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# The Global Challenges in the Middle East Region: An Egyptian Perspective

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We live today in a small world. Distances between continents have essentially remained unchanged, yet are at the same time much shorter as the communication and transportation revolution has transformed the world. Our world is multicultural and diverse, even though, to some extent, the increasingly quick and free flow of information has fused, and occasionally blurred, the distinction between different cultures. As before, there remain rich nations and poor ones, powerful states and less powerful ones. In fact, the disparities between them on both counts are today greater than ever before. Ironically, as market forces strive for ever cheaper products and larger market shares, wealthier states are now more dependent on the less affluent ones. As security is redefined, in a new world with paradigms different from those of the Cold War years, the security of powerful states is increasingly linked with that of weaker states, well beyond traditional alliances.

These changes have brought our many and distinct communities into a more global, yet smaller, melting pot. It is a melting pot that produces exquisite culinary dishes when wisdom, tolerance, and understanding prevail. However, it is one that can suddenly boil over, scalding the fabric of our society when divisive politics, bigoted intolerance, or ignorance fuels our actions.

Our world today is one of vast opportunities for those who have the knowledge and understanding to take advantage of them. However, globalization has also made the world a much more volatile place because we all have to react to and are held accountable for a greater number of issues, in more places, and in less time than ever before. And, the ramifications of our mistakes or missteps extend over a much wider area and directly affect more peoples around the world.

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The world today is challenged because it suffers from a paucity of global understanding. It is further challenged, not by a clash of civilizations, but by our inability to accept that in the twenty-first century ours is a global civilization. The clash is caused by a fermentation of ignorance and occasional bigotry, not of divergent cultures and experiences. For centuries our diverse cultures have found ways to assimilate and interact through a process of gradual cultural osmosis of values and norms.

With the end of bipolarism, the world today is more troubled. The absence of the accompanying military checks and balances which periodically exacerbated or contained global and regional conflicts and muted cultural differences, has left a vacuum being filled by a legitimate search for identity. It is also one that has regrettably found refuge in ethnic fundamentalisms rather than in global culture. Many communities are frustrated by not being as prosperous as others, or by being

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negatively affected by problems not of their making. Yet many communities do not want to open up to the world or share their wealth with others with whom they have a common destiny. All nations are to blame for this, because they have often let their short-term national and parochial interests prevail over long-term wisdom and global responsibilities. Needless to say, these worldwide trends have resonated in the Middle East as well.

With these few fundamental and overriding assertions, it may be interesting to turn to two specific issues of global concern that are also relevant to the Middle

East: weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. I choose these two not only because of their importance, but also to correct a misperception that these issues have their genesis in, or emanate from, the Middle East alone.

The Middle East is among the most storied regions in the world. Its peoples have had unparalleled contributions to the arts and sciences. Algebra was a term attributed to the work of the Arab scientist El Khawarismi before the eleventh century. Pulmonary circulation was discovered by Ibn Nafes, an eminent physician of the thirteenth century. However, Middle Eastern countries did not invent weapons of mass destruction, neither nuclear, chemical, nor biological. These were invented by the industrialized world.

In fact, weapons of mass destruction were not first used by Middle Easterners, or for that matter by rogue states. In modern history, some of these weapons go back to World War I, others to World War II. In both cases they were used first by industrialized democratic states. These weapons remain today the

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greatest threat to humanity because of their destructive capacity, as well as their extremely dangerous military industrial spinoff effects. This arises as states and non-state parties define and redefine perceptions of threat, in terms of fear and damage, rather than a symmetrical balance of forces.

Egypt has been a pioneer in regional efforts to safeguard the Middle East from the threats of these weapons, calling for the establishment of a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East in 1974. Furthermore, in 1991, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak proposed the establishment of a Zone Free of all Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East, as well as their means of delivery, be they nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. These initiatives would have embodied a comprehensive regional verification system, covering all the Arab countries, as well as Israel and Iran, to complement full-scope global safeguards applied by the International Atomic Energy Agency. These regional initiatives have regrettably been thwarted, most of all by the existence of Israel's non-safeguarded nuclear facilities and its refusal to initiate negotiations regarding either of these initiatives.<sup>1</sup>

Israel's unwillingness in this regard will remain an obstacle toward any hope for resolution of these threats regionally. Furthermore, if America is serious about its declared nonproliferation efforts in the Middle East, it must apply one standard to all nations in the region and try to deal with the problem comprehensively. Stopgap or selective measures will only generate more complex problems later.

The threat of weapons proliferation, whether to states in the Middle East or non-state actors, did not start with September 11th or with the Iraqi issue, nor will these threats stop there. If the world is serious in addressing proliferation concerns, it is time to be proactive and apply itself with preemptive and constructive diplomacy, before it is faced with a much more dangerous threat.

In order to be successful, regional nonproliferation efforts have to be within the context of global nonproliferation and disarmament efforts. It is highly inconsistent for nuclear weapon states to call for international efforts to curtail proliferation, highlighting the threatening roles of non-state actors or nuclear terrorism, and at the same time announce programs to develop tactical nuclear weapons.

Now I will address the second issue, terrorism. History teaches us that terrorism is not exclusive to certain people or specific cultures. Contrary to present

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day mythology, terrorism is not a Middle Eastern creation; its threat extends to all mankind. Some people blame the Muslim world for this insanity, which is a judgmental and unsubstantiated allegation. There are of course terrorists from within the Arab world, as well as some that hideously and maliciously cloak their criminal acts under the guise of Islam. However, there are people in every region who opt out of mainstream teachings, and choose to propagate distorted ideas in order to sow seeds of hatred and spread anarchy.

The sinister phenomenon of terrorism goes back to the days of the emerging concept of the nation-state in the eighteenth century, and particularly during the era of the French Revolution. Later, it helped trigger one of the terrible tragedies of the world, when the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was assassinated in Bosnia by a terrorist group in what was known as the Sarajevo outrage. Baader-Meinhof in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Red Army in Japan, and Timothy McVeigh in America were all modern day terrorists. It is noteworthy that none was Arab or Muslim. Most were from western democratic states. Egypt was hard hit by terrorism during the 1980s and 1990s, which took the lives of over 1,000 individuals. It lost one of its presidents to Egyptian terror, as Israel lost Prime Minister Rabin to terrorism in Israel.

In the 1990s, terrorists started to take advantage of greater openness and the explosion of information and technology. The new technologies of terror and their

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increasing availability raise chilling prospects of our vulnerability, making each of us a possible victim. The heinous tragedy in America on September 11, 2001, is a case in point.

Terrorists come from various communities, yet have much in common with each other. The masterminds of terrorism are criminals who take legitimate causes hostage to defend their illegal acts. These terrorists will not be convinced by moral persuasion and have to be dealt with through formidable security measures. However, there are underlying causes that need to be addressed in order to limit sup-

port for terrorists in all our communities. Among these root causes are prolonged foreign occupation, economic disparity, poverty, inequality, humiliation, hopelessness, injustice, and disenfranchised young people who are fertile fields for terrorists' claims of advancing social justice.

Terrorism is an international phenomenon that will only be defeated by collective efforts. It is with this in mind that Egypt proposed convening an international counterterrorism conference. The goal is to develop a global commit-

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ment to jointly combat terrorism, as well as to evolve the best ways and means for civilized society to deal with this scourge and to preserve civil liberties.

I would like to turn now to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the situation in Iraq, and the socioeconomic development of our region, which are issues of major concern to Middle Easterners, and also to other members of the international community.

October 2003 was the 30th anniversary of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. As such, it was an auspicious opportunity to reflect on achievements and failures in the quest for an Arab-Israeli peace in the Middle East. The 1973 War was a turning point in history, for it restored Arab self-confidence, shattered Israeli sense of invincibility, and reminded the global powers that the unresolved conflict could suddenly break out and bring them into a conflict of dangerous dimensions.

Egypt initiated this historic transformation by placing its sons and daughters in harm's way. It then raised the quest for peace to a new level with its peace treaty with Israel, which has stood tall in the face of dire circumstances for over a quarter of a century. The peace treaty has survived numerous challenges because it serves the interests of both Egypt and Israel. For Egypt, it provided for the return of its occupied territory and a new beginning toward an overall peace in the region. For Israel, it was the bulwark against any further full-fledged Arab-Israeli wars.

A little more than a decade later, the U.S. and former Soviet Union cosponsored the Madrid Middle East Peace Process. Under this umbrella, Jordan and Israel found peace. The Oslo Palestinian-Israeli process was conceived and fragile steps toward Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation were taken, including the establishment of a Palestinian National Authority with Yasser Arafat as its president. Syria and Israel came close to signing a peace treaty to end the conflict between them.

Needless to say, it was not all a story of endless success. With the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin at the hands of an Israeli, and repeated delays and inconsistencies in fulfilling the agreements pursuant to the Oslo process, the presumed confidence-building effect of the phased process was reversed into a rapid process of confidence erosion.

By 1999, the peace process was running behind schedule in terms of transfer of power to the Palestinian Authority. The time envisaged for concluding the peace process expired. This left the vast majority of the occupied territory in the hands of the Israeli government, without even starting the permanent status negotiations that should have begun four years earlier.

As President Clinton's term was winding down, he made a final effort to salvage the peace process by convening the Israeli and Palestinian parties in a hastily arranged meeting at Camp David, during the summer of 1999. With confidence between the parties at its lowest level ever, the meeting was doomed to fail in reaching agreement on such critical issues as borders, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem. The Camp David Summit was ill-timed and poorly planned,

but it was important because it brought forward many important issues, which were developed further in President Clinton's final weeks and in Taba, Egypt, the month after that.

It is regrettable that all these efforts did not come to full fruition, and we see today an almost unparalleled recourse to indiscriminate use of force. Egypt, for one, has spoken unwaveringly against the killing of civilians, be they Palestinians or Israelis, and whatever the so-called justification. Also, Egypt has unequivocally condemned Israel's recent infringement of Syrian territory and sovereignty.

During the last three years Israelis and Palestinians have suffered heavy casualties: more than 850 Israelis and over 2,000 Palestinians (including 250 children) have died in a cycle of violence and destruction. The Israeli government has resorted to an ironfisted policy, reoccupying the major cities in the West Bank

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and Gaza Strip using excessive and disproportionate force, confiscating land, demolishing homes, restricting the transit of Palestinians across their towns, pursuing a policy of targeted assassination, and, finally, denouncing the Oslo agreement. All of this must stop.

The most serious Israeli practice is the expansion of settlements deep inside the Arab occupied territories. As President Bush has stressed, settlements in the occupied territories must end. Now Israel is building a separation wall that runs over 130 miles and cuts across Arab cities and villages. It separates families and friends, which will make the establishment of a Palestinian state almost impossible. More than 11,000 Palestinians will be trapped between the wall and the UN green line that separates Israel from Palestine, and 128,000 Palestinians will be trapped in enclaves removed from the other parts of the West Bank.

The Palestinians should maintain the course toward political and administrative reform and the peaceful resolution of their conflict with Israel. Israel must desist from its indiscriminate killing of Palestinians and confiscation of land, for this erodes any possibility of peace in the future. Israel must take concrete steps to support the establishment of a viable Palestinian state and work quickly toward a final status agreement. Unlike the Oslo process, the Middle East road map is time and performance based. It remains feasible, but will come to a standstill if the present cycle of violence continues. It has the support of the international community, which should monitor its implementation through an appropriate international mechanism. The U.S. holds a unique position in relation to the parties of this negotiation, and it should exercise its responsibilities in a balanced manner for Israelis

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and Palestinians to find their way to peace. President Bush has our support in his effort to convince them to follow the course and the time line set out.

The will of the Palestinian people, or for that matter the Syrians, will not be broken by Israel's military might or delusions of military conquests. Unbalanced attempts to move the process forward will fail to the detriment of both Arabs and Israelis. One should draw a lesson from the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement. Steps toward peace must provide dividends in each phase to both sides, Palestinians and Israelis, in order to prevent regressions with every crisis. Palestinians must come closer to statehood, and Israelis must feel more secure as we move forward. But, Israel must end its occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory once and for all.

The newest conflict in the Middle East is in Iraq. The battle against Iraq was short and brisk, and the United States succeeded in eliminating a vicious regime that did not have support in the Arab world. Nevertheless, the conflict engendered a vigorous debate worldwide and across the Arab world, regarding its timing, merits, and legality. The United States had always enjoyed a special niche in the Arab world because it was never a colonial power. The Arab countries grappled to understand the danger posed by Iraq to the United States and the justification of the war without the support of the United Nations. That situation, coupled with the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, has left a resounding feeling of confusion and apprehension across the region regarding the continued presence of the coalition forces in Iraq at the expense of Iraqis governing themselves. Against this backdrop, Egypt and the Arab League have, nevertheless, welcomed the Iraqi International Council as a step towards Iraqis governing Iraq out of concern that the situation in Iraq might spiral out of control.

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Furthermore, Egypt helped forge consensus among the Arab countries for an understanding to allow the Iraqi delegation representing the council to participate in the meeting of the Arab League on a provisional basis.

Now, the United States should invite the international community to help the Iraqi people decide for themselves what political system best suits them. An expanded role of the United Nations in Iraq and a quick transfer of authority to the Iraqi people, would greatly facilitate participation of Arab and non-Arab states in the reconstruction of Iraq. Nation building is never easy. However, the UN is the best-qualified party to be entrusted with the mandate of political reconciliation in Iraq, overseeing free elections and helping the Iraqis to draft their own constitution. Furthermore, resorting to the UN will diminish the perception

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that the United States is an occupying power, and will help quell rising anti-Americanism in the Middle East.

I would now like to turn to the issue of the socioeconomic development of the Middle East. For the last decade, the Middle East has been, and continues to be, in an ongoing process of change. This started long before regional transformation came into vogue. It is domestically driven by demographic change, although admittedly, the pace has been heightened by the free flow of information and the transfer of technology. In Egypt, for example, 56 percent of the population is 25 years old or younger. Egypt has to create 600,000 new jobs each year to direct the

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population's energy towards the betterment of our society and the world community. To succeed, it has to project itself as, and become, not only a regional, but global player in the marketplace. This implies greater global engagement by its community and greater responsiveness by the global community to its concerns.

There has been progress in Middle Eastern societies. In 1990, the public sector in Egypt contributed almost 70 percent of our entire GDP and 65 percent of our total investments. Today, the picture is almost exactly the opposite. The private sector today contributes 67 percent of our entire GDP and well above 60 percent of our total investment.

Egypt's experience in the pursuit of economic development has taught it that economic development does not automatically translate into social development. Consequently, it designed policies in such a way as to pursue a development process that is humane, equitable, and sustainable. A central element of that was to prioritize equity concerns in order to ensure that the poor, marginalized, and deprived segments of society receive fair dividends from growth and development.

Improving the status of children and women has been a major focus of the Egyptian government. Since the early 1980s, Egypt has been committed at the highest level to the welfare of children and the protection of their rights. This commitment has also extended to the international arena. Egypt is one of the six initiators of the First World Summit for Children and a strong advocate of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

With regard to women, sweeping changes have been introduced to our laws over the last few years. For example, the revised personal status law allows women to get a divorce through a quick court procedure. On the institutional level, the National Council for Women was established in the year 2000 to promote the rights of women in Egypt.

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Thirty years ago, the Egyptian political system was a one-party system. This changed dramatically over the course of the last three decades, allowing the number of political parties to increase from one to three parties in 1976, and to currently 14 parties. Egyptian parliamentary elections are now fully supervised by an independent judiciary. Egyptian media currently enjoys an unprecedented level of freedom. Gone are the days when bureaucrats dictate what can be written and what cannot.

In 102 years of its history, only eight Arabs and Muslims combined won the prestigious Nobel Prize. It is, however, noteworthy that six of those won in the last quarter century—half of whom were Egyptians. As a matter of fact, and outside a handful of Western and developed countries and three developing countries, Egyptian nationals have won an impressive amount of Nobel Prizes in the last 25 years. In 1978, President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab to win the Nobel Prize for Peace for his groundbreaking role in the Middle East peace process. In 1988, Naguib Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1999, Egyptian-American scientist Ahmed Zewail won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

Needless to say, these examples do not mean that everything is wonderful under the blazing Middle Eastern sun, or that there is nothing more that can be done. The Middle East, including Egypt, has a ways to go in all three of the fundamental components of development—political, social, and economic. Individual rights, freedoms, and responsibilities have to be as strongly embraced as societal rights and responsibilities. Individual rights must better affect, and at the same time accept to be affected, by global, political, economic, and social norms. Society must become more amenable to change. Egypt cannot reap the benefits of global engagement without becoming more global. The same applies to the Middle Eastern region as a whole. That

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being said, I reject the notion that the Middle East, its culture, and its widespread Islamic faith are the sources of all evil in the world. Most of the world's problems to this very day are ramifications of decades and decades of colonialism, injustice, and greed by the more wealthy at the expense of the less affluent.

I have touched briefly on the issues that I believe provide a context for global relations, or that will be paramount in determining the immediate future of the Middle East. In concluding, I cannot overemphasize the importance of greater global understanding and interaction as we strive for a more secure world and a more modern and moderate Middle East. In his famous "I hate war" speech some 70 years ago,<sup>2</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt elaborated on the causes of

wars. Particularly, he mentioned ancient hatred, turbulent frontiers, and newborn fanaticism and convictions on the part of certain peoples that they have become the unique depositories of ultimate truth and right.

In a global society today, our destiny is even more closely intertwined and interlocked. Together we must develop a global civilization encompassing all peoples in order to provide for a safer and more prosperous world for future generations. ■

#### NOTES

- 1 The 1991 Madrid Arab-Israeli peace conference established a working group on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS). At the meetings of that working group Israel refused to discuss nuclear weapons issues before peace agreements with Syria and Iraq were signed and those states joined ACRS.
- 2 Franklin D. Roosevelt on War at Chautauqua, New York, 1936.