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AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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EGYPT IN SEARCH OF A ROLE

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Over the course of ten days in November, Egypt has staged a state funeral service for Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat and hosted an international conference on the future of Iraq. The first event is consistent with Egypt's long-standing involvement in Palestinian affairs, which appears set to take on new momentum in the post-Arafat era, particularly in light of Israel's Gaza disengagement plans. The second reflects a broader upsurge in diplomatic activism. What underlies Egypt's moves to raise its foreign policy profile? And can it achieve its aims?

In terms of its ability to advance its own interests, to influence its neighbors and to shape the regional agenda, Egypt's diplomatic weight has substantially declined since the end of the 1991 Gulf War. But that is itself part of a longer-term trend. Half a century ago, Gamal Abdel Nasser proclaimed that the conjuncture of international and regional developments had generated a "role" in search of a "hero," namely, Revolutionary Egypt holding the banner of pan-Arab unionism. But Egypt's capabilities never matched Abdel Nasser's quasi-messianic vision, and the final blow to his ambitions was delivered by the Israeli military in June 1967.

The Sadat era (1970-81) and the subsequent decade under Husni Mubarak produced a recalibration of Egypt's relations with its Arab neighbors and of its image of itself, in ways that recall the pre-revolutionary situation under King Farouk: "yes" to the reality of multiple Arab states, "no" to the overthrow of Arab regimes in the name of Arab unity, but "yes" also to Egypt's status as *primus inter pares* in the Arab system as expressed through collective Arab institutions and, even more importantly, through respect for and deference to Egyptian sensibilities. Bolstered by its military and psychological achievements in the October 1973 War with Israel and by its subsequent abandonment of Soviet patronage in favor of the US, Egypt registered a number of foreign policy accomplishments:

(i) the end of the state of war with Israel and the full recovery of Egyptian territory;
(ii) the triumphal return to the Arab fold in the late 1980s on Egyptian terms, after years of ostracism; and
(iii) the formation of an Arab coalition in 1990-91 in support of the West's expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which brought huge financial rewards from Western creditors.

The post-1991 years, however, have been less kind. For one thing, Cairo's hopes for a lasting "well-oiled" alliance with the Gulf Arabs were quickly dashed. Secondly, the dynamics of the

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renewed Arab-Israeli peace process took on a life of their own without Egyptian patronage, resulting in feelings of sullen marginalization. Thirdly, the rapid emergence of an Israeli-Turkish alliance in the mid-1990s demonstrated the strength of non-Arab Middle Eastern states in comparison to the Arab world. Finally, daily broadcasts throughout the Arab world of scenes of Palestinian suffering, especially since September 2000, provided graphic evidence of Arab impotence. So, too, did the US-led war against Saddam Husayn's Iraq in 2003, about which Arab states could do nothing except issue meaningless resolutions. Indeed, the entire institution of the Arab summit conference degenerated into an exercise in empty rhetoric.

The weakness of Arab states, individually and collectively, has many facets. As recent Arab Human Development Reports have shown, Arab states have fallen further behind other emerging countries due to the lack of investment in "knowledge capital," particularly regarding women, and the lack of freedom and rule of law. Domestically, Egypt exemplifies many of Arab world's deficiencies. Its economy registered moderate macroeconomic growth under IMF-sponsored programs along with substantial improvements in infrastructure. But it remains uncompetitive in the global market, unemployment rates remain high, particularly among Egypt's large youthful population (two-thirds of its 70 million people are under the age of 30), and widespread poverty, corruption, and an unwieldy bureaucracy continue to cast a shadow over Egypt's prospects.

Politically, Husni Mubarak's 23-year rule is attracting increasing scrutiny, both at home and among foreign proponents of reform. Criticism is focused on the absence of movement towards genuine political pluralism and harsh treatment of dissidents and social groups deemed deviant (e.g., homosexuals). Moreover, as the 76-year-old president's health appears less robust, the absence of a vice-president and designated successor, even as Mubarak grooms his 42-year old son, Gamal, for future office, are additional sources of concern. Recently, six hundred and fifty Egyptian politicians, academics and journalists from across the political spectrum called for Mubarak to step down in October 2005 at the end his current term in office, for an overhaul of Egypt's 1971 constitution, and for an end to the 23-year state of emergency. In addition, last month's terrorist bombings at Sinai tourist resorts suggest that the scourge of radical Islamism, which had plagued Egypt during the 1990s, might be re-emerging in a mutated form, either with the direct involvement of al-Qa`ida or as a result of its example.

Generations of Egyptians have been nurtured on the notion of Egypt's special role in the region and even in the international arena. However, the gap between Egypt's self-image and sense of high entitlement and its actual abilities to shape events has become painfully obvious in recent years. Still, Egypt continues to have genuine regional interests, and promoting them in ways that make sense to Egyptians is one of the regime's traditional tools to reinforce its legitimacy at home.

The Middle East faces a welter of challenges, including the specter of radical Islamic terrorism, chaos in Iraq and a possible US-Iranian confrontation over Iran's nuclear program. There may also be an emerging opportunity to break the Israeli-Palestinian impasse and renew the diplomatic process. And hovering over everything else is American Middle East policy, which has changed substantially since 9/11 but is still in the process of evolving in directions that remain uncertain. At best, Egypt can play only a supporting role in dealing with these issues. But the Mubarak regime would clearly like to be more of a player in the region and beyond and less of a bystander, let alone the object of someone else's ideas about "reform" or "transformation." If it is able to manage this role, valuable time will have been bought for a regime that must somehow accelerate the pace of change while preserving underlying stability.

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