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President Trump's First Hundred Days: An Egyptian Perspective

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Mohamed Tawfik served as the Ambassador of the Arab republic of Egypt to the United States from 2012 to 2015, a period of profound transformation for his country and region. In a diplomatic career spanning thirty-four years he assumed a number of multilateral positions including that of President of the Conference on Disarmament, Chairman of the Group of 77 in Geneva, and Coordinator of the New Agenda Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament.

President Donald J. Trump took the oath of office on January 20, 2017, to become the 45th President of the United States, in a whirlwind of domestic polarization, foreign recriminations, and more importantly, general uncertainty. By the end of his first hundred days none of the domestic uncertainty had dissipated. With no major blunders, the foreign relations situation seemed somewhat less precarious. Overall, though, the question marks have become even more pressing.

As it was for its predecessor in the White House, Iran will undoubtedly remain the central challenge for the Trump administration's Middle East policy. It appears that President Trump – who, luckily, has shown no qualms about reneging on many of his campaign pledges – has grudgingly accepted the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPA), which leaves his administration with variants of Obama's regional balance of power policies to contain the Islamic Republic. It is also clear that the new administration is slowly absorbing the complexities and multiple dimensions of the situations in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. This would probably favor ad-hoc moves rather than a grand strategy.

The prospect of some form of global deal with Russia that would open the door to regional resolutions, while originally overoptimistic,has clearly failed to materialize. Russia's beleaguered state of mind makes it unable to show substantial flexibility on most of these issues, while the Americans have no real need to make major concessions. The fate of millions of Syrians and other Arabs is clearly not stealing anyone's sleep.

President Trump's decision, on April 6th, to fire 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a government controlled airbase in central Syria (in response to a chemical weapon attack that killed at least eighty civilians) represents a turning point of sorts, not just in terms of US involvement in Syria, but in the broader context of US-Russian relations.

In an interview with Fox News, the president seemed to be reveling in the fact that he was keeping his foreign adversaries guessing as to his next moves, not on a forthcoming negotiation or trade deal, but with regard to possible military actions. Unfazed by Russian, Iranian, and North Korean saber-rattling and threats of military retaliation in response to American escalation, Trump calmly defended his stance by criticizing his predecessor for having nounced the attack on Mosul four months in advance.

"There is a low level of trust between our two countries," said Secretary of State Tillerson at a Moscow press conference with his Russian counterpart on April 12th, in effect announcing that the Trump-Putin honeymoon was over.

The following day, as if to showcase the new president's muscular approach to international relations, the US military dropped its most powerful conventional bomb (nicknamed Mother of All Bombs) on an Islamic State cave complex in Afghanistan. This was the first time this

weapon had ever been used in a combat situation.

Coming as it did only a few days after the US announced that it had redirected the Carl Vinson carrier strike group to the waters off the Korean Peninsula, it looked as though the Trump administration was quickly shifting into a more aggressive gear than its predecessor had ever dreamt of. The outright threat of nuclear escalation from the North Koreans seemed like a shrill reminder of the complexities of the Korean situation that, only a few days earlier over a sumptuous dinner at Trump's Mar-A-Lago home in southern Florida, Chinese President Xi Jinping had patiently tried to educate his American host on.

If Trump had been posturing or bluffing, no one blinked. Tremors from the Arab World's collapsing states had reverberated around the globe. No nation was going to give an inch without a fight, and any fight was bound to take existential proportions. The administration, however, did not follow through with impetuous escalatory steps. With regard to North Korea, it was more interested in coordinating with the Chinese. In Syria, it informed the Russians in advance of the rocket attack, enabling them to withdraw their personnel from the airbase in time to avert Russian casualties.

No less significant than the rocket attack, the administration has been quietly expanding its military footprint in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other Middle Eastern conflict zones. In Syria, it looks like the conflict is entering a new phase. While the Russians have taken advantage of the Americans' traction with their domestic politics to shape the situation on the ground, the US may be finally ready to claim a share of the pie.

For some time now, the Syrian conflict has been witnessing a slow process of carving up the country into zones controlled by local actors under the influence of their respective regional and international patrons. As the US drive to dislodge ISIS from the territories it controls in Syria proceeds, the administration will need dependable and ideologically acceptable local allies to take over the liberated areas. The US can neither allow the Islamists nor the Iran-backed regime an outright win. It is particularly unlikely that the administration will allow Iran's allies a contiguous land corridor all the way to the Mediterranean.

It may well be that the Syrian conflict has already entered the dangerous phase of drawing up partition lines. As evidenced by recent developments, this does not translate into an end to the bloodletting and civilian displacements. It could, however, move the conflict one step closer to a political settlement aimed at formalizing a new status quo once it is established.

While Egypt should resist attempts to be drawn into the military conflict, it should continue to be a player in the political process with the aim of safeguarding – as much as possible – the continued existence of the Syrian state. No matter what Washington academics may think, no post-conflict arrangement can gain regional legitimacy without Egyptian endorsement. Egypt should also oppose any outcome that could leave Islamist militants free to further build up their capacities and networks.

In Iraq, the current anti-ISIS drive seems to be proceeding, slowly but surely. But while denying ISIS the ability to hold territory is, certainly, a viable proposition, it will unavoidably come at the cost of greater devastation – and possibly sectarian displacements – in Sunni areas, thus further disenfranchising this battered component of the Iraqi fabric. Until a more inclusive approach is adopted, Sunni majority areas and the dividing lines between them and other Iraqi communities will remain a source of disquiet.

The administration will face a balancing act to help keep Iraq in one piece while rolling back Iranian influence. This can only be achieved by a more active – and non-sectarian – Arab role, in which Egypt must – by necessity – play a central part.

In Iraq, as in Syria, faced with a dearth of effective and reliable regional and local allies particularly as Turkey appears less and less

dependable – the US is increasingly depending on Kurdish militias. As it overlaps with Kurdish national ambitions, this strategic realignment could already be laying the foundations of the next regional conflict.

Setting aside its sectarian and tribal dynamics, Yemen has developed into another Iranian–Saudi proxy war (involving – after initial hesitation– a direct military effort on the part of the Saudis and their allies). Plotted on a map, the conflict has the potential to expand the arc of Iranian influence to almost a semi-circle. From the start of the military operation, the US has provided important intelligence and logistical assistance, but no decisive outcome has been achieved. While this administration has shown more interest in Yemen than its predecessor, its objective remains, in all probability, to enhance the terms of a political settlement.

There is also an important counterterrorism component to the situation in Yemen where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is particularly lethal, as evidenced – inter alia – by the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. The Trump Administration has evidently intensified its operations against terrorists in Yemen. Yet a more stable political situation would obviously be beneficial to the counterterrorism effort.

Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem was, luckily, another electoral pledge that the president wisely chose to relegate to the indeterminate future. In a joint press conference with the prime minister of Israel on February 15, Trump seemed to have his heart in right place when he remarked, "I'd like to see you hold back on settlements for a little bit." On the other hand, he seemed to be undermining the longtime US position of supporting a two-state outcome:

"So I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one."

It remains an open question whether the US president will make a serious effort to breathe life into the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace process. What seems more likely, though, is for the US administration to expend its scarce political capital on forging some kind of informal Sunni-Jewish alliance to counter Shiite Iran's influence.

"…for the first time in my lifetime, and for the first time in the life of my country, Arab countries in the region do not see Israel as an enemy, but, increasingly, as an ally." This is how – at the same press conference – Netanyahu summed up what he saw as a golden opportunity for his country.

While this approach may help to forge better - though still informal – ties between Israel and some of the Gulf countries, it is unlikely, in my view, to create an alliance of strategic significance. So long as the Palestinians are denied justice, Israeli involvement will remain a liability to any military coalition in the Arab world. The lesson from the war for the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 is, today, as valid as ever. The Egyptian president has remained steadfast in his support for a peaceful settlement. Egyptian diplomacy should be wary, however, of attempts to transform the peace process into an empty shell whose sole purpose is to provide political cover for new regional security arrangements. The long term injustice suffered by the Palestinians will remain an emotive issue capable of arousing the Arab masses. Perceived complacency by the Arab Governments will be quickly exploited by the opposition Islamists to further destabilize the region.

By the end of the first hundred days, the new administration had not shown much interest in the situation in Libya. Yet, the gradual convergence of the positions of Libya's Arab and European neighbors, abetted by the renewed trust between the US and Egypt, did provide an opening for a new push for stability in this neighboring country, so crucial for Egypt's national interests. Egypt has been playing an active and pragmatic role and has proved to be a productive partner in a revitalized international effort. Of all the Arab world's hotspots, Libya seems the likeliest to achieve progress. Egyptian diplomacy must remain actively involved in this effort.

While pressing regional issues remain an important component of US-Egyptian relations, the bilateral aspect should not be overlooked. President Sisi's visit to Washington in early April gave a much needed boost to the relationship.

By all accounts it was a great success. Unlike visits by leaders of some NATO allied nations, the atmospherics were impeccable.

"I just want to let everybody know, in case there was any doubt, that we are very much behind President al-Sissi," President Trump told reporters. "He's done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation. We are very much behind Egypt and the people of Egypt."

While the trip presented an opportunity for the Egyptian leader to build rapport with President Trump, leading members of his administration, and congressional leaders, it was not the right occasion for detailed negotiations. As expected, it produced no breakthroughs on the pending issues. However, it took both sides one step closer to an overdue discussion on how to forge a more predictable relationship in the long run. The visit should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as the launching of a comprehensive process to rebuild the relationship on more solid foundations.

The military strategic dimension, at the heart of the relationship, needs to be attended to with some urgency. Both sides need to reach a common understanding on how to proceed following President Obama's decision to limit all future weapons transfers to four specific areas (counter terrorism, border security, maritime security and Sinai security) and to end cash-flow financing starting from the 2018 budget. The Cairo visit of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, less than three weeks after President Sisi's visit to Washington demonstrated the importance that both sides have on these relations.

In dealing with these immediate concerns, both sides should be aware of the need to adapt the program to changing times. No matter how much they may wish it, they cannot go back to exactly where they were a decade ago. For starters, the purchasing power of the assistance package has significantly eroded, while the maintenance and upgrading costs of a much larger force has shot up. And while Egypt has started to diversify its weapons' resourcing, the bulk of our military equipment will remain American. Continued cooperation at the military and strategic levels is of paramount importance for regional – and consequentially, world – stability. Both sides need to agree on more predictable arrangements for these programs to function efficiently.

Traditional interests such as Egyptian-Israeli Peace, facilitation for US military over-flights and Suez Canal passage, counterterrorism cooperation, and Egypt's capacity to protect its international waterways, are today as valid as they were three decades ago. For the region to regain an acceptable level of stability, a minimum balance of power needs to exist between the region's Arab and non-Arab States. That cannot happen without Egypt.

With Egypt's heightened emphasis on stability, its domestic economy will remain a major priority. While increased assistance is probably out of the question, and consensus on an FTA is demonstrably lacking on both sides, US support for Egypt's economic reform – possibly our most serious effort in this direction in recent history – can go a long way. Continued American support within the International Financial Institutions will be essential, as will increased levels of FDI. Expansions to the QIZ program could also be helpful. Luckily, we have robust business to business links. The US-Egypt Business Council and the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt have provided efficient frameworks for the two countries' business communities. Such cooperation needs to be expanded beyond the traditional players and sectors. The two governments can play an effective role in encouraging and supporting their respective business communities to this end. Trump's busy first hundred days did not produce substantial progress in achieving these ambitious goals. Yet there can be no doubt that US-Egyptian relations are back on track.

In his first hundred days, President Trump's foreign policy has proven more balanced and nuanced than some skeptics had anticipated. His positions have opened avenues for Egyptian diplomacy that were not available while his predecessor occupied the White House. While taking full advantage of these immediate opportunities, Egypt should focus on rebuilding the strategic relationship, including regaining our traditional bipartisan support. We cannot expect agreement on every issue, yet we should remain closely engaged.
