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The Role of Regional Actors in the Middle East Peace Process

**Part II: The Role of Egypt in the
Middle East Peace Process**
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Introduction

Egypt has played a significant role in the Middle East peace process. Under President Anwar Sadat's leadership, Egypt was the first Arab state to make peace with Israel in 1979 – and this has remained the status quo throughout current President Hosni Mubarak's twenty-six year presidency. Yet at the same time, Egypt has on occasions appeared unable or unwilling to fully embrace the potential role it could have in advancing the process of normalisation between Israel and the Arab world. The role that Egypt plays in the Middle East peace process is shaped by Egypt's overriding concern to maintain stability, both in the region and domestically, as well as its ambitions to carve out a leadership role for itself in the Middle East.

These motivating priorities have in some cases led Egypt to play a constructive role. Mainly at times where it sought to enhance its strategic significance by acting as a bridge between the West and the Middle East, as well as promoting the peace process in order to secure foreign aid needed to stabilise the Egyptian economy. However, at times, Egypt has been less forthcoming in relation to the peace process, mainly due to the need to appease domestic opposition to the Egyptian regime. This paper will explore the reasons for Egypt's ambiguous approach to the peace process, while examining the areas where Cairo may be both willing and able to make a difference. In conclusion, this study will present some recommendations on how Egypt can be encouraged to play a more active and constructive role in the Middle East peace process in the future in order to increase the prospects for a successful and substantive resolution to the Middle East conflict.

Egypt's Quest for Stability

Egypt's role in the wider Middle East peace process has often been shaped by the emphasis that successive Egyptian leaders

have placed on the need to maintain stability both at home and in the wider region. The growing support for the Muslim Brotherhood inside Egypt, the rise of Islamist extremism on Egypt's border with Gaza, and the emerging threat from Iran, has meant that the promotion of stability within the region has become an overriding priority for Mubarak. In recent years, this priority has expressed itself through a number of Egyptian policy decisions which have had diverse effects on the peace process:

- i. *Egypt's role in Israel's disengagement from Gaza* - Cairo offered to assume an active role in the wake of Israel's decision to carry out the disengagement from Gaza in the summer of 2005. Egypt wanted to ensure that Israel's withdrawal did not leave a vacuum that could be filled by destabilising Islamist forces like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This concern steered Mubarak's willingness to sign the 'Agreed Arrangement' with the Israeli Government in September 2005, allowing the deployment of Egyptian forces along the Egypt-Gaza border at Rafah, providing greater security reassurances to Israel in the wake of its withdrawal.ⁱ
- ii. *Promotion of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas* - Egypt invested considerable efforts to bring about a Palestinian National Unity Government of Fatah and Hamas in late 2006 and early 2007, following Hamas' election victory in January 2006. It hosted Fatah and Hamas officials for talks in Cairo many times to lay the ground for the deal finally agreed in Mecca in February 2007 that established the unity government. Most recently, Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman has been at the forefront of Cairo's efforts to broker a ceasefire between Hamas and Fatah since Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007 that followed several

months of internecine fighting. Suleiman has been attempting to create a list of demands from both sides that would provide a framework for future efforts to reinstall the National Unity Government. Egypt's overriding concern over instability in Gaza and the potential for it to spill over the border is one of the main reasons for why it is taking a leading role in helping mediate between the warring Palestinian factions.

iii. *Smuggling from Sinai to Gaza* – Over recent months, Egypt appears to be doing very little to stop the smuggling of weapons and money from the Sinai desert in northern Egypt into Gaza. Israeli military intelligence have reported recently that over 20,000 rifles, 6,000 antitank missiles and 100 tons of explosives have been smuggled into Gaza in the past year.ⁱⁱ Cairo may believe that by relaxing its policy towards smugglers in Sinai and accepting a level of limited tacit cooperation (exemplified by the inaction over weapons smuggling), it can exercise greater control and leverage over Hamas. Egypt can also claim that by allowing some of its members to cross into Gaza, Egypt will be able to monitor Hamas more effectively and that by doing so, Egypt will be able to weaken Iranian ties with Hamas and help stabilise Gaza in the long run.

Egypt claims that the failure to stop smuggling in the Sinai is also partly the result of the Egyptian security services lacking the capabilities to monitor the border effectively. Egypt is restricted in the number of troops it can deploy in according to the 1979 Peace Agreement with Israel, which made the Sinai a "demilitarised zone". Egypt's security services also focus most of their resources on monitoring the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in central Egypt, mainly Cairo, and are relatively weak in the area of border security and monitoring militant

groups based in the Sinai Peninsula - demonstrated by their repeated failure to prevent suicide attacks in the Sinai holiday resorts of Sharm-el-Sheikh.ⁱⁱⁱ

iv. *Egypt and Annapolis* – Egypt has recently displayed its support for the upcoming Annapolis conference, announcing after a meeting between President Mubarak and Saudi King Abdullah on 11 November that Egypt and Saudi Arabia are "very keen to make this conference successful."^{iv} One of the reasons that Egypt is offering its support to this most recent diplomatic initiative is because of its aim to thwart Iranian hegemonic ambitions and maintain the current balance of power in the region. Egypt together with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are increasingly concerned about Iran's growing power, specifically in light of Iran's self proclaimed nuclear ambitions. These regional actors, united in opposition to Iranian aspirations, seek to promote the current peace process as a means by which to diffuse Iranian influence in the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon and hinder Tehran's efforts to exploit Palestinian anger and frustration in garnering support amongst public opinion in the region.

Leadership in the Arab World

The legacy of Egyptian pan-Arab leadership still lingers on in Egyptian foreign policy today. Egypt manages to punch above its weight, especially as a relatively poor state in a region dominated by powerful oil rich countries. This is helped considerably by the prestige and reverence Egypt has managed to preserve amongst its Arab neighbours, as well as its sizeable population (around 80 million) and its powerful and expanding military (currently the largest army in the Arab world). One of Egypt's primary foreign policy goals in the region is to preserve and enhance

this leadership potential. As one of only two Arab countries that have diplomatic relations with Israel, Egypt is in the unique position of having a measure of influence over both Israel and the Palestinians, and therefore has the potential to play a constructive mediating role between the parties. It's pan-Arab leadership legacy, along with its bold move to make peace with Israel in 1979, has created the potential for Egypt to serve as a constructive driver of the peace process within the Arab world and has given Egypt the renewed strategic significance in the region that it seeks.

Current Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has advanced this role by putting pressure on the Palestinians at crucial junctures in the peace process. At the beginning of the Oslo process, he helped persuade Arafat to sign the 1993 Declaration of Principles and the 1994 Cairo Agreement.^v He was also instrumental in encouraging Syria to attend the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. Mubarak has hosted numerous summits between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders (for example the Sharm-el Sheikh meeting in February 2007) and worked actively to bring about a ceasefire following the eruption of violence in the second intifada in September 2000. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit visited Israel with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdelelah Al-Khatib together and met with Israel Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in July 2007 in order to promote the Arab Peace Initiative. Recently Egypt has been acting as a go-between in negotiations between Israel and Hamas to secure the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit^{vi} (so far with little success) and has already expressed its readiness to play a role at the forthcoming Annapolis meeting.

Despite these encouraging influences, in practice Egypt has maintained a "cold peace" with Israel, and for Arab audiences it has, on occasion, publicly declared its opposition to

the process of Israel's normalisation with the Arab world. Amr Moussa, the current Secretary General of the Arab League and former Egyptian Foreign Minister, was among leading Egyptian officials who seemed to oppose normalising ties with Israel, overseeing decisions such as withdrawing the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv in the wake of the Israeli incursion into Gaza in November 2000.^{vii} More recently, current Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit put Egypt's attendance at Annapolis in doubt, suggesting that Egyptian attendance was contingent on Palestinian demands being met ahead of the conference.^{viii} While in principle supporting Annapolis, Cairo has also publicly expressed reservations about the direction and content of the proposed meeting in an effort to appear to acknowledge Arab scepticism towards the summit.^{ix}

These moments of hostility can be seen as Egypt's way of showing it's Arab constituency that it acknowledges and moreover represents their concerns. Egypt feels that it must qualify its support for the peace process alongside its own domestic considerations, as well as the need to maintain popular Arab support for Egypt's leadership role. This can at times force Egypt to emphasise its distance from Israel and the US in order to maintain any kind of legitimacy as an honest broker and leader in the Arab world.

As well as appealing to populist Arab sentiments, the occasions where Egypt does not contribute as effectively as it could to the peace process also successfully demonstrates to outside players that without Egypt, peace is much harder to achieve. At Camp David II in 2000, US President Clinton's failure to fully engage Egypt ahead of the negotiations, resulted in Egypt rebuffing the late invitation when it finally arrived.^x Their absence from the summit contributed to Arafat not making the concessions necessary for reaching a deal that would have been easier to achieve had he

had significant regional (specifically Egyptian and Saudi) backing. The dire consequences of the failure of Camp David (i.e. the collapse of the Oslo process and outbreak of the second Intifada) have helped strengthen the belief that Egypt's role in the peace process cannot be overlooked. The current support for engaging and encouraging regional involvement in any bilateral Israeli-Palestinian peace process (potentially through the Arab Peace Initiative) is partly the result of this Egyptian strategy of highlighting that without Egypt, peace is much harder to achieve.

Domestic Preoccupations

Domestic factors have played a key role in shaping Egypt's international behaviour and role in the peace process. A number of crucial domestic factors have a significant role in determining Egyptian policy, notably the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the weakness of the Egyptian economy and the question of succession to the Presidency.

i. *The growing strength of the Muslim Brotherhood* – The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is the largest opposition power in Egypt and won a fifth of parliamentary seats in the 2005 general election. The organisation is a multi-national Sunni Islamist movement and the world's largest political Islamist group, with one of its strongest branches operating in Egypt. The MB believes in the rule of Islamic law and the establishment of the Islamic caliphate. The Egyptian MB claimed to have banned the use of violence in the 1970s and has since been promoting a more centrist-conservative image in Egypt, attracting widespread public support in recent years. It is officially banned by the Egyptian authorities and Mubarak recently launched a crackdown on the organisation, arresting hundreds of its members.

The fear within Egypt is that Hamas'

success in Gaza has emboldened the MB (Hamas itself is an offshoot of the organisation), and the Egyptian leadership has therefore been reluctant to openly endorse and legitimise Hamas' rule. However, recently there have been signs of a growing cooperation between Egypt and Hamas, explained in part by Mubarak's need to diffuse domestic criticism from the MB of his 'pro-Israel' policy. In October, Egypt allowed 85 Hamas operatives into the Gaza strip and there have also been discussions about bringing wounded Hamas members for treatment in Egypt. Mubarak is forced to play a delicate balancing act: he does not want to award Hamas too much legitimacy for fear of strengthening Egypt's own Islamic opposition, and compromising relations with Israel while at the same time, Mubarak remains wary of appearing too sympathetic to Israel's position and fuelling his Islamist critics domestically.

ii. *Economic constraints* – Egypt's economy is weak and unstable and since President Sadat signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1978, successive Egyptian leaders have become heavily reliant on US aid. Inflation and unemployment are high and workers strikes are commonplace, making living conditions hard for many Egyptians. According to World Bank figures, forty percent of the country's 80 million citizens live in poverty,^{xi} and according to the Egyptian government 80 percent are labelled 'low-income'.^{xiii} The US has given around \$2 billion in aid annually to Egypt since the 1978 Camp David accords. Sizeable reductions in this aid would throw the Egyptian economy into crisis and no Egyptian leader is willing or able to take this risk. The weakness and fragility of the Egyptian economy has so far provided the US with a degree of leverage over Egypt to make it more compliant on issues related to Israel and the Middle East peace process. This dynamic lies at the heart of

recent proposals being discussed in the US Congress to suspend some aid in order to pressure Egypt into doing more to stop the smuggling of arms and militants from Sinai into Gaza.^{xiii}

The state of the Egyptian economy has improved in the past few years due to more competent economic management and liberalising reforms. The current growth rate of 7%,^{xiv} the \$11 billion in direct foreign investment in 2006 (up from \$500 million three years ago)^{xv} and stable (although still high) levels of unemployment, all represent a new economic momentum that many Egyptians would want to capitalise on. This gives further impetus to the need to secure a peaceful and prosperous regional environment in which the Egyptian economy can grow and strengthen.

- iii. *The question of succession* – With speculation and concern over Hosni Mubarak's health, Egypt has found itself increasingly preoccupied with the issue of the veteran leader's successor. There is intense speculation that Mubarak is grooming his son Gamal, as his natural heir and successor. Other possible candidates for the Presidency include Egyptian Intelligence Chief, Omar Suleiman. Either way, Mubarak's successor could have a significant impact on Egypt's role in the region.

Egypt's next President will invariably lack the experience and clout that Mubarak has gained from over 25 years in office. Mubarak's personal relationships with Arab and Western leaders, established over time, has played a significant part in helping Egypt secure the delicate balancing act it maintains on sensitive issues, particularly in its relations with the Palestinians. Furthermore, Mubarak has developed effective mechanisms for containing domestic opposition which rely in part on his personality and particular

leadership style, and his ability to manipulate Egyptian democracy to his own ends. Mubarak's succession therefore has the potential to signify a less stable and confident era in both domestic and foreign policy, and in doing so would clearly impact on Egypt's ability to play a leading role in the peace process.

Conclusion : How Egypt Can Make a Difference?

Egypt has demonstrated its willingness in the past to act as a facilitator between Israel and the Palestinians in order to maintain its leadership role in the Arab world and to win the support of the United States. Egypt places an emphasis on promoting stability in the region and countering those threats which undermine it. Thus, on a formal level, Egypt will publicly support moves to advance the peace process, and will be ready to act as a crisis manager should this become necessary.

On the other hand, Egypt does not view a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians as a priority in itself, rather as a means by which to achieve the most stable regional environment in which Egypt can advance its own ambitions. Furthermore, recent signs of Egypt's cooperation with Hamas and its inaction over weapons smuggling are also raising tensions between Jerusalem and Cairo, as well as Washington and Cairo, detracting further from Egypt's ability to act as an honest broker between Israel and the Palestinians.

Notwithstanding some of the difficulties presented above, Egypt remains broadly committed to advancing the cause of peace in the Middle East and there are steps that can be taken to help encourage Egypt to play a more constructive and positive role in the peace process:

- i. *Encouraging regional support for the Middle East peace process* – In the immediate future, Egypt can do more to enhance its relevance as a regional player and advance the peace process. One way of doing this would be to encourage Syria to engage more fully in the Middle East peace process, starting with encouraging Syria to attend the Annapolis meeting (reprising the role that Egypt played in 1991 when it helped ensure that Syria attended the Madrid Conference). Western countries, like the US and the UK, have struggled to define their relationship with Syria. They recognise the importance of Syria in the peace process but cannot reconcile this with the strong alliance that exists between Syria and Iran, and Syrian actions in Lebanon. A third party, like Egypt, could therefore play a role in mediating and helping bridge the gap between Syria and the West, that could prove crucial for progress in the peace process. Furthermore, by pulling Syria away from its alliance with Iran and nudging it towards dialogue with Israel, Cairo will also be counteracting Iranian efforts to strengthen its influence in the region.
- ii. *Stopping the smuggling of weapons on the Sinai-Gaza border* – The international community should exert sustained pressure on Egypt to stem the weapons and contraband smuggling across the Gaza border. Continued Egyptian inaction in this realm may be very harmful for Israel-Egypt relations and for the peace process as a whole. Israel may lose confidence in Egypt's ability to deliver on its commitments, jeopardising Egypt's potential to act as a mediator. If the situation on the Gaza border deteriorates further, Israel will have little motivation to carry out further withdrawals, and the security threat will impede Israel's ability to make the necessary territorial concessions in any future negotiations.
- iii. *Egypt and the Palestinians* - Egypt is likely to continue its efforts to promote a dialogue between Hamas and Fatah in order to prevent instability on its border. However, Egypt should not moderate its stance towards Hamas significantly given their conflicting aims and interests. Egypt should be encouraged to utilise whatever leverage it already has over the more pragmatic elements within Hamas to accept the conditions set out by the Quartet. More immediately, if Egypt can help suppress any Hamas-led violence during the coming months, the Annapolis summit and ensuing peace process will have a much higher chance of success.
- iv. *Providing political backing to President Mahmoud Abbas* – In the event that an agreement is reached at Annapolis on issues such as Jerusalem, refugees and borders, Egypt should be encouraged to provide political cover to the Palestinian leadership as part of an Arab effort to support the progress being pursued between Israel and the Palestinians. Abbas will be more likely to make necessary but difficult concessions to Israel if he is confident that he has the support of Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, adding crucial regional legitimacy to any bilateral deal reached. This is key for the long term success of the peace process.

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i "On September 1, 2005, following lengthy negotiations, Egypt and Israel signed the Agreed Arrangements Regarding the Deployment of a Designated Force of Border Guards along the Border in the Rafah Area (the Agreed Arrangements). This agreement was designed to enable Israel to evacuate the Philadelphia corridor, an eight-mile (thirteen-kilometre) military zone along the Gaza-Egypt border, through the deployment of Egyptian border patrol forces to the Egyptian side of the border in order to prevent smuggling into Gaza. In eighty-three clauses, the agreement describes the mission, weaponry, infrastructure, and obligations of the parties." Brooke Neuman, A New Reality on the Egypt-Gaza Border (Part I): Contents of the New Israel-Egypt Agreement, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 19 September 2005 available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2374>

ii Egypt and Hamas, Jerusalem Post, 11 November 2007, available at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1192380790579&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

iii Some most recent attacks include bombings on October 2004 at Taba and Ras Shitan in the northern Sinai near the Israeli border in which 34 were killed. In July 2005 suicide bombers killed 64 people, mainly tourists, in Sharm el-Sheik and in three nearly simultaneous bombings in April 2006 at the resort of Dahab, 24 people were killed.

iv Egypt, Saudi Back Mideast Peace Meeting, The AP, 11 November 2007, available at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5gPLQ9iEIQrF39jrvDOvdjHr5UUYAD8SR25280>

v The 1993 Deceleration of Principles was signed at a Washington ceremony by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin hosted by US President Bill Clinton on September 13, 1993. The agreement marked the beginning of the Oslo Peace Process which included the signing on May 4, 1994 of the Cairo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The accord led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) shortly thereafter. Each side to this agreement undertook numerous obligations, chief among them Israel's commitment to turn territory over to the PA, and the Palestinian commitment to combat terror and prevent violence - the famous "land for peace" bargain.

vi Gilad Shalit is an Israeli soldier who was captured by Hamas on 25 June 2006 when his army post on the Israeli side of the southern Gaza Strip border was attacked by militants who crossed through an underground tunnel near the Kerem Shalom border crossing.

vii Egypt Pulls Its Ambassador Out, Guardian, 22 November 2000, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,401127,00.html>

viii Egypt Renews Scepticism Over Annapolis, The AP Press, 12 November 2007, available at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1192380798655>

ix ibid

x The peace process and the role of Arab diplomacy, Bitter Lemons, Edition 1, Volume 1, 10 July 2003, available at, <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=1>

xi Most recent data collected by the World Bank is from 2000. World Bank figures define people living in poverty as those who live on less than \$2 a day. Figures are available at, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPProfile.asp?PTYPE=CP&CCODE=EGY>

xii In Egypt a Son is Readied for Succession, The Washington Post, 11 October 2007, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/10/AR2007101002436_2.html

xiii Israel Urges Egypt to Act Against Hamas, The New York Times, 9 November 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/09/world/middleeast/09mideast.html?ref=world>

xiv Figures taken from The Economist, Country Briefing on Egypt, available at <http://www.economist.com/countries/Egypt/profile.cfm?folder=Profile-Forecast>

xv Figures taken from Egyptian Ministry of Investment, available at http://www.investment.gov.eg/Moi_Portal/en-GB/Information%20Center/Publications/Reports_and_Indicators/Foreign%20Egypt/