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A Fragile State at the Crossroads

Egypt—U.S. National Security Equities in the Land of the Nile

CAPT Dane S. Egli, USCG

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Professors
Mr. Robert Callahan
COL David Knack, USA

Advisor
CAPT Timothy R. Hanley, USN

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"So something is going to have to get very badly out of whack for the relationship really to suffer."

Ambassador Robert Pelletreau referring to Egypt in *Middle East Policy*, June 2001

Introduction

Egypt is the most populous country in the Arab world with nearly all of the country's 70 million people living in Cairo, Alexandria, and the Nile delta region—making it one of the world's most densely populated areas. Egypt's strategic location has made it the site of many conquests over its 6,000-year history and the most recent conquerors, the British, granted Egypt partial independence in 1922 and withdrew completely in 1954. The Arab Muslim conquest had the greatest impact on Egyptian culture, resulting in the conversion of most of the population to Islam and ultimately establishing Egypt as the primary interpreter of Islamic *sharia*, which it remains today—the heart of Islamic religious law.[1]

The strategic focus of the Middle East in recent years has been on Iraq and the Israeli—Palestinian conflict. Yet to address vital national security issues such as winning the Global War on Terror, advancing the borders of democracy, and seeing reform take place among Islamic extremists, one must look carefully at Egypt. In response to the Ambassador's quote about Egypt in 2001, one might say that the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the ongoing war on terrorism, and the recent

[1] U.S. State Department, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Country Profiles, November 2003, pp. 1-3.

regime change in Iraq have gotten things *very badly out of whack* and the U.S.—Egyptian relationship reflects that.

During an interview at the Egyptian embassy in Washington, D.C., one of the counselors emphasized that Egypt was a "vibrant democracy in the region," and forcefully rejected the need for a democratic exemplar (like Iraq) in the Middle East. "After all," he exclaimed, "each country must make their own choice of government," and furthermore, he emphasized, "democracy will not work in Iraq because they have no experience with it." The idea of Iraq sparking democratic reform in the region was considered highly controversial indeed.[2]

Notwithstanding the views of Egyptian officials, many see Egypt as a failed state that has made only cosmetic changes in the name of reform.[3] Furthermore, as Egyptians observe events in Iraq, Libya, and even Iran, America's National Security Strategy and its "forward strategy for peace" must be on their minds. President Bush's vision for Egypt is based on the belief that America will only be made safe when the people of the Middle East are made free, and "we will expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy."[4]

With countries like Egypt in mind, President Bush described a "freedom deficit that undermines human development" in the Middle East and outlined what is needed to advance democracy in that region:

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[2] Youseff interview, 17 December 2003.
[3] Beitler and Jebb, pp. 1-2.
[4] Excerpts from the National Security Strategy, September 2002.

- *Responsible leadership*… conducting open and transparent elections, accountable for providing public services, observing the impartial rule of law.

- *Human development*… including women's rights, privatized economies, participatory governance, investments in health and education.

- *Healthy civic institutions*… marked by respect for political parties, labor unions, independent media, religious liberty.[5]

To carry that vision forward, the Administration has launched the "Greater Middle East Initiative"—the most ambitious democratic effort since the end of the Cold War—that introduces a wide range of diplomatic, cultural, and economic measures. "So long as the region's pool of politically and economically disenfranchised individuals grows, we will witness an increase in extremism, terrorism, international crime, and illegal migration," the report says.[6]

Egypt's reaction is a portent for what challenges can be expected in executing this ambitious plan in the region. Egyptian officials are unhappy about the American proposal which earmarks $20 million for democratization. President Mubarak, at a news conference, insisted that Egypt is the region's only *real* democratic state. "We do not need any pressure from anyone to adopt democratic principles," he declared.[7]

Recognizing the rich history of this ancient land, this paper will examine modern Egypt in the context of American foreign policy, the intractable Arab—Israeli

[5] Bush remarks, 6 November 2003, p. 4.
[6] Wright, A18. Citing a "unique challenge and opportunity for the international community," the report identifies three "deficits"—freedom, knowledge, and women's empowerment—that contribute to conditions that threaten the national interests of the G-8 industrialized nations.
[7] Frankel, A13.

conflict, ongoing Global War on Terror (GWOT), nation building in Iraq, and the prospect of broader reform in the Muslim world.

Diplomatic—International

1. **US—Egypt Relations:** Recent visitors to Cairo indicate that Egyptians view the "War in Iraq" as a "War against Islam," and the Iraq conflict has "poisoned U.S. relations with all Arabs." While U.S. relations with the Egyptian government and military might be good, they certainly are not with the *people* of Egypt. Furthermore, the U.S. role in Iraq, combined with the U.S. position with Palestine make them feel "like we are against them." Are these observations accurate, and if so, what is the prospect for improvement?

2. **Arab—Israeli Conflict**: Jordan's King Abdullah recently described the Arab—Israeli conflict as "the core challenge" as the Arab world works to achieve "genuine development and reform."[8] Given the international importance of this challenge and its role as a troubling flashpoint in the region, how does that crisis specifically impact Egypt? Now that the Roadmap has stalled, and Sharon has "unilaterally disengaged" from the Palestinians, what—from an Egyptian perspective—should the Bush Administration do, unilaterally and multilaterally, to bring stability to the region? Is it possible that Arab leaders "use" the Arab—Israeli conflict to deflect attention away from troubling policies within their own government, or even unfairly "blame" that conflict for other problems within their borders?

3. **Israeli Peace Process**: According to Nader Fergani, an Egyptian social scientist and writer of U.N. reports on Arab states, "… the Israeli occupation is the greatest obstacle to human development in Arab countries."[9] Given that there is no apparent solution to that situation in the near future, what is Egypt doing to move forward on its own, as well as assist others in the region, with human development initiatives? Despite the standstill in Roadmap negotiations, what role might Egypt play as regional interlocutor to introduce peaceful outcomes and serve as a stabilizing influence?

4. **Neighboring Countries**: Egypt has an historic leadership role in the Arab world, and maintains a peace treaty with Israel. What is the diplomatic relationship and level of engagement with the surrounding nations of Libya, Sudan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel? Given the recent overtures of General Qadhafi to eliminate Libyan WMD

[8] Kessler and Wright, p. A26.
[9] U.N. 2002 Arab Human Development Report, p. 3.

programs and submit to international inspections, what impact will that have on Egypt, if any? What is the status of border or water disputes with Sudan to the south?

5. **Regional Influence**: A top figure in an Egyptian think tank chastised Arab leaders for allowing Saddam to humiliate the Arab world, and exclaimed, "the Arabs should have been the ones to bring him down."[10] Does Egypt see itself as a regional leader in this sense, or should Iraq—and other Arab nations—be allowed to determine their own affairs, no matter how destabilizing to the region? President Mubarak may feel that he and the Tunisian president "tamed Qadhafi," but how much influence does Egypt really have in the region? How accurate is Egypt's self-estimate of influence potential in the region, and how does that impact its diplomatic strategy?

6. **Mideast Democracy Plan**: In response to the Bush Administration's "Greater Middle East Initiative," Egypt and Saudi Arabia have proposed an Arab summit, along with formation of an Arab League "security council," to adopt a unified strategy for political and economic changes. Saudi and Egyptian leaders have criticized the American plan as "the imposition of reform from abroad," while U.S. officials insist, "ideas for reform must come from the region, and there is no intent to impose a blueprint on others."[11] Will Arab governments and/or the general public eventually support the American plan? What is the spirit of the Egypt—Saudi reaction to the Bush proposal? Is there genuine commitment among Arab leaders to see reform take place within the region?

7. **Global War on Terror (GWOT)**: After September 11th, President Bush said to the world, "the line has been drawn… either you're for us or you're against us" in fighting the GWOT. Where does Egypt stand on that issue? How has America's superpower-approach of "democratic globalism"[12] been received by Egyptian strategists? Will this approach garner support within the Arab community of nations? With the clarion focus of America, and much of the international community, on fighting—and winning—the GWOT, where does Egypt stand with respect to providing strategic and tactical support?

8. **Winning the Peace in Iraq**: Egypt opposed the March 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq and has continued to oppose the occupation. And Egypt insists it will not participate in security or peacekeeping operations unless they are under UN

[10] Friedman, p. A1-2.
[11] Nasrawi, p. 10A.
[12] Krauthammer, p. 8. "Democratic globalism" is a foreign policy that defines the national interest not as power, but as values, and identifies one supreme value, what JFK called "the success of liberty."

auspices.[13] Is that still the official position of the Egyptian government? Given that Iraq has had no experience with democratic structures, and was ruled by an abusive dictator for the past 35 years, what is Egypt's view of the prospect of a stable democracy there? What direct or indirect role does Egypt have—if any—in helping the people of Iraq recover from the corrosive impact of wars, U.N. sanctions, repression, and internal strife?

9. **Security Assistance**: Egypt is the second largest recipient of American security assistance funds in the world.[14] How is that support used to advance human development and democratic reform? If future American policy links delivery of these funds to specific reform criteria, how would that be viewed by Egyptian leaders? Does this dependence upon foreign assistance cause a conflict with Egypt's aspiration for national independence and its leadership role within the Arab League?

10. **Egypt—Iran Relations**: After a break of 25 years, Egypt and Iran are restoring diplomatic relations. Given the Iraq conflict and discovery of nuclear ambitions in Tehran, how has this burgeoning relationship with Iran impacted U.S.—Egypt relations? What are the diplomatic, military, and economic goals of this relationship and what implications—from Egypt's perspective—might there be to reform and development in the region?

11. **Islamic World Engagement**: According to some experts of international national security systems, there must be a "new dialogue" among Arab Muslim leaders "to break the shackles of the past and come to terms with the West." They believe the current wave of violence—contrary to the claims of the perpetrators—is not derived from religion, but from a lack of progress, modernization, and hope.[15] What form of diplomatic cooperation between the U.S. and Egypt might be useful in fighting the transnational threat of terrorism, and sparking appropriate reform within the Muslim world?

Domestic—Political

1. **Radical Islam**: Cairo, with its 15 million inhabitants, is Islam's largest city and al-Azhar University trains Muslim scholars from many countries. With Egypt as the capital of Islamic religious law and source of fundamentalist teachings, is Egypt considered fertile ground for Muslim extremists and terrorists? What is being done in

[13] Congressional Research Service, p. 3.
[14] Annual average of over $2 billion in economic and military foreign assistance since 1979.
[15] Beitler and Jebb, p. 49.

the Egyptian mosques and culture to contribute to the "battle of ideas" being waged against radical Islam? Have Islamic movements such as the *Brotherhood* and other Islamic Associations enlisted more members and become more of a threat since the recent Iraq war? Is there any threat to internal security based on their extreme religious views? Has the Egyptian government won the fight against militant Islam? What tactics worked and why?

2. **Democracy**: In a recent visit to the National War College, Ambassador Jean Kirkpatrick said, "the best foreign policy to advance human rights is democracy—it makes the most difference to the people of any nation."[16] If the definition of *democracy*[17] includes qualities such as majority rule while respecting minority rights, holding free and open elections, honoring the principles of self-determination, separation of powers, and accountability of public officials to the electorate, can the Arab Republic of Egypt be considered a democratic nation?

3. **Public Policy**: Some refer to Egypt as a "social democracy." Based on the universal principles of democracy such as rule of law; limits of state power; free speech; women's rights; equal justice; respect for private property; and religious tolerance, how does the Egyptian form of democracy compare? What systems exist or are being developed to provide these kinds of human rights and development within Egypt? The United Nations Human Development Index and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index both indicate below average ratings in these areas.[18] How would the Egyptian government rate itself and what has been the official response to these evaluations? What is being done in the areas of public policy and governance to address these issues?

4. **Middle East Development**: The Bush Administration has announced the "Greater Middle East Initiative" to promote good governance, democracy, accountability, and prosperity in the region.[19] What impact has Egypt seen since that plan was introduced? Given the increased role America is seeking in the region to advance democracy, what specific contributions could it make in Egypt and the greater Middle East to improve stability and development? Given the reaction to this campaign within the region so far, what chance for success does it have?

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[16] Kirkpatrick special seminar, 18 February 2004. (Used with permission)

[17] Democracy—Rule of the majority, where supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation, involving periodically held free elections. (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary)

[18] Of countries surveyed, Egypt rated 120/175 on UNHD Report 2003 and 72/133 on TICP Index 2003 (lower ranking is better on both evaluations).

[19] Wright, A18.

5. **Presidential Leadership**: President Mubarak is 75 years old, in questionable health, and has never selected a vice president. He has been reelected three times by overwhelming majorities, and some believe he is grooming his son to succeed him. Does he enjoy the free and open support of the Egyptian people based on accountability and self-determination? Does his administration have the confidence and support of the general public, and will they view 'election' of his son as reinforcing democratic structures? What challenges will presidential succession bring to Egypt? Who will be President Mubarak's successor?

6. **Expressions of Anger**: Some fear that the war in Iraq has caused greater sympathy in the Muslim world for bin Laden and extremists, providing ammunition to militant elements. However, demonstrations in Egypt were directed as much at the local authorities as the U.S., where thousands protested the Mubarak regime. Various sources indicate there is a "subdued anger" among the population because of widespread poverty and limited political exchange. What does this indicate about the younger generation in Egypt and the desire for empowerment? What is the domestic tone within Egypt?

7. **Arab Hearts & Minds**: The younger generation (60% of the Muslim population is under 30 years old), is asserting itself in the region, demanding more rights and participation due to modernizing forces of change. Consequently, leaders like President Mubarak talk about the importance of youth, and integrating them into the political process. While talking about expanded rights and socioeconomic improvements, oftentimes the governments are trying to control this new wave.[20] What is Egypt doing to recognize the demands of the "freedom generation" and respond to their desire for expanded rights?

8. **Electoral Process**: The November 2002 elections were considered to be more transparent than past elections, but opposition parties still complained of manipulation by the government, and there are still significant restrictions on the political process and freedom of expression.[21] Why, over 50 years since the revolution and over 20 years since President Mubarak took office, are opposition political parties (New Wafd, Socialist Labor Party, etc.) not permitted to participate fully in the political process? Will there be substantive changes in the near future?

9. **New Radio Program**: Recent reports from Egypt indicate that government-controlled media are rife with anti-American and anti-Israeli attitudes. The U.S. has launched Radio Sawa in an attempt to close the perceived gap between American

[20] Gerges, p. 3.
[21] US State Department, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Country Profiles, November 2003, p. 5.

culture and political ideals in the eyes of Arabs, and plant seeds of reform and civil society. Is this investment worth it? Will it help the U.S. be a catalyst for positive change in the Muslim world? Or will Arabs view this as another form of propaganda that reinforces the perception of American arrogance?

10. **Education**: Since 1960, enrollment in secondary education has increased significantly, but in recent years population growth has put severe demands on the under-funded education system.[22] What has been the impact on advanced education opportunities, quality of education systems, and delivery of necessary skills to the labor market? A "Future Generation Fund" was established to help prepare students for the workforce. Has that initiative been effective and will it continue?

11. **Health Services**: Egyptian nationals have state-provided healthcare and statistics reflect a well-developed system. The infant mortality rate dropped from 150 per 1,000 (1975) to 30 per 1,000 (2002), and USAID funded projects exist to target childhood diseases. However, rapid population growth has resulted in reduced services and lack of resources, especially in urban Cairo and Alexandria, as well as rural villages of Upper Egypt. What steps are being taken to address these emerging demands on the medical system?

12. **Human Rights**: Cairo has established a Human Rights (HR) Council headed by a former U.N. Secretary General, and the Egyptians are well aware they are under close international scrutiny in this area. Yet, State Department human rights reports show "convincing evidence" that Egyptian police use torture to extract confessions, and detain suspects without charge or trial. Freedom of assembly has been restricted due to government fears of public demonstration and violence. Many newspapers are partially government-owned and align with government doctrine. There appears to be little restriction on religious freedom, speech, movement, or trade union association.[23] How do Egyptian officials reconcile these reports with their claims that "conditions are actually free, open, and much better than external reports indicate?"[24] What is the role of the HR Council and what has it achieved to date?

13. **Internal Governance**: Does the Egyptian system of government provide a balance of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government? If the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet members, how does that arrangement provide for accountability and dissent within national leadership? Is there evidence of self-determination and representative government within the bicameral system of the legislative branch? Does the judicial branch with

[22] Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Country Profile—Egypt, pp. 13-14.
[23] Congressional Research Service, p. 4.
[24] Youseff interview, 17 December 2003.

its Supreme Constitutional Court provide the basis for the rule of law and independent service of judges and lawyers?

14. **Internal Security**: Based on the lack of terrorist attacks, below average levels of crime for the region, and absence of major attacks on tourists in recent years, it appears police, military, and security forces provide effective public safety and security. Are there lessons that could be learned by American counterparts with respect to detecting, preventing, and deterring terrorism and security threats?

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