

Collateral Damage: Is the Widening Middle East Crisis Damaging Our Relations with Egypt and Other Regional Allies?

USEF EXPERT PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

September 28, 2006

SPEAKERS:

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Nick Veliotos (Moderator):

Mohammed Hakki has a very unique and diverse background, an Egyptian who was one of their most prominent journalists as a young man at Al-Ahram, who helped to develop the paper itself. He was a very distinguished diplomat in the Egyptian Foreign Service. He was also a minister in the President Sadat's last cabinet. He is now an Egyptian American and is continuing his interest in all things concerning the Middle East, most particularly Egypt, and continuing his career as a journalist, some of you read him in the weekly Al-Ahram in English.

Ambassador Walker has been ambassador to UAE, Israel, Egypt, he was deputy chief of mission in Saudi Arabia, and an ambassador in the UN. He has the unique distinction of having the longest direct involvement in Middle East of any Foreign Service Officer, that I know of. I recall that one of his early contributions was as a young staffer in our Middle East peace period. He was one of the people primarily responsible with what later became the Reagan Plan.

Now, I hope I have convinced you that both of these people are qualified to address this difficult issue that we are going to have today. We all know that collateral damage is a military term, but it can also be used in other contexts, like what happens when you try to swat a fly on a window with a brick. Or, given the elastic nature of the term, it can also mean unintended consequences of a nation's actions or policies. We all know that good intentions alone are never enough. Let me illustrate, Shibwi Johami tells us that in polls taken in six Arab countries, with governments friendly to the United States, in three successive years, the following persons were cited as the most popular and most admired: Osama Bin Laden, first year; French President Chirac, second year; and Lebanese Shia leader. However, the primary reason for choosing these people, was not support for their agendas or their policies, but rather the winner stood up to the United States. Recently in Egypt, a private exhibit of US art was only given final permission to use a very prestigious cite in the middle of Cairo when the word American was taken out of the title of the exhibit. It was explained this was not due to official policy, but rather due to concern about negative reactions from the public. And finally, a Jordanian friend the other day, related a story currently making the rounds of Amman, where there may be a quarter a million of Iraqis. Saddam is interviewed in his jail cell and asked if he were president how long would it take him to restore order in Iraq. He thought for a minute and replied three days and fifteen minutes. When asked to explain his very bizarre answer, Saddam said it would take him three days to recover his energy and rehabilitate his wardrobe and fifteen minutes to restore order in Iraq. On that note, let's turn to our panel.

Edward Walker:

We really haven't been able to bring peace in the Middle East, but we did achieve several very important elements of progress, largely attributable to the relationship with Egypt. It is continuing to be a key component of the relationship; Egypt is such a central player in trying to restore stability and peace to that part of the world. But as Nick referred to public opinion polls, I think all of you are aware how low our popularity is in the region among the public. Generally speaking, the favorability ratings of the United States in the most recent polls done by University of Maryland, show us ranging somewhere in the teens in terms of percent of favorability. That's not many people who like us. Now, that's pretty depressing when it comes to the Middle East, but considering we are only rating around the thirty percent for the European countries, who are supposed to be our allies

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and companions in this war on terrorism, people seem to be more concerned about us invading Iran than they are about the war on terrorism. I think we have a long ways to go and have dug ourselves a pretty deep hole.

And public opinion, in our diplomatic and government mind, has not played more important a role in determining policy, and I think we really have to start taking it into account. If democratization continues in the region and countries are successful, then suddenly its not going to be authoritarian leaders telling the people what to do, but the people will start telling the authoritarian leaders what to do, and most will be telling them that they don't want anything to do with the United States, given the way its treating Islam, they way it talks about Islam. We do ourselves an enormous amount of damage when we don't think about what we are saying; we talk about Nazism in terms of Islamic radicalism. You can bet your bottom dollar its going to come out in the Riyadh op-eds as equating Islam with Nazism, where the finer points are lost. We need to be a lot more careful with how we deal with messages to ourselves, where we understand what's meant, and what the collateral damage is to our relationships in parts of the world. There has been a very slight improvement in rating over the past months, but it is very slight.

It is not true that we have had a worry free and wonderful relationship with Egypt all through the time we have been working with them. There have been irritants a every turn, it's normal in a relationship with another country. We have different regional perspectives, different objectives, and a lot of areas with different opinions, cultural differences, and historical differences. And we have to take account of that and not exaggerate the damage that is potentially happening to the overall relationship between the United States and Egypt. If you look at history, at the time I was ambassador in the mid 90's, we had terrific cooperation in any number of areas. The economic cooperation, the Gore Mubarak Initiative, brought our business communities at the top level together. We built a network of relationships both in military and business communities. It was my objective at the time, and I think the objective of the Egyptians, to increase that fabric that drew our countries together so that it could sustain the irritants that take place in the normal course of business. Now, if you were talking to Nabil Fahmy, the ambassador here now, I am sure they could give you a long list of things that bothered them. Starting with, the nuclear issues, which is still a conflict between us, as to how to manage the issue of nuclear proliferation, and there was always the feeling that we didn't take into account the problem of the Israeli nuclear capability when we were talking about the rest of the region. So it was an irritant. We had various irritants in the way we pursued the war on terrorism at the time. We were very tightly enmeshed between the CIA and the Egyptian authorities in the terms of dealing with terrorism. We helped the Egyptians immensely in being able to roll up threats that came from the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, headed by Mr. Zawahiri. We were helpful in getting him out of the picture, unfortunately we got him out of the picture into Osama Bin Laden's picture, and that made it worse in some ways, but he got out of Egypt. So, We were absolutely tied in with the Egyptians in their ability to overcome the problem that had arisen. At the very same time we were having a terrific problem in our relationship with the interior ministry. We were providing special assistance to their shock forces to deal with terrorism, and the report came out that they were shooting second after they've captured people. And this was not appreciated, and so that aid program was terminated, much to the disappoint of those of us who felt that it was a key element in trying to train people so that they wouldn't do this kind of thing, but that was not the way our government saw it. I had many words with the authority, the minister of interior and others, that created an aura of hostility between us, when actually we were cooperating very closely.

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So I think that in the process, the overall relationship was pretty good, although I have had some tough times in talk with Mr. Mubarak and times when he would wag his finger at me because of the things we were doing. But we had the advantage we still have today of a extremely tight relationship with the military. It's not just built on the aid we give, it's built on the fact that we have people who work with the people in the other country to help develop a coherent capable military capability that can work with our military in a seamless fashion. And those ties are incredibly important for the overall fabric of our relationship. We still have a significant investment in the Egyptian business, from our businesses working with their businesses. They have progressed extremely well in more recent years in trying to develop the economy and particularly the business investment climate, making progress, and a lot has to do with the ties they have created with Americans, which has been a learning process, but a very productive one. We have had and still have very close cooperation on the Palestinian issue. In fact the Egyptians have picked up a lot of the burden that we have walked away from over the past couple of years and are trying very desperately to help the Palestinians come to grips with the problems they face through Hamas and with the relationship with Israel. And we still have an intensive aid program there, although it is considerably smaller than it has been in the past, but it is important in the sense that it brings people together. When I was there, maybe our aid program was not directed quite as well, I think I went to about 75 different sewage systems where our aid program was active, and that kind of program does a great deal for people, but nobody ever sees it, or wants to see it frankly. It was one of those invisibles, a very successful invisible, and we never really got credit for it. When I did get praise was when I went into a small village and everyone came out and greeted me and we had a celebration because we had dug little wells for the people in the village, and we brought electricity to the village. It was on a very low level, intimate basis, where the people in the village had worked with our aid people, gotten to know them, and that had an enormous impact on the attitude. But the aid program continues and it's doing good work. It's not always what we'd like it to be, I m sure it can be improved; it is another one of these elements that ties us together.

But we have irritants as well. I think part of it comes from our different perspectives of where Egypt is and what is there and where it should be going in the future. And certainly what concerned me while I was still in government, was this question of stability and the problem Egypt faces with growing Islamic fundamentalist trend in the country. I don't mean the serious radical fundamentalism, I'm talking about the basic trend in the country to a more religious society. You could see it because when I first got to Egypt and I looked at the graduating class in the American University in Cairo, I saw all these young women in fashionable clothing in this great picture of the graduating class. And by the time I had left, you look at the class photo; they were all wearing the headscarf and demure clothing. It shared a change in society's thinking about religion and tradition and about the way they wanted to see their country. I think that's cause for concern among our country that maybe Egypt is not so secure and that maybe this is the growing trend. And of course, it is epitomized by the election results in which the Muslim Brotherhood gained far more seats than people expected in Egypt. Now, the way people in this country think of it is to counter this type of growth in the first place. I'm not sure we have to counter it, but the question whether it's really the radicals we want to deal with. But there is concern that it's partly a factor of the society and if you read the President's remarks at the UN General Assembly, he said it's because people don't have the ability to choose their own government. I'm not convinced it is that simple in approach, but it is an element in program and policy that the United States government is following. So we are pushing democracy, we are basically saying that democracy is the answer to a lot of problem in the Middle

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East. It is a simplistic term or way of pitting it, but I think that is the bottom line and message. Now the Egyptians don't have the same perception, at least the government doesn't, of what the problem is and they recognize that they have problems with unemployment and modernization and a whole host of other problems. But they don't necessarily believe the answer is to open the doors and have elections and have Hamas or Muslim Brotherhood come into a greater portion of power. Many Egyptians I know would prefer not to see that result. They see it as a more gradual process of movement towards a more open society and in the first instance, opening on the economic side so that there is a more competitive environment.

So there is difference, and it's reflected in the level of irritation between our two countries. We are currently at a different perspective on Iraq. I was in Egypt before we went in, and the advice that President Mubarak was giving to our government was don't do it, you don't know Iraqis, they aren't who you think they are, they are not like Egyptians, they are not like Algerians, well they are a little bit closer to Algerians. But they said you misread Iraq if you think that by taking out Saddam Hussein you are going to resolve the problem. So that warning was very clear, it wasn't only from Mubarak, but from Crown Prince Abdullah and some other leaders I talked to. But we didn't pay attention for all sorts of reasons, but I don't want to get into an Iraq discussion. And we still had problems on the nuclear issue, particularly when it comes to Iran. Our solutions appear to be moving in different directions. Certainly the Egyptians are afraid that our solutions include military action, and I think they would find that to be the least best of answers for the Iran problem. And I do know that there seems to be in public opinion polls of the region are more or less concerned about Iran than either in Europe or the United States. So we still have any number of issues that are drawing us apart and we compound that by public opinion which is pushing us apart. We always have to remember the Egyptians have a choice; they don't necessarily have to be tied in to the United States as deeply as they are. I think it is very important that we remember that. I think when Anwar Sadat was president of Egypt in practically an overnight decision, he got the Soviets out of there and nobody expected that. So we can't just assume that our relationships with a country like Egypt are going to just be able to sustain themselves without any effort on our part. We've got to make an effort and do the job to make sure these strains don't overtake the ties that are pulling us together.

Mohammed Hakki:

The title of our talk today is whether the widening Middle East crisis is damaging our relationship with Egypt and other regional allies. My answer is yes. I know that neither the US nor Egypt can afford differences with each other. I heard an Egyptian once, at a USEF event, one of the high-ranking Egyptians, describe the relationship as a Catholic marriage, I would say that it is a marriage that has lots of disagreements and arguments between the two parties, but I don't think that there is any divorce in the future. Egypt is much too important to the US and the US represents in a sense the only income in the Middle East. It is not only the annual 2 billion amount of aid, but for a wide range of reasons we cannot and will not have a settlement in the Palestinian area without the US. All of the problems in the Middle East are interconnected, and all, or almost all somehow lead to America in one way or another.

Instead I would like to point to a number of hot buttons, which if left to fester can develop into potential problems between the two countries. One of course is what Ambassador Walker alluded

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to, which is the nuclear option. A week ago, the New York times published a story about Gamaal Mubarak, the son of the current president, proposing a nuclear program, the times said that the comments drew a strong applause from the nations political leaders and if you watch it on television you could see the passion that is coming through as soon as he mentioned that issue. However, the thrust of the times story was about the future of Mubarak, who was being positioned and groomed to replace his father as president. Simply raising the topic of Egypt's nuclear mission at a time of heightened tension with Iran's nuclear activity was received as a calculated effort to raise the younger Mubarak's profile to build public support through his show of defiance towards Washington, and political analysts and foreign affairs experts said so. The whole world, and I don't want to say all, but many developing countries, have proposed and started talking about the issue of nuclear development, like Mubarak. It is time for Egypt to push forward, and the party should and will put forth, this proposal of alternative energy. This issue of alternative energy, including nuclear energy is one of them. He also said, in a clear reference to the White House, we do not accept visions from abroad that try to dissolve Arab identity and the joint Arab effort through the framework of the so called Greater Middle East Initiative. When President Bush called for promoting democracy in the Middle East, he looked to Egypt as leader in that effort, because with all the chaos in the region, the US has been strong allies the administration it seems has backed off on pressing democracy. Instead, it has seen the country reversing some earlier gains, and has seen some problems with figures and administration, and the bloggers blocking the creation of new political parties. In his speech the young Mubarak, who is an Assistant Secretary General of the governing National Democratic Party and head of its powerful Policies Committee, did not specify what his vision for the nuclear program would be, but there are several potential avenues. If for example, Egypt simply purchased nuclear fuel from abroad to power its reactors under international restrictions, and then returned this fuel to its original supply it would cause no significant threat.

A week later, Dr. Adel Safty, whom I don't know, a visiting professor at the Siberian Academy of Public Administration in Russia and author, wrote an article which appeared in the Gulf News, he said ten years ago that Egypt should (would) pursue a nuclear option. I find this point of importance because I worked closely with President Mubarak and early on, 1983 or so, I raised this issue when an Egyptian scientist was gunned down in Paris by the Israeli Moussad. I was worked up about it, and I said, 'Mr. President how can we allow our scientist to go and work for Iraq, why don't we work here, why don't we develop nuclear capacity here?' At that time we still had two very small laboratories but I was still somehow still irritated. And he said, 'whoever thinks that the nuclear policy doesn't know what he is talking about, it requires astronomical figures or sums of money, there is no way we can do it.' For Gamal Mubarak to propose and talk about it openly without having his father either objecting or advising or putting brakes on what he is talking about, to me is significant. Most American commentators describe the speech as calculated, as I have said earlier, to raise Gamal Mubarak's profile and position him. They suggest that given the 2 billion dollars that Egypt receives from Washington, America would not be amused if Egypt were to develop nuclear power. Gamal Mubarak said in his speech that Egypt was not soliciting advice as to the form of the new Middle East in a key reference to the Bush administration's plan. Egypt, needless to say, has traditionally had some sort of manifest destiny; this is what Adel Safty has said. He says: should Israel be allowed to impose its own peace in the region? This will inevitably lead to greater upheavals. He also says that anarchical society, in a state of balance of power where one power is falling behind then only means available is for that power is to augment its strength, such strength used to be measured by territory and population in the 18th century, and by industry and military organization in the 19th century, it is now measured by military technology, as is the case

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with Israel. It was interesting to me to see that Adel Safty and a host of other commentators in Egypt maintained a growing unease about this, in a number of magazine and newspapers in Cairo. But everybody there agrees that Egypt is the most likely candidate given its traditional leadership, politics, and its relative advancements in nuclear science capabilities. My point really is not to either suggesting or encouraging Egypt to develop nuclear power or nuclear technology, my point is that if Egypt decides, with the advice and consent and encouragement of the United States, to have some nuclear capability, it will have a very positive effect on the whole region. To have one country which proves to be the cause of a lot of chagrin, discomfort, frictions and misery acting with particular force, without any visible deterrence, makes the area live in paranoid state. This is not a normal way to live. If American encourages a stabilizing factor, like Egypt, it will do wonders, it will check Iran's nuclear ambitions, it will have a stabling effect on the Shia and Sunnis. Because Egypt has been tested and proven to be a very close friend of America and I don't think that it would fly off the handle and do any harm to its neighbors, especially them.

The second point of friction is, of course, the war between Hezbollah and Israel. In the beginning no one expected the war to last 34 days, but it did. Each Saudi Arabia and Jordan took a very cautious move that the war was a misadventure by Hezbollah, but Hezbollah stood their ground. And by extension, on the US schemes in the area, at a time when the US really needed the understanding and support of every single Arab country because of the Iraq war. They don't need any additional flare-ups and anti-American feelings and misunderstanding and misperceptions, and as you all know, perceptions in the Middle East are more important than anything. It is only the investigations and pressure on the Prime Minister and the army to explain what happened, it shook Israel from within. It will take months possibly years for the results to sink in and for all what happened to be analyzed to see where and why it happened. And to my mind, this puts an avid responsibly on Egypt to rise up to the occasion and to regain its leadership position, because it is the only party with the potential to do that. And the US should allow it to play that leadership role because it supports and has similar views and ideas, we are all on the same page, there is no disagreement, there is no basic conflict. That is why I believe the nuclear option is important, which cannot be done without the advice and consent and encouragement of the US, to have a regional power. There are hundreds of articles talking about an Islamic bomb, but for ten years Pakistan has a bomb. There will be problems, and yes there are problems, but that is because of the area, not because of the Islamic bomb. The US should not oppose it. Egypt is no danger to Israel, it already has a peace agreement, and the number of Israelis that visit Cairo almost on a daily basis is continuing without any discomfort among the Egyptian population. I close by saying that given this administrations actions, I am not holding my breath.

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Questions and Answers: Highlights

Question -

I want to refer to a point that Mr. Hakki brought up, about perception and responsibility. There is a perception in the region that the Israeli conflict with Hezbollah was really Israel acting as a middle man for the United States that the effort was really by the United States to clear Hezbollah out of southern Lebanon. Was that a perception?

Answer -

Hakki: I would say that it is. I was in Cairo in July, and almost everybody said that Israel would not destroy half of Beirut by itself. I have never seen people more angry. But the picture was not clear, on who was pushing who, but unfortunately, it was a common perception.

Walker: I think there is a mirror image in the US, and I agree. While you have perception that the US was giving license to the Israelis, Hezbollah would not have begun this if it had not had the go ahead from Iran and Syria. And the US was reacting to those nations when it gave Israel time to do some damage. We had two completely opposing perceptions that intensified the argument that made it worse.

Hakki: The Egyptian secular society has done had petitions and protests to show their disapproval. They are tired and angry, it is something that is alarming and needs special attention at both points. It is not just the military money that is given. Egyptians are very much like Americans. And we need to understand that the 2 billion dollars of aid is not the lifeline of the Egyptian economy, I know one single Kuwaiti investing more than that amount into Egypt. And what Egypt provides to the US, access to Suez, and landing rights, and so forth, must add up to the amount Egypt receives. I think we have to be more attentive to each other now, because the situation has changed

Question -

Recently, Phil Zelikow, from the State Department, gave a speech in which he talked about one way to get the modern Arab regimes together with the US and Europe was to build a coalition to establish stability. Last week we saw President Bush's speech about how Sec. Rice went to the region to see how to get some type of advancement in the peace process. Do you think that if the US put more effort in the Israeli Palestinian, that this would help turn around the US problems and tensions in Egypt?

Answer -

Walker: I think that you find that increase approval of the US when there is more engagement in the Palestinian issue, and there is a reason for this. When we are engaged, our stock goes up, we turn our back, our stock goes down. Many believe that the US holds the cards in finishing a solution. When the US is not paying attention, the possibly to solution disappears. And the US is saying that we don't care about your most important problem. I am delighted that the President wants Condi to make some waves and gain some ground on the issue.

Hakki: I think we can all agree that if America gets involved, and attempts to find a solution that is good for everybody, it would be best. Everyone has to coexist because they are all there. There must be less talk and less rhetoric. There is much love between the people of the US and Egypt, but to resort to such rigid words, is a loss in the process.

Veliotis: Let me say, that I think there is great skepticism for us to follow up our words. We have to remember that President Bush just made a speech in which for the first time an American president called for a two state solution, but the context of the speech was saying Arab world has now justified the Israeli occupation. Just so, good words are important, but we have got to do more than just talk.