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Book Review: The Diplomat's Son Who Became One of the Founders of Al-Sisi's Foreign Policy

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Egypt's Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition
Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 377 pp.

In the 1980s, Ismail Fahmi, Egypt's foreign minister from 1973 to 1977, published a fascinating autobiography that afforded an intimate, behind-the-scenes peek into Egyptian diplomacy. There, Fahmi described his shock when, in October 1977, President Anwar Al-Sadat, still dressed in his pajamas, summoned Fahmi to his quarters in Sinaia, the picturesque Romanian resort town where they were staying, and revealed to him for the first time his intention to visit Jerusalem. The heated discussion between the two lasted eight hours and concluded with severe differences in opinion. Several weeks later, when Fahmi understood that he had failed to convince Sadat to forgo his initiative for peace with Israel, he submitted his resignation.[1]

When the senior Fahmi ended his diplomatic career on a harsh note, his son Nabil (b. 1951) was still a young statesman at the beginning of his career. In the ensuing decades, he rose in the diplomatic ranks and eventually held senior positions, including as Egypt's ambassador in Washington from 1999–2008 and as Egypt's foreign minister from 2013–2014 in the transitional government established after the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood. His book summarizes fifty years of Egyptian diplomacy, which he observed from various roles. However, this is not only an autobiography, but also an attempt to analyze Egypt's foreign policy from an academic perspective, as the author served from

1 Ismail Fahmi, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Cairo: Dar Al-Shuruq, 2008), pp. 303–335 [Arabic].

2009–2014 as the founding dean of the Faculty of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo.

The book is divided into four parts. The first is devoted to Fahmi's personal and professional biography. The second discusses challenges and opportunities in Egypt's foreign policy, from the shift to peace with Israel, through Egypt's efforts to turn the Middle East into a nuclear-weapon-free zone, to Egypt's complex relations with the United States and Russia. The third part is dedicated to the two revolutions experienced by Egypt in January 2011 and June 2013, as well as the roles that Fahmi filled in this tumultuous period. The fourth and final part offers a look into the future of the Middle East, and Egypt at its center, from Fahmi's point of view as a seasoned diplomat. The text combines the author's personal experiences and insights with relevant primary and secondary sources.

The importance of this book lies in its focus on Egypt's foreign policy after the decade of the "Arab Spring," whereas most of what has been written on Egypt on this period relates, naturally, to the internal changes experienced by the country. The timing of its publication corresponds with the increased efforts made by Egypt in recent years to update and redefine its regional and international orientation. Egypt, known as "the elder sister" and "the mother of the world," has watched the emergence of the rich Gulf countries and non-Arab Middle Eastern countries, which it perceives as challenging its leading regional status.

A significant portion of Fahmi's book is dedicated to Israel. Readers expecting the son to admit the errors of the ways of his father, who was a symbol of opposition to the peace agreement, will be disappointed. Even after four decades, Fahmi justifies his father's resignation, arguing that Sadat's initiative disrupted the ability to achieve a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace and solve the Palestinian problem (p. 8), granting Israel a "premature normalization" that harmed the interests of the entire Arab nation (pp. 60–61). In his view, this dire outcome was a result of Sadat's capitulation to Israel's demands, which succeeded in removing Egypt from the circle of conflict without requiring Israel to prove that it indeed desired peace (pp. 62–64).

Fahmi's criticism is based on the assumption that Sadat could have forced Israel into a better agreement, had he been more patient. However, he does not raise the possibility that an Egyptian insistence on a comprehensive peace would have thwarted the Egypt-

Israel peace entirely. This is a likely scenario in light of the fundamental opposition expressed at the time to the move by the Arab rejectionist front, led by Syria, the PLO, Iraq, and Libya, as well as the unwillingness of Menachem Begin's government to accept a territorial compromise in Judea and Samaria. Furthermore, while the senior Fahmi criticized Sadat when Egypt was being subjected to an Arab boycott, the junior Fahmi refrains from presenting an updated calculation of the long-term benefits – territorial, political, economic, and security-wise – granted to Egypt by peace with Israel, versus the short-term costs Egypt suffered.

It is apparent that Fahmi's frigid attitude toward the peace with Israel reflects not only a blind loyalty to his father but also a deeper critical stance. Israel is presented in his book as uncommitted to the Oslo process and primarily responsible for its failure. In this context, Fahmi mentions Israeli actions, such as settlement expansion (pp. 74–76, 110–113), but neglects to mention, for example, Palestinian terrorist activities. Fahmi even admits that he himself encouraged the Palestinians to harden their positions in the negotiations with Israel (p. 88). Furthermore, Israel is described in his book as an aggressive state that introduced weapons of mass destruction into the Middle East. He admits that Egypt's diplomatic efforts to force Israel into signing the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) failed, but refrains from the requisite soul-searching regarding the contribution of Egypt's "cold peace" policy to Israel's continuing, guiding sense of existential threat (pp. 119–128).

Indeed, Fahmi's account of the conflict with Israel does not remotely provide readers with a full and honest picture. Thus, for example, he regards the normalization developed during the Oslo period between Israel and Arab countries such as Jordan and Qatar, before reaching a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as "placing the carriage before the horse" (pp. 76–82). At the same time, he barely mentions other, equally important reasons that caused Cairo to view the positive form of peace developing between Israel and Jordan with skepticism from the outset. Egypt was afraid that in the realization of the vision of a "new Middle East," Israel would figure as a prominent economic and technological force, threatening Egypt's own status in the region. Furthermore, another Arab country joining the circle of peace, and even working toward a "warm" peace (as opposed to Egypt's "cold" peace), meant that Egypt no longer enjoyed the exclusive

ability to determine the character of relations between Israel and the Arabs; thus, peace of this kind harmed Egypt's regional leadership.[2]

With regard to the 2000 Camp David Summit, at which time Fahmi was serving as Egypt's ambassador in Washington, Fahmi adds an original element to the discussion of the historical responsibility for its failure. Contrary to the prevailing trend in the research literature to pin the blame on Yasser Arafat's intransigence or Ehud Barak's hastiness,[3] Fahmi instead concentrates on the American party. As he puts it, the conditions were not yet ripe for an agreement in light of the distrust between Barak and Arafat, but Bill Clinton insisted on reaching a permanent agreement before the conclusion of his term (pp. 91–94). While choosing to place the majority of the blame on the United States, Fahmi also clears Egypt of the charges it faced at the time, according to which it had refrained from applying its full weight to make the Palestinians compromise on the issue of Jerusalem.[4]

A major chapter in the book is dedicated to the relations between Cairo and Washington, which Fahmi defines as "indispensable but uncomfortable." He describes the ups and downs of these relations under the various administrations, in the context of American military involvement in the Middle East, the "War on Terror" after 9/11, the pressure put on Cairo regarding human rights and democratization, and the "Arab Spring" upheavals. Fahmi agrees that Egypt was in need of political reforms toward the end of the Mubarak era, as Mubarak's ability to govern the country had been undermined. Nonetheless, he expresses misgivings regarding the attempts made by the United States, during the terms of George Bush Jr. and especially Barack Obama, to force the American agenda on Egypt and interfere in its domestic affairs (pp. 161–189).

In his book, Fahmi presents the prevailing Egyptian narrative, according to which the United States preferred a Muslim Brotherhood government over a government by the army or even by liberal parties and the business elite. He does not unequivocally state

2 Martin Indyk, *American Peace: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009), p. 145 [Hebrew].

3 See for example: Benny Morris, *One State, Two States: Resolving the Israeli-Palestine Conflict* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2012), pp. 95–105 [Hebrew]; Moshe Sasson, *Talking Peace* (Jerusalem: Maariv Library, 2004), pp. 277–280 [Hebrew].

4 Rami Ginat and Meir Noema, *Egypt and the Second Palestinian Intifada: Policymaking with Multifaceted Commitments* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), pp. 35–37.

whether this is a false conspiracy theory or actual reality. However, in his time as the foreign minister after the removal of President Muhammad Morsi, he applied conclusions drawn from what was perceived as Washington's "betrayal" of Egypt. On the one hand, he recognized the importance of relations with Washington and worked to rehabilitate them; on the other hand, he shaped a new foreign policy that championed a more balanced approach, expanding relations with Russia and China (pp. 189–200).

Whether from a lack of historical perspective or a fear of stepping on political landmines, the author rarely touches upon Egyptian foreign policy during the era of Abd Al-Fatah Al-Sisi. Nevertheless, although he served as foreign minister for just one year, doctrines shaped by Fahmi during his term continue to inspire Egyptian diplomacy: support of a regional, state-based order focused on national rather than trans-national Islamist identities; a demand to halt interference by Turkey and Qatar in the domestic affairs of Egypt and Arab countries, without ruling out normalization of relations contingent upon a change in their conduct; diversifying Egypt's sources of support while reducing its reliance on the major powers and establishing regional and sub-regional alliances with African and Eastern Mediterranean countries; and prioritizing geoeconomic considerations in forming Egypt's foreign policy (pp. 18–19, 274–275).

In summary, Fahmi's book offers a comprehensive and personal look at the major foreign and domestic issues faced by Egypt in recent decades. However, it has several weaknesses. First, Mubarak's lengthy reign, to which the majority of the manuscript is devoted, was devoid of the exhilarating dramas of Sadat's days or the "Arab Spring," and this hamstrings parts of the book. Second, although Fahmi was indeed a talented and wise diplomat, as a player in history his personal influence on the course of events was rather limited. Finally, Fahmi appears reluctant to confront past or present superiors, adopting diplomatic rhetoric even as a retired diplomat. Thus, readers interested in a more critical view of Egypt's foreign and domestic affairs will have to seek a different source or go back to the book authored by the senior Fahmi.

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