

Egypt-U.S. Relations and Egyptian Foreign Policy

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Brief Analysis

Despite the existence of a two-decade old strategic alliance between Egypt and the United States, political elites in both countries are profoundly skeptical of the goals and intentions of the other side. In Egypt, there are doubts about the legitimacy of U.S. behavior in the world, about the even-handedness of U.S. policy in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli peace process, and about America's cultural and political motives toward the Arabs in general. In a similar fashion, Egypt is often viewed by the American political elite as obstructionist in the peace process and harboring designs of regional hegemony by returning to the pan-Arabist policies of the Nasserist period. The history of this relationship--from Kissinger's post-October War visit to Cairo to the present--does not support the kind of apprehensions that exist in the political elite of both countries. Over the past quarter-century, differences may have emerged between the two sides on the tactical level but Cairo and Washington have, to a remarkable degree, shared a common strategic orientation. Early on, the two countries agreed on these four major strategic objectives:

- Settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This has been transformed from an existential conflict to a conflict about the rules to define relationships between states. This transformation occurred largely because of Camp David and the development of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship.
- Security of the Gulf. Today, Iran is evolving from a revolutionary into a status quo state and Iraq has been bottled for some time. Threats from these countries have been reduced considerably, at least in part because of the U.S.-Egyptian alliance.
- Stability of the Middle East. Throughout the region, forces of radicalism--both religious and nationalist--are in retreat. Egypt has taken the lead in this fight.
- Egypt's economic development. Egypt is now a different country than it was at the beginning of the partnership. It is a promising emerging market with declining birth rates and healthy growth rates.

Both sides have benefited greatly from this partnership. Thanks to U.S. help, Egypt regained control of the Sinai and has enjoyed considerable political and economic gains, including about \$50 billion in aid. Thanks to the relationship with Cairo, Washington gained political legitimacy throughout the Arab world and a partner in the protection of U.S. interests, especially the flow of oil supplies. Both sides have been more secure because of this alliance.

Pattern of Behavior

Despite the strategic relationship, tactical differences provoke tensions between the two countries. Indeed, there is a pattern to these episodes. Usually, there is some policy difference about how to deal with a specific situation. A senior U.S. official then makes an official statement about how the Egyptian position is not helpful. Immediately after that, an article in the New York Times or Washington Post will criticize Egypt--not on the policy issue but rather on the domestic Egyptian reasons fueling the contest with Washington. Then, a Washington think-tank will issue a briefing paper explaining Egyptian policy as a symptom of Egypt's re-Nasserization or a product of Cairo's declining role in the region. After that, some member of Congress will make a statement raising questions about the future of

U.S. aid to Egypt.

In Egypt, the response will be swift and sharp. It will come from officials who will first refer to Egypt as a sovereign state and declare that the United States has no right to interfere in Egypt's domestic or foreign policy. Pro-government media will then accuse the "Jewish lobby" so as not to criticize the U.S. government directly. Islamic and Nasserist newspapers will issue more fundamental broadsides, lambasting the hegemonic and imperialist behavior of the United States and its basic enmity against Arabs and Muslims, and calling on President Husni Mubarak to cancel some forthcoming trip to Washington. In the end, Mubarak and the U.S. president will talk on the telephone, patch things up, order lower level officials to meet, and get the relationship back on track.

Improving the Partnership

As in all relationships, U.S.-Egyptian ties have to be nourished. In Egypt, we need more knowledge of the U.S. political system. We have to go beyond the governmental level to have intellectual contacts that allow certain empathy and passion with the different positions both countries have. In America, elite groups--such as the Jewish community--need to have a closer look at the reality of Egyptian-Israeli relations. There is a certain "hyperness" in dealing with every hiccup we have in the relationship. This is because there is too little real knowledge about its realities.

Egyptian-Israeli Relations

Contrary to popular perception, Egyptian-Israeli relations are not cold at all. According to all indicators that measure between countries, Egypt's ties with Israel are quite normal, especially when compared with Egypt's ties to other neighboring states. For example, Israel is Egypt's second largest trading partner in the Middle East; Egypt receives considerable Israeli investment; two flights fly daily between the two countries; and more Egyptians travel to Israel for non-work and non-pilgrimage reasons than to virtually any other Middle Eastern country. One must recognize that there is very little interaction among the peoples of the Middle East in general, a fact which affects Arab-Arab relations just as it affects Arab-Israeli relations.

It is true that Egypt held back on selling natural gas to Israel during the Netanyahu era, but now Egypt is eager to do business with Israel on this. (It is Israel that has currently put the project on hold.) More generally, Egypt is sending many positive signals of peaceful intent that Israelis and Americans do not notice. Most important of these is the situation in the Sinai. There, Egypt is building a civilian population based on civilian infrastructure and tourism. Similarly, Egypt's deployment of troops in the Sinai has never exceeded 8,000, whereas the treaty permits 22,000. These are important signs of Egyptian priorities.

Egypt and the Turkish-Israeli Relationship

Initially, there was a big alarm in Egypt about a so-called "alliance" between Israel and Turkey. After studying it, Egypt realized that it is simply a normal level of military cooperation between states that does not threaten any third party. That helped smooth problems in the relationship between Egypt and Turkey. Yet, the question remains: What kind of future do we want for the Middle East--a balance of power system or a regional cooperative system? Enlightened Egyptians believe we must embark on a new era, based upon the ideals of the multilateral talks, the regional economic summits and the European Union-Mediterranean initiative.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Levent Onar.

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