

## Egypt:

### Foreign Policy and the Peace Process

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#### Brief Analysis

**I**srael-Palestinian Peace Process: In Israel and the Arab world, the mood is changing with respect to peace. In Israel, the recent elections were evidence of soul-searching. Although Israelis have diverse views on peace, last month they looked at the region and decided they needed a change. Most Israelis are now convinced that the Palestinians need to live separately from them, not under Israeli control. Most Israelis have accepted the idea of living side-by-side with a Palestinian state, albeit one with certain limitations -- demilitarized, no Arab armies west of the Jordan, and so forth. And most Israelis accept that this Palestinian state should not be cut off from Israel, Jordan, or other neighbors, and that a policy of openness is the best way to build bridges of cooperation. Despite decades of confrontation, Israelis and Palestinians are now used to living together, and while this relationship is not always harmonious, the two sides know how to coexist.

There is also a change of mood taking place in the Arab world. The number of Palestinians who accept the existence of the state of Israel has increased in the last few years. Palestinians have reconciled themselves to living in peace with Israel, no longer holding to the idea that the state of Israel and a Palestinian state are mutually exclusive. While this percentage varies, as do certain camps' conditions for coexisting with their neighbors, it is obvious from Egyptian discussions with Israelis and Palestinians that both sides feel it is time to work seriously toward a permanent settlement. And although "final status" issues are complicated and sensitive, both sides realize that, if these issues are left unresolved, they may endanger lives on both sides in the future.

Moving forward will take a lot of hard work. The two parties have to think seriously and creatively about the most controversial issues and what the potential solutions are. The Palestinians have already assigned the task of drafting options on each of the final-status issues. The Israelis have of course done more work on these issues in the past, but the new government is also going to have to make a fresh examination of the available information.

**I**srael-Syria Peace Process: The change of mood also extends to Syria. Recent comments by Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad included praise for Israeli prime minister-elect Ehud Barak and leave the impression that Asad is open-minded, hopeful, and wants to deal with a forward-looking Israeli policy. There is a feeling of anticipation on both sides. Anticipation can sometimes be dangerous, especially if expectations are raised and then not met, leading to frustration and disappointment. In this case, however, both sides have learned the limits of expectations from the years of confrontation and hard bargaining, so the anticipation is therefore a positive development. Moreover, Israelis believe that peace without Syria will not be complete or stable. The important point is that although neither party is abandoning its point of view or lowering the ante --change is relative, piecemeal, and takes time -- both sides are positively inclined and a window of opportunity does exist. One problem is that the leadership on both sides is waiting for the other to take the first step.

Restarting the Israeli-Syrian talks would require the good offices of the United States; Egypt would also be happy to take part in the process. At the same time, it is important to reduce the number of self-appointed envoys. The line of communication must be selected very carefully and the go-between must have the trust of both sides. The United

States can play this role because both sides accept it as an honest broker. The Europeans can also play a supportive role, and a greater one as the process moves on. The resumption of talks can be expected in three to five months, probably beginning in Washington and then moving to the region.

All Tracks: In the end, some movement will occur in the process, to reassure both Israelis and Arabs. Both sides are tired of confrontation and stalemate, and so the chances for progress on all tracks are good. In this vein, Egypt believes that it is in the best interests of peace to move forward on both the Syrian and Palestinian tracks simultaneously. This is logical, as progress on one track spurs confidence and movement on the other. The new Israeli government should implement the outgoing government's Wye commitments to the Palestinians, bear in mind the sensitivity of the settlement issue, prepare to start final-status negotiations, and simultaneously move forward with the Syrian negotiations. Asad is positively inclined toward peace because he knows it is best for his people and he should therefore seize the window of opportunity while it exists. Asad also believes that Barak would like to move forward on Lebanon as well. There is a national consensus in Israel that it should withdraw from Lebanon as soon as its security guarantees are met. So, as Israel moves on the Syrian track, it should also address the Lebanese track.

Another reassuring development is that the tide of extremism is ebbing. Most of the movements that advocate, tolerate, or condone terror and violence have been weakened in the last few months. As a result, moderate forces will now have the opportunity to move forward without worrying what their detractors are going to do. This current mood is contrary to a time when both Israelis and Palestinians thought of confrontational policies. One can see that the extremist movements in the Arab world peaked several years ago and are now on the downturn. This happened for several reasons. First, these groups failed to convince a majority of the people that their cause was justified or that they were able to deliver anything. In the case of Egypt, the majority of the people have mobilized against these groups because they realize that these groups' policies are not in Egypt's best interests. These groups are not hurting the regime or the government; they are hurting their country. This turn against extremism seems to apply even to Algeria. Second, the United States has done a lot to change the approach of European and other countries that used to tolerate terrorism even if they did not advocate or admit it as part of their policies. The picture also changed markedly following the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Saalam. Although not a turning point, it prompted serious discussion with European governments about terrorism and resulted in an improved European position against extremist groups which advocate terrorism.

Other Actors: The U.S. role in the peace process is hard to label; at different times, Washington has usefully served as mediator and facilitator. It would therefore be a mistake to attach a rigid definition to its role. Rather, the United States should be an active partner in the peace process owing to its position in the international community as well as its historic responsibility. Most Egyptians feel that the United States should be an unbiased, fair partner that is always engaged -- including during election cycles -- to enable both sides to reach an agreement. The Arab world also welcomes involvement from the Europeans. This involvement should not be viewed as contradictory to the U.S. role, as the Europeans coordinate their steps and initiatives with the United States in any event.

For Egypt, it is important to keep open the lines of communication with Israel, especially in times of crisis. As for a possible visit to Israel by President Mubarak, the issue is timing. The president has no objections in principle to visiting Israel, but it has to be more than symbolic; more good must come from it than harm. This is not dictated, however, by domestic politics inside Egypt. Policy cannot be decided by fear of antagonizing certain factions of the public, because opponents will always exist. Heads of state should lead their people, not be led by them. But the risks they take must also be reasonable. Accordingly, Egypt does not want a visit to raise expectations and then not have them met.

Kosovo and Iraq: The United States did the right thing in Kosovo. It would be an indictment of the human race to see

this kind of ethnic cleansing occurring for any reason. This reaction is not because the ethnic Albanian Kosovars are Muslim. Had they been Jewish or any other nationality, it would have been proper for the United States to do what it did. As a human being, one cannot sit by and watch this happen. The United States made an historic contribution to world peace and this role will be very much appreciated, even if this appreciation is not often expressed. People will see that the United States was not there for any selfish reason. On the contrary, it was a great example of a superpower playing a role for moral and ethical reasons. If the Kosovo situation were to be repeated in Iraq or anywhere else, the international community should react with equal force. But Iraq is not going to begin a systematic campaign against the Kurds, Shi'is, or other group. Iraq will therefore not get itself into that position because it is unlikely to pursue such a policy, in part because it is now clear that the price for such policies is very high.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey.

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