering the Role of the United States

The United States should know that while its involvement in bringing peace to the Arab-Israeli front is valued, skepticism is growing as to its role in Iraq. Ultimately, democratization cannot be imposed from outside the region. It cannot be obtained with a prescription from eight thousand miles away. Iraq, like many other Arab countries, is still a developing nation whose citizens are not well informed about events in much of the rest of the world. Although it was born of an ancient civilization, the modern, independent state of Iraq has only existed since the end of World War II. One cannot expect such a state to automatically adopt the U.S. system of government, which has been more than two hundred years in the making.

Hence, while Iraq must embrace development instead of stagnation, the country cannot simply jump from one mode of governance to an entirely different one. Democracy, like any other viable form of government, must be the result of internal evolution, not external dictates. With these facts in mind, the U.S.-Egyptian partnership can be an important source of progress in the Middle East, particularly if it generates cooperative efforts to peacefully resolve both the Iraqi crisis and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Gottlieb.

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