

MIDDLE EAST NOTE

August 2003

CSIS Middle East Program

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The United States and Egypt: Building the Partnership

A Conference Report

The study of bilateral relations has fallen deeply out of favor in the academic community. Political science has turned to the study of international state systems rather than relations between individual states; anthropologists and sociologists are far more interested in non-state actors; and historians have largely abandoned states altogether. It is a shame, because there is much to be learned from bilateral relationships, and some such relationships are vital—not only to the countries involved, but also to a broader array of countries.

One such vital relationship is that between the United States and Egypt. Forged during the Cold War almost entirely on the issue of Arab-Israeli peacemaking, the U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relationship has deepened and broadened over the last quarter century. Egypt remains one of the United States' most important Arab allies, and the bilateral relationship with Washington remains the keystone of Egypt's foreign policy. Strong U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relations are also an important anchor for states throughout the Middle East and for Western policy in the region. The relationship is valuable for policymakers in both countries; doing without it is unthinkable.

To explore this relationship, the CSIS Middle East Program, in cooperation with the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, convened a one-day conference on June 26, 2003, entitled, "The United States and Egypt: Building the Partnership." The goal of the meeting was to brainstorm how that partnership might be strengthened.

Participants agreed that much needs to be done on the diplomatic, political, military, and economic levels. Although all did not agree on a single course forward, the participants unanimously concurred that a stronger U.S.-Egyptian relationship is very much in the interests of both countries, and although it will require a great deal of work to achieve, the benefits are worth the effort.

An Ambivalent Alliance

In a world that has changed dramatically in a quarter century, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has remained a relative constant. Cairo is consulted on major U.S. decisions involving the Middle East, and Egyptian views factor into every U.S. policy toward the region. Egypt's regional role has been significantly enhanced by its relationship with the United States, partly through the strength that comes from U.S. backing and partly from its perceived ability to steer the United States when it has gone astray. The aid relationship has neither grown nor diminished significantly and has lasted for much longer than many might have supposed. More than \$50 billion in U.S. aid has flowed to Egypt since 1978, contributing to a thorough modernization of the Egyptian armed forces, as well as supporting a vast array of programs ranging from agricultural improvement to industrialization support to infrastructure construction and beyond. In addition, economic ties between the two countries have grown under the umbrella of close governmental

cooperation. U.S. companies have invested billions of dollars in Egypt and are the top source of foreign direct investment in the country. Egyptian companies export hundreds of millions of dollars worth of goods to the United States annually. While room for growth remains, the strength of what already exists is indisputable.

But while the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has grown, it has not quite flourished. Mid-level officials rely on it, and high-level officials understand its importance, but few in either country are willing to proclaim its centrality. As a former Egyptian military officer put it recently, the relationship is often hobbled by Egyptians' concentration on U.S. strengths and Americans' concentration on Egyptian weaknesses. That it is clearly not a relationship between equals sometimes makes it difficult to sustain a deep sense of partnership.

On the Egyptian side, there remains a discomfort with the United States' embrace. This is partly because many Egyptians feel that the United States is deeply biased toward Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but it is also tied to resentment toward the United States as an outside power in the Middle East, fear of U.S. cultural hegemony, and questions about U.S. intentions. After a quarter century of U.S.-Egyptian bilateral partnerships that have helped electrify the Egyptian countryside, improve wastewater treatment in Cairo, construct roads throughout the country, modernize the telephone system, and in myriad ways improved the daily lives of millions, most ordinary Egyptians see these achievements as the actions of their own government rather than those of the United States. In addition, these changes have taken place against a backdrop of increasingly crowded cities, growing environmental pollution, diminishing job prospects, and a host of other factors that make Egyptians' lives more difficult. Some Egyptians cast blame on the United States for much of what has gone wrong in Egypt. They say that if the U.S. government really wanted things to go right, it would ensure that they did. A recent poll taken among Egyptians stunned official Washington: only six percent had a favorable view of the United States. Even allowing for significant displeasure over U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict and toward Iraq at the time the poll was taken, public opinion in Egypt appears deeply unsympathetic to a relationship that government officials widely consider crucial.

American Views

Americans, too, have a certain ambivalence about the relationship, which is linked partly (but not entirely) to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Among numerous supporters of Israel—including many in Washington—the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty has resulted only in a “cold peace.” Egyptian-Israeli bilateral trade is meager; Egyptians' trips to Israel are rare; and Israel

continues to face virulent criticism in Egypt's semi-official media. Many Americans, and especially those in Washington, remember that Sha'aban Abdel Rahim's song “I Hate Israel” topped the Egyptian charts for months in the summer of 2001. For Israelis and their supporters, Egypt is a manifestation of the fear that even peace treaties may not mean an end to Israel's isolation in the Middle East nor to Arab hostility.

On the professional level, many Americans working with Egyptians come away liking individuals but completely stymied by the bureaucracy. Under the U.S. system, bureaucracies hold vast amounts of information, are often decentralized, and can be powerful institutional actors. In the Egyptian system, they are more often obstacles to change than agents of it, and power is remarkably concentrated among a tiny few. Consequently, real power often rests with a tiny handful of people at the top, and those individuals become so consumed with handling minutiae that they lack the time for strategic thinking or working on important issues.

Finally, Americans are increasingly concerned with the Egyptian political environment, which they view as undermining stability, holding back Egyptian economic growth, and contributing to anger and extremism at the popular level. Calls periodically arise in Washington to condition aid to Egypt on an improvement in the country's human rights record. Although administration after administration has resisted such conditionality, the perennial nature of the efforts, combined with relatively slow progress in Egypt toward more openness and political reform, has put a damper on closer U.S.-Egyptian ties.

Egypt as a Regional Leader

Despite these obstacles, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has delivered a great deal to both sides. On the strategic level, Egypt remains a remarkable partner. The pre-positioning of military equipment, the guarantee of secure passage through the Suez Canal, joint training operations, and the interoperability of hardware helps give the United States strategic depth in the Middle East. Egypt plays a role that Israel cannot, partly by virtue of geography and partly because operations mounted out of Egypt seem far less aggressive to neighboring states than those launched from Israel. Egypt has participated actively in peacekeeping operations around the world, giving an important Arab imprimatur to activities that the United States sees in its national interest.

In addition, Egypt's peace treaty with Israel removes the preeminent threat to a key U.S. ally and helps ensure that large-scale interstate warfare will not break out in the Middle East. Indeed, Egypt has been involved in every interstate war with Israel, and since Egypt made peace with Israel in 1978, no wars have occurred. This is more than a coincidence.

The strategic benefits of the bilateral relationship for Egypt have been no less important. Egypt has one of the best-trained, best-supplied military forces in the Arab world, capable of taking on any threat emanating from beyond its borders. Twenty-five years ago, the Egyptian military was saddled with outdated Soviet equipment that was badly in need of replacement. This is no longer the case; in fact, the Egyptians themselves produce the M1-A1 Abrams main tank.

Even more importantly, Egypt's threat environment has changed markedly because of its relationship with the United States. Egyptian-Israeli fighting is no longer an option, which makes Cairo more secure and brings security to the millions of Egyptians who live along the Suez Canal.

But to reduce the U.S.-Egyptian strategic relationship to primarily a military one is to miss much of the story. Egypt is a key diplomatic partner of the United States, in part because of its active role in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Time after time, Egypt has had the difficult task of prodding Palestinian security forces toward greater cooperation with their Israeli counterparts and bringing militant groups to the negotiating table. It is a job that the United States simply cannot do and one that Egypt does with remarkable regularity. In addition, Egypt is a reliable voice of moderation in Arab councils. Although the Egyptian position often differs from that of the United States, Egypt frequently helps frame an agenda that is much more to U.S. liking than would otherwise be the case.

Perhaps most importantly, Egypt is a key strategic partner of the United States *because* it is Egypt, the fount of ideas as well as talent, skills, art, and culture throughout the Arab world. Egypt's population of 70 million is an important reservoir of teachers, doctors, lawyers, and accountants for many Arab countries. Egyptians fill needs that indigenous workers cannot, and combined with the earnings of manual laborers, these professionals send billions of dollars back home every year. For decades the Egyptian legal tradition has had a disproportionate effect on the development of constitutions and legal codes throughout the Arab world, for the simple reason that it was Egyptian lawyers who wrote many of those constitutions.

Egypt's intellectual output has been a dominant force framing debates in the Arab world, starting with the founding of al-Azhar in the tenth century and continuing to this day. Egypt supplies professors to a range of regional universities, and Azhar-trained clerics continue to have an important influence in Muslim communities throughout the world. Virtually all Islamist political activism has deep roots in Egyptian thought, from the modernist writings of Egypt's first *mufti*, Muhammad Abduh, a century ago, to the work of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna in the

1930s and 1940s, to more modern interpretations. Egyptian influence has not all resulted in good, but there is no denying that it has often been central.

Building on the Foundations

Because of Egypt's role in the Arab world and the U.S. role in the broader world, Egypt and the United States are bound to interact. It is in their mutual interest to cooperate rather than compete. How can that cooperation be built? Participants in the CSIS/ Al-Ahram Center conference had several specific ideas:

- **Remember the importance of the relationship for its own sake, not just as a means to achieve short-term goals.** The overall U.S.-Egyptian relationship has often been subordinated to other goals, whether Arab-Israeli peacemaking, counterterrorism, proliferation, or regional security. Burdening the relationship with endless tasks and goals without nurturing the relationship itself both undermines it and ensures that important goals sometimes will not be met.
- **Acknowledge the importance of the relationship to domestic populations.** Policymakers in Cairo and Washington often seem embarrassed to express support for the relationship, especially outside of strictly bilateral meetings. Systematically neglecting to build domestic support for the relationship undermines each government's ability to maintain it. Frankly admitting the benefits of the relationship to each population is an important gesture that needs to be made again and again.
- **Sell the relationship to the other population more effectively.** Neither the United States nor Egypt has sufficiently explained the relationship to the opposite population. This requires something more than a marketing effort and extends to reaching out to and responding to concerns of the opposite community. Support for the relationship cannot be built merely from the top down; it also needs to be built from the bottom up.
- **Delineate roles for each other and discuss them frankly.** That Egyptian and U.S. government officials are often frustrated by what they consider meddling by the other party is no secret. Too often, however, they are unwilling to sketch out roles for each other. A frank discussion about shared interests and how each side might pursue them would be a welcome development.
- **Plan the partnership into the future.** U.S.-Egyptian relations are handicapped by the lack of a clear vision of where the relationship is headed in 5 or 10 years. It would be a useful exercise to agree on what the relationship should look like a decade into the future and delineate the steps required to get there.

- **Work to develop a common analysis and shared vision for the Middle East.** Coordinating actions could be facilitated by a greater coordination of analysis. Egypt has expertise that the United States lacks, and the United States has capabilities and competencies that the Egyptians lack. Better coordination of intelligence, law enforcement, and diplomatic efforts can help build the structure for a closer relationship.
- **Build deeper intellectual ties between the two countries.** American and Egyptian academics appear to be drifting farther apart, partly due to disparities in resources, but also due to less dialogue than there was in the past. Egyptians are just beginning to establish American studies centers in leading universities. Middle East centers in American universities also have an obligation to nurture more interaction and exchanges. In addition, both governments need to take steps to facilitate the work of foreign researchers in their own countries.

Tasks for the United States

- **Continue engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict.** Even more damaging than a sense among Egyptians that the United States is biased toward Israel is a sense that the United States is indifferent to Palestinian suffering. Sustained, high-profile U.S. engagement in Arab-Israeli peacemaking may not win widespread admiration for U.S. efforts, but the apparent absence of such efforts stokes anger and outrage against the United States in Egypt and makes it harder for the Egyptian government to appear close to the United States.
- **Successfully manage the post-conflict environment in Iraq.** Many Egyptians doubted U.S. intentions going into Iraq, and it is important that the postwar environment be perceived in Egypt as improving the lives of the Iraqi people. Clarifying where the United States seeks to go in Iraq, and in what timeframe, would be a helpful step. Adhering to these pronouncements would be a necessary component in building credibility.
- **Encourage deeper business ties.** More activity in Egypt by U.S. businessmen helps deepen the bilateral relationship and helps create a constituency in Egypt for closer bilateral relations. One step the United States may wish to take is to begin negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement *prior* to Egypt's adopting all of the requisite economic and market reforms as a way to help spur those reforms.

Tasks for Egypt

- **Real and visible political reforms are a prerequisite for closer ties.** After September 11,

growing voices in the U.S. government and beyond are stating that Egypt's relatively closed political system creates a threat of extremism that outweighs the benefits to the United States of a close government-to-government relationship. In the early 1990s, Egypt reined in civil liberties and used security courts extensively to escape from violence that many thought might overthrow the system. Now, without that threat, Egypt needs to move toward greater political openness and transparency if it is to build U.S. confidence in the relationship.

- **Further economic reforms will help both Egypt and the bilateral relationship.** Egyptian economic reform appears to have lost much of the urgency it had in the early 1990s, dampening the interest of Americans, and even many Egyptians, in investing in Egypt for the long term. Egyptian and American investors alike desire the same things: a growing economy, a vibrant banking system, a stable currency environment, a minimal amount of red tape, and an absence of corruption.

Egypt and the United States have done a good job broadening and deepening the relationship since it was forged in the late 1970s, but much more needs to be done. If both sides take on this task energetically, the benefits will be great, not only for the two governments and their interests, but also for the two countries' citizens.

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