

Egypt's Foreign Policy in a Time of Crisis: A Conversation with H.E. Nabil Fahmy

Salem: He was also, as many of you know the Egyptian Ambassador to Washington for nine years between '99 and 2008. Prior to that, ambassador to Japan and prior to that, uh, had also a very vigorous career in the Egyptian Foreign Service with particular activity and experience in the, in the Arab-Israeli, uh, peace process, was part of the Egyptian delegation in the '91 Madrid Peace Conference. He's also held a number of positions with the United Nations.

In addition, he has an academic profile. He's been the founding dean at the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo. Uh, and so I'm going to, uh, start with Mr. Fahmy with a few sort of open questions to paint us a picture of the directions of Egyptian foreign policy and to probe a bit on some of the various themes and issues and challenges that Egypt faces in its foreign policy and then, of course, turn it over to you for more questions.

In the sessions this morning, we heard about the domestic political scene in Egypt. Obviously we've also followed the, you know, the first revolution, the events, the Morsi government, second revolts, and events since. Then in the second panel we heard a lot about the economic situation and challenges. Uh, but Egypt is also the biggest Arab country. It has historically been a weighty and important player in the Middle East, uh, and also has been in the past a player globally as part of the nonalignment and so on. So it has sort of a big foreign policy history and profile.

So maybe my first question, Mr. Fahmy, is how would you describe the continuities and differences perhaps between, uh, Egypt's foreign policy before all of these recent events from 2011 and so on and the maybe last couple of decades of the Mubarak regime, to this new era that is beginning, a new president a new powerful president, certainly an interesting set of regional relations. Egypt used to be the leader of the Arab world in the 50's and it became rather isolated for awhile. President Mubarak brought it back into the Arab fold. How would you describe the phase that Egypt is going through in its foreign policy and where might it be headed?

Nabil Fahmy: Well, based on your premises, which were correct, the important significance, the influence of Egypt in the region, uh, one has to look at what's happening inside Egypt and what's happening in the region to determine where its foreign policy will go and what are the challenges and opportunities. And, uh, you've heard the debate this morning about the domestic situation, but let me encapsulate it for you. Since 1952 to 2011 we had four presidents. From 2011 to 2014 we've had four presidents. Uh...

Paul Salem: And two revolutions.

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Nabil Fahmy: And two revolutions. Uh, so obviously Egypt's changing. Obviously people want something different, a little bit of what they had and something different. Uh, they wanted more... uh, they want more of it and they want it more urgently and they want to be stakeholders in the process. And to pursue a foreign policy in a period of change is always delicate because, my academic profile aside, it is true that foreign policy ultimately is based on your domestic situation. You can talk the talk but ultimately to deliver it you have to have your domestic base.

The domestic base is changing. It's, uh... there's a lot more pressure on Egyptian foreign policy to provide early results, concrete results, to emphasize its independent, uh, to emphasize its, um, leading role. Uh, those are functions of the revolutions most of all and they are questions I asked myself when I was first asked to take the position. Okay, what is different in my responsibility from that of my predecessor and those before the revolution?

The other question of course is, the whole region's on fire. So we're supposed to lead a region that's on fire and a region that, not only are we supposed to, we have to, uh, and it's a region that is on fire literally, but we can handle it. More importantly, it's a region that's searching for its identity. You have the conflicts between the national identity, the ethnic identity, sectarianism, um, issues of ethnicity, and then you can go on to issues of extremism, modernity, poverty and so on and so forth.

So all of this is changing. For Egypt to regain its role, it needs to stabilize domestically and it's on the way to do that. It also needs to continue to take initiatives, um, throughout the region, and it needs to try to promote a model and a direction for the home at least, as a centrist, modern region that is going to assert itself, be more dependent on its own assets, on its own resources, at the same time not isolate itself from east, west, north or south, uh, engage with the world as a whole. It can't afford to be overly dependent on any one power and it can't afford to isolate itself from what's happening around the world.

Uh, we need to go back to the real strong elements in what Egypt has always provided the region, intellectual value added to the region. Uh, except for a very short period of time, we were never material leaders. Uh, it was basically that most of the new ideas, good and bad, even some of the bad ideas, most of them came out of Egypt. And unless we do that, I mean, and if you look at, in travels around the Arab world, so many Arab leaders in the past would say, "well, we studied at the universities in Egypt. We trained here or we spent our youth and our summers here." Uh, they did that because for them, they... Egypt was a model for what they wanted to achieve and for... and... and because Egypt received them in a hospitable fashion, irrespective of whether we agreed with them or not. And even among our friendliest countries, we have a history of bringing in those we agreed with and even those we opposed. So we need to go back to

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that and it's going to be a challenge domestically but also a challenge regionally. I think we can do it, frankly. I'm quite optimistic in that respect.

Paul Salem: Thank you. Let me dig a bit deeper, uh, in that general vein. President Obama in a couple of speeches over the past year tried to define what strict US interests are in the Middle East as a nation among other things. Uh, if you were asked to define what are Egypt's specific interests, needs, you know, possibly there's some economic interests that are important, there are some security interests, what are the narrow things that Egypt as a state can define clearly as interests that are existential or very real to its economic, political and security survival?

And alongside that, to, uh, or separate, uh, you know, aspect of the question is what... what you were touching on, what type of Middle East,, you said centrist, you said moderate, what type of political economic order does Egypt want and need in the Middle East? So they're separate but obviously...

Nabil Fahmy: Sure. I mean, I'm not sure whether to define this as a specific interest but I think it is and it's definitely an existential one. The conflict between natural identity and ethnic identity is central. I mean, we lead or led the Middle East as nation states, not by way of promoting one ethnicity versus the other. If we go back to nation state constant, that will be a foundation for us to lead but also a foundation for the whole region to move forward. But the big difference is everyone has to be open and admit this. None of us can afford to ignore ethnicity. In the past we all did.

What we need to find as Arabs, and Egypt needs to lead the way, and we have the luxury of not having serious ethnic problems back home, we need to highlight the national identity, at the same time ensure that minority is different, ethnic groups find a role within that identity, not in place of the identity. Um, and I defining the Arab world for me, for example, includes all the Arab countries and it includes Arabs and non-Arabs living in the Arab world. Uh, that's a challenge we need, we need to face really and I think Egypt should, uh, lead the actual discussion on this.

Um, just recently I wrote an article calling on Arab leaders to have dialogues with their own people about the national identity and under that, not in place of that, under that, okay, how do we deal with this in ethnic groups and so on and so forth.

Well, the other thing, um, much more dependence regionally than internationally. Uh, I think we're gonna see many more small problems and smaller problems are not conducive (inaudible) mentioned it, uh, um, in passing, are not conducive to super powers getting engaged easily. Uh, so we're gonna have to depend on ourselves. Uh, that requires much more inter-Arab, uh, engagement.

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I followed the debate about ISIS, ISOL, whatever you want to call it. Um, and I think we're moving in the right direction but very late, first of all, and I would argue also... I still believe there needs to be greater regional engagement because at the end of the day, the reason non-regional parties engage is when it threatens their security. That's always after they threaten ours. Um, so and I would argue also I think Egypt has started this last year and will continue to pursue, uh, multidimensional relations with multi parties. Over dependency on one party or the other doesn't survive with the two parties, but the Middle East cannot afford to say, "well, I'm not gonna deal with the west or I'm not gonna deal with the south," uh, so isolationism is not the, uh, is not the solution either. Now, there are resource issues but they're more technical.

Paul Salem: Yeah. Uh, I mean, the Arab world has gone through phases when Egypt and the Gulf have been at odds, periods when they've been working together from the 50's to the 70's through today. Now Egypt has a very strong and rich relationship with a number of major Gulf countries, from the sort of bridging the two wings of the Arab world and also Egypt being the largest, them being the wealthiest. How do you see that partnership between, the Gulf countries and Egypt, restructuring, bringing, you know, hopefully towards a period of more stability and more Arab sort of cooperation and building our own stability instead of going east and west looking for things? How do you see the nature of that partnership and where is it going?

Nabil Fahmy: Well, first of all, I mean, Arabs do a wonderful job in announcing agreements.

Paul Salem: True.

[laughter]

Nabil Fahmy: The implementation... no, no, no, no. I didn't mean that. That's another issue. Uh, what they don't do very well, frankly, is explaining their disagreements. There's nothing wrong with being a strong friend with country X or country Y and not having an identical position with them.

So the idea that when we differed with this country it's a major problem. It's not a major problem. In the short term there can be differences. But strategically there's not. Uh, and I would argue even if you look at Egyptian Gulf relations, and I know what you're, what you're implying. Uh, many people remember when we differed with some Gulf countries or when we agreed with them. But in actual fact, many of the Arab leaders in the Gulf stood with Egypt and against it depending on the issue and we stood with them and, again, depending on the issue.

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So I think two issues should be, uh, paramount, not only in our domestic relations but also in our... our regional and international, more transparency and more accountability. I think we should speak openly to each other, uh, about where our differences are, where, uh, our agreements are. And I honestly believe that what we've seen recently in Egypt, I'm talking about North Africa here, Egypt and Algeria in particular, also Morocco but (inaudible) in particular and if you go towards the Gulf, um, inwards and Saudi in particular and then the other Gulf countries about this vet of extremism and terrorism, it's clearly there, there's a common position there, and the support we've received from the Gulf countries, frankly, in the fashion it was presented, in the timing and in the content, goes beyond the material support, frankly. They could have and some countries, some super powers for that matter, stood back wanting to wait and see what's gonna happen and where will the win end before determining. The Gulf countries did not.

Uh, I have no... I would much prefer and I'm much more comfortable speaking openly about our agreements and disagreements than always announcing that we have identical views that we find don't make much sense most of the time. And I'm not at all... let me add just one point here. We actually don't have a choice. We live in a much more transparent society. Uh, complications are obvious and they're debated. So it's better to lead the debate rather than to react to it.

Paul Salem: Uh, I mean, unfortunately the Middle East, we're often beset by crises and, you know, we don't have the luxury necessarily all the time of thinking, uh, uh, long term, and I wanted just to get your quick views on the three obvious crisis, uh, beginning with, you know, this week's announcement of a strategy to combat this very large, uh, terrorist group ISIS, the (inaudible), Egypt's inclusion and... and support for that meeting. What might that mean? How is the threat perceived? Uh, uh, in Egypt, what might Egypt be able actually to do given its situation, its resources and so on? Uh, and connected to that crisis, uh, uh, how does it view, you know, the future of... I mean, the situations here? Are there disagreements over, you know, transition, Assad Regime and things of that nature? Uh, so what's the take on ISIS and the current strategy from the Egyptian side of things?

Nabil Fahmy: Well, it's just one... one further permutation in the whole issue of extremism and recolonization in the region. It ultimately starts from the same starting point, um, closed beliefs, um, um, arbitrary decision making, uh, which are completely inconsistent with open societies of today and I haven't even touched on the issue of violence because the real threat of these, uh, organizations are how they think much more than what force they use. Force we can handle. It's how they think that's gonna take a longer time.

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But what's happened this last week is in the right direction. It's late and while there were a lot of good announcements, the proof is in the pudding to see how it's actually implemented. And I would add to that I'd like to see more of a regional component to it and I'd like to see more of a political component to it. You're never gonna convince leaders of ISIS to be democrats. What we need to do is to ensure that they don't have a fertile environment to act or to promote their interest or to take advantage, uh, of other conflicts that exist. So a serious regional debate about what's happening in the region and, again, on this issue of ethnicity and so on and so forth, is important. Um, a strategic discussion regionally and internationally, uh, about the threat of terrorism and, with all due respect to my western friends, you seem to address terrorism when it hurts you, not realizing that it doesn't stop at boundaries, uh, even though we've gone through this over and over again from Afghanistan, uh, against the Soviets and so on. Um, that's always too late. Terrorism is a cancer. It is... there's no... you can't control it. You need to try to eradicate it from the very beginning and then do whatever you can not to create the circumstances for it to reemerge.

But as much as I don't like military solutions, uh, as long as you're late, then you have no option but to start with a military solution and then move to a political one. On Syria, look, personally I believe that the Syrian population, uh, has good reason to have very serious concerns, um, to feel frankly, uh, feel opposed in the regime. Um, and I think that we should look at a new Syria with new elements, new dimensions, probably also new faces. At the same time, I don't think that it's gonna be resolved militarily and I stand very strongly against dividing Syria, um, intentionally or unintentionally because we're looking for quick fixes.

When we're debating the Syrian issue, over and over again Egypt's said the extremists in Syria are gonna be a problem and others weren't listening. Uh, so this is not a... among the ISIS, by the way. Uh, but do we support Syria? We support Syria as a country. We support the Syrian, uh, people in wanting to live in a better environment, uh, and we support a new Syria, uh, without getting into dividing. I mean, if that's the option, that's not one that, uh, we'll support.

Paul Salem: Thank you. And let me ask about the recent Gaza war and the prominent role that Egypt played. Egypt started discovering without good relations, without Hamas and so on, that was well known and yet obviously Egypt was the inevitable mediator and the strategic heavyweight along that border and so on. Uh, how would you describe, uh, the role of this new presidency in dealing with this player, uh, Hamas, in dealing with this very close foreign, so not exactly foreign policy, it's right on the border and, uh... uh, obviously there's still talks moving forward, this very much affects obviously Egypt's security in the Sinai and Egypt's security directly. Has the Egyptian position, I mean, how, how have you seen it? Has it evolved and, uh, what are the visions, what are the views of dealing with, uh, with that access, uh, and that challenge?

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Nabil Fahmy: Well, no question is complicated. But I think what you saw Egypt do over the last couple of months, um, starting with the election campaign and then after that, is highlight two elements. One is that we will be a player with friends and foe. We don't have to be, uh, in excellent relations to talk to somebody. You can actually talk to somebody and use your influence even though you differ with them, uh, very, very seriously, uh, up to a point that is.

So the fact that you have to be friends with these elements to deal with them is frankly, it's a simplistic politics, and that reflects a self confidence in Egypt today that they can talk to people they differ with, at the same time have the difference in opinion.

I also believe that, um, the pronouncements of the president, again, during his campaign but more so since then, about the regional threats, uh, reflects again that Egypt is looking at its whole, the whole region. Uh, and I would argue that even before he was president, the whole year before that when I was still in government, uh, we went through a determined, premeditated process of multiplying our options on everything from foreign policy to energy to commodities, again, not moving away from anybody but if you've had two revolutions people want to start their independence. You can be independent by isolating yourself and living alone and we don't have that option or independent by having multiple choices and options before you.

So, um, you're gonna see more activism in Egyptian foreign policy. It won't be easy because we have our domestic challenges and you need to put assets behind your policies but also because we have so many issues around our borders all at the same time. Libya is horrendous.

Paul Salem: Yeah, that's what I wanted to ask you about next. I mean, you have a failed state on your western border, a state the size of, you know, half of Western Europe. Partly it's a border concern and, you know, smuggling of arms and so on but partly it's just the whole situation in eastern Libya in particular. How is it, you know, how does Egyptian government perceive the nature, the intensity, depth in that threat and what are tools that Egypt might have to impact the situation, whether they're political means, are there any military means being considered, any cooperation with other countries to try to bring more stability, uh...?

Nabil Fahmy: Sure. Let me just make one point so that, uh... I don't (inaudible) the government.

Paul Salem: I know that.

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Nabil Fahmy: Sure. And, and, and my opinions don't differ frankly, seriously but I don't speak on behalf of the government.

Paul Salem: I understand.

Nabil Fahmy: Um, but I do believe that what I say is consistent with policy. Libya is a failed state to its roots. And the problem with the Khadafy Era that nobody was left. There was nothing left. So it's not an issue where you can, okay, go in there and train some civil servants. Uh, it is complete chaos and it is de facto divided in at least three pieces.

The number of international emissaries to Libya is probably more than the number of any international embassies to any issues in the world and they're not doing anything at all because they don't know who to talk to. So my long answer to you, this is gonna take years. It's gonna be the source of extremism, instability, uh, international crime. Um, you need to reorient the whole society and if there's, and that's of course in the middle of this whole Middle East mix and, and turbulence, but if there's a target that I'd focus on, it would be the tribes. Everything else ultimately is tactics. Uh, if you want to start changing a society, you need to focus on the tribes, work with them. But we will... we can have a discussion three, four years from now and we'll still be discussing Libya.

Paul Salem: On the issue of crises that, uh, you know, touch on the issue of the south of Egypt, you know, as Egyptians say Egypt is the gift of the Nile and (inaudible) waters as well as issues even recently with Sudan, some security issues and problems of, you know, Sudan itself, which are not as bad as Libya but certainly have a lot of challenges there but mainly focusing on the long term issues of the Nile and the Nile waters and the crisis with Ethiopia and so on, uh, is there new thinking in Egypt how to deal with this, uh, to ensure sort of Nile-based instability and security given all the challenges that are being faced?

Nabil Fahmy: I think so. Honestly, though, but it's not new as a function of uh... since President Sisi came into office. Uh, we had these discussions with President Adly Mansour and field marshal Sisi was in government at the time so after the Muslim Brotherhood left government we've been having an intensive debate about, okay, how do we deal with this and we've reviewed our different policies. In most cases we came back and decided we should stick to the same policies, but in some areas there was a difference. We have emphasized both the urgency and the importance of the issue of the Nile to Egypt as a national security issue. At the same time we've emphasized that this can and can only be a win-win situation. There's no way that you can prevent Ethiopia from its energy rights, uh, nor should one. And there's no way that you can prevent Egypt from its water rights.

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There's actually more water than is needed, if it's well managed, and we can provide, working together we can provide a lot more resources to create more energy. So is there a more constructive approach? Yes, there is, but we're not there yet. Because I think the negotiations, particularly with our partners, in this, we've had two revolutions in three years. Uh, they haven't. So they're still carrying the baggage of the past, while we're not, and they're still very sensitive about what they felt happened in years past. Um... and I say this from, from personal experience, the number of times I told my colleague from Ethiopia, "I want you to succeed on this. I will help you on these areas." He listens, very happy, but he's suspicious because he's still thinking about what they felt happened in the past, which was partially true but not completely true, frankly, and it works both ways. So is there new thinking? Yes, but it's a year old. It's not two months old.

Paul Salem: Okay, before ending my round of questions and reaching sort of the US, you know, global situation, two other big, in terms of population states in the region, Turkey and Iran, very different countries but you know, Egypt, Turkey and Iran in terms of population are the big three, one would think that between Egypt and Turkey there's a lot of certainly, you know, common interests potentially, certainly economically and otherwise, but the relationship has been strained in the last two years. How do you see that relationship going? How would it improve, what could, you know, what are the mutual benefits there?

Nabil Fahmy: I don't at all. If Turkey continues to believe that it has the right to judge our domestic situation, uh, that's my first point, whichever way they do that. Secondly, they seem to be ideologically connected to the Brotherhood, much more than nationally connected between Turkey and Egypt. So if they do back to the nation's state consult, uh, frankly competing with Turkey, it's fine. That's a constructive competition which serves both sides. And we have had uh, strong economic relations, but presently, no, I don't see it moving forward at all. The (inaudible) issue has to be behind us for it to move forward. As long as it remains, and with all due respect (inaudible) in all honestly, the president of Turkey believes it's his role to emphasize this. So as that's continuing (inaudible).

Paul Salem: Iran obviously casts a long shadow, particularly in the eastern part of the Middle East, it's involved in many conflicts in the region, it's a big issue obviously for the countries of the Levant, of the Gulf and so on, uh, uh, and obviously it's, you know, it's part of the Egyptian thinking of how the Middle East should be, how the Arab world should be, what, what, you know, vision do you see in terms of dealing with Iran and how do you see that relationship evolving?

Nabil Fahmy: Well, to give you a precise answer, my perspective has always been that we need to deal with others, not only with ourselves be that Egyptians or Arabs and so

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on, so engaging Iran I think is mutually beneficial, um... even if we don't succeed at the beginning because there are serious problems and the serious problem is the one I mentioned previously. If you start defining yourself as the leader of (inaudible) then that means you're crossing your border. If you're defining yourself as leader of the Persian world that's your border. So when Iran postures itself as, well, we're the great Persian kingdom, fine, we will compete together and work together and differ and agree and so on. But once they start assuming that, well, they have responsibility vis-à-vis (inaudible), wherever they may be, and this is beyond the basic values of democracy and human rights and all that, then clearly you have a conflict between Iran and our closest friends, which immediately makes the conflict between Iran and ourselves.

I don't think this conflict can be resolved militarily, nor it should be. I think it should be resolved through a discussion, a serious discussion. I met the Iranian foreign minister in New York a couple of months ago, actually in Nigeria more recently, um, and we had an extremely interesting discussion about the issue of ethnicity, sectarianism, and nation state, and he was completely engaged in it, but that's where the core problem is with the Gulf and that's where our problem is with Iran. Uh, not engaging them I think would be irresponsible, engaging them naively would be equally irresponsible.

Paul Salem: And let me end on sort of situations, trying to situate Egypt sort of globally. In maybe the 50's, 60's and 70's perhaps Egypt saw its most, you know, its strongest allies either in the east or in the west globally, now that there's a sense that Egypt's strong allies are in the region and that the global powers are there, they're important, there are relationships, but that the real weight is in the region itself which is perhaps part of the evolution of the region and things being as, as they should be. President Sisi has visited the east several times, Moscow and so on, has not yet come to the west, so I've, you know, my questions, my question is of two parts, how does Egypt see itself sort of between player in the region or dependent of have very important relationships, is it really more focused regionally, and then between east and west, as power moves east economically, Russia's also more resurgent politically, how does Egypt see itself between sort of east and west?

Nabil Fahmy: Well, I think, taking our regions, Arab world and Africa, (inaudible) are the logical things to do. Uh, if we're going to say we're the leaders or... it's not gonna be Latin America so if we don't have an Arab relationship or an African one my clue as a product sold internationally (inaudible) that has to be where we start. And that's where our immediate interests are. But... were a country that has always been activists, even when people disagreed with us, uh, those who wrote the chart of the UN including Egyptians, and I can go on and give you other examples, and frankly I would like to see in the decades to come a modernized Egypt, an activist Egypt, that's part of the world. So even when I speak back home I tell them, "Don't think that you can live in isolation." There will be things out there that we don't like, but you have to cope with it,

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and there will be demands made on us because we are part of the world, we have to cope with that. Not always responsive but cope with it.

I would use that to jump into your second point. I'm tired of listening to why should we have balance between east and east. It's not the same world that existed years ago and that's particularly because of our mistakes, frankly this over emphasis on east and west. Um, I announced the third day I came into office, and I actually announced even at the UN after President Obama made his speech, uh, postponing some of the deliverables to Egypt, that look, I will assure you that we will have multiple choices and my first trip out of Egypt was to Sudan. Uh, and then to Africa, then to Ramallah and then to Africa, and the Gulf states of course, then I went to Russia, then I went to Asia, before even going to New York, and then ultimately to Washington.

That was my plan to give a message honestly to Egyptians before foreigners. But this is what we need to do. But that being said, we're part of the world and I want people to come and say, well... not ask the question, will Egypt be allies of the west or east? I want people to say, "well, should we be allies with Egypt or not?" I don't want to have an alliance relationship with anybody frankly. Uh, I think for the next 20 years, 15, 20 years, I mean, there's no particular reason for the number but a decade at least, Egypt needs to build itself and really reach its full potential before getting into an alliance with anybody. Because people will still look at Egypt and say, "Well, have you reached your full potential or not?" And I think our strongest base, frankly, is the Arab world, but also Africa.

Paul Salem: Thank you and my question is with where we are today in Washington, and we heard from the representative of the US government, you were ambassador here for many years, your relationship in the past has gone through some ups and downs, briefly how, you know, how would you describe the relationship, particularly now things have moved on a little bit from July 2013 and so on, there's now also an ISIS situation, how do you see that relationship moving? What still needs to be done possibly to firm it up and how important is it to Egypt, as you said, you know, you're not now in the business of alliances and so on?

Nabil Fahmy: I think it's equally important to Egypt as the US. It's important for Egypt globally, it's important for the US regionally. And I would argue that strategically I think the relationship will be very good, uh, because we need each other. And because I believe that the US will continue to have a strong role internationally for years to come and I think Egypt's role will increase with time so you're going to look for your own interest. Tactically there are problems. In the short-term there's no question there's a, for lack of a better term, a lack of trust, and the ISIS is an issue of immediate need and dependence rather than... it could be the step back into...

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Paul Salem: Building trust.

Nabil Fahmy: ...but it's gonna take time. It's gonna take time because the last three years were very difficult, but ultimately if we both get over this dependence issue, I'm gonna be very candid and frank with you, uh, USA to Egypt has always been (inaudible). Anybody tells you otherwise doesn't know what he's talking about. But the overdependence on aid lead Egyptians not to look for different options, and that's wrong (inaudible), and the fact that they've been giving aid to Americans, Egypt for so long allowed them to assume, well, you should follow our instructions, and that's not gonna happen.

I'll give you one quick story. I went to Congress when I was ambassador way back when, sitting in Mohamed's shoes. Uh, it was a delegation and I used to go and visit the young congressman, a month after they came into office. So you went in and we put on the road show of what're doing and the congressman who was about 20 years younger than I was said, "What kind of activity are you talking about? You weren't even at Camp David." He was right. He was talking about a different Camp David. He was talking about the Palestinian Israeli one, not the Egyptian....

Paul Salem: He didn't even know of the other one.

Nabil Fahmy: No, no, he knew that but for him, I mean, he was 38 or whatever it was, so he was, so his immediate answer was, "You mean, we've been giving you money for that long?"

[laughter]

And then of course they assume well, if we're doing that for that long then you must follow our instructions. Now that's not administration policy. I'm just telling you the general environment is its over dependence is wrong. Because we are a state that is extremely proud of its independence, we'll act in that fashion. I think American strategic policy I understand respects that but I think tactical domestic policy occasionally forces the administration to take actions that are inconsistent with that.

Paul Salem: Well, thank you very much, Minister Fahmy. Let's turn it over for questions from the crowd. I'll begin at the very back, a gentleman with his hand up.

Man: Thank you. My name is (inaudible). I teach at George Washington University. Um, Mr. Secretary and we have known each other years ago. I have a quick question. What is the status of Egyptian/Russian relations and is Washington happy with this?

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Paul Salem: Let me take a couple more questions and we'll group them. There was a gentleman in the first row here. In the red necktie.

Man: Ambassador Fahmy, you brought a very excellent point about the, the nation state and identity and the ethnic minorities and religious minorities and so on, and my question is this is a really important issue and there is a concern also the rise of xenophobia in Egypt and conspiracy theories and so on, are there specific initiatives that maybe you seem to be doing that yourself. That if somebody wants to help in this direction of expanding the identity concept in Egypt to include minorities, to include, you know ethnic religions, everything, who's doing what and how can we help?

Paul Salem: Sure. Thank you. The gentleman right here in the front row? Then I'll move east. I'll move east. Yes?

Man: (inaudible) At the moment...

Paul Salem: (inaudible)

Man: At the moment (inaudible) and the terrorist threat. Other day I was with a senior, former senior officials who was the architect of the liberation with Kuwait and we were talking about (inaudible) and he said to me, "you know, Egypt has an important role in this issue. We need to reach out to Egypt." How can they (inaudible) in Egypt work on challenging the (inaudible) and extremists threat, what ambassador (inaudible) talked about in *The Wall Street Journal* the other day?

Paul Salem: Thank you. So Russia/Egyptian sort of xenophobia and (inaudible).

Nabil Fahmy: Sure, um, Russia. [pause]

[laughter]

Paul Salem: Why are you smiling?

Nabil Fahmy: Because last time I was here in my official capacity I had a speech prepared and I was gonna spend some time on the Russia issue and one of my friends said, "please don't tell the Americans about Russia. It annoys them."

[laughter]

Uh, it isn't meant to, frankly, and I don't think that any serious American looks at our foreign policy, looks at where we're do... what we're doing, what we want to do, what we need to do, and looks at Russian foreign policy at the same time, uh, will be overly

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concerned, but there's nothing secret about it. We announced publically we will engage others. Whether you like it or not we will do it. But it will not be at your expense. And I actually said that in Moscow, at a press conference in Moscow with the Russian Foreign Minister that I didn't come here to promote relations with you at the expense of the Americans. I want to add relations with you, uh, because it serves each. So we're not playing this, this country versus this country, uh, if, if we were we would end up only with one friend, and that doesn't help. You had that friend in the past. So um, will relations with Russia effect our relations with the United States? Yes, it will.

It will give us more options. Uh, will there be an alternative? No, I don't think so. I don't think the kinds of assets available, the kinds of relationships available but politically it will definitely add to our situation. Now the, I don't think the Americans are overly anxious about it but it definitely caught their attention.

The other issue was the issue of identity. You make a great point. Um... it's, I init... I said at the beginning and I did this in an article in Iran newspaper about 19 days ago, I called on Arab states to engage their own people on the issue of identity individually because if we have this discussion, regionally or internationally, conspiracy theory is going to be ramped as to who's trying to influence who and I don't actually want the issue identity be determined in Italy or in Virginia or in Bulgaria. It is a national issue. It is identity within the national identity. So I think you should encourage, if you want to participate, encourage locals in each of our countries to debate this, but I wouldn't really encourage foreigners to come and get engaged in it at this point. We need some time bef... but we do need to discuss it. It is part of what's going to happen. Um, what was the third?

Paul Salem: US and Egypt on DESH.

Nabil Fahmy: Uh... in spite of the president, President Obama's speech and the (inaudible) Declaration, and they both have substance in them, um, Egypt announced that the (inaudible) Declaration does not mean we will necessarily provide material assets, uh, in the fight against Daash. Um... that being said, I mean, Egypt was among the first to raise the warning, the caution about Daash. I know that because I was who did it. And will we support combating Daash? Yes, we will. How we do it. Um, the next few weeks will required a discussion between the experts in this area, who needs to do what, uh, who will have a military role, who will have a social political role. Uh, the ambassador's article recently, um, was very interesting in that he added the dimension that you need to talk about the minds as well, not the Daash leaders but those who may or may not support them so uh, this is going to be a process.

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Paul Salem: Thank you. I will move east. The gentleman in the red shirt who has had his hand up most of the day. And not been called on despite that he has a red shirt on which should... go ahead. I don't know why but, yes, go ahead.

Anthony McCray: Um, thank you so much for coming. My question that I want to bring...

Paul Salem: Introduce yourself, please.

Anthony McCray: Oh, Anthony McCray. I'm with American University. I'm studying foreign policy. Um, in particular the question I wanted to ask was in reference to the Syrian refugee crisis. Now I know, um, during the uh, Morsi administration there was lot of efforts made to really be inclusive towards the Syrian refugees that were coming over and I know that after that happened with the um... the Morsi's ousting, um, there was a bit of a backlash in the Egyptian community, against the Syrian refugees and there was a lot of rhetoric used against them that was very um... harsh I suppose is a good word. I'm just curious like how the Egyptian government has gone about to address this issue in reference to the Syrian refugees.

Paul Salem: Thank you, Anthony. All the way in the back. The lady... I think it's a lady with her hand up. There you are. Yes?

Sophie: Hi, I'm also from American University. My name is Sophie. It was recently mentioned in an article by Fox News that president Sisi had offered up part of the Sinai Peninsula to the Palestinians. I just wanted to check out the...if they turned it down or if it was true.

[laughter]

Paul Salem: And for how much?

Sophie: And... and just the second part of the question, how big of a threat is the Hamas stronghold of Gaza, how big of a threat is that to the Egyptian governments?

Paul Salem: Thank you. A third question, the lady... there are two ladies. I'll have to take the one, I don't know, yes, you.

Woman: Hi, I'm (inaudible) American Taskforce on Palestine, um, could you discuss the Egyptian initiative in Gaza? Do you think there will be another round of talks in Cairo and what is Egypt's vision for Gaza?

Paul Salem: Thank you. So Syrian refugees, did you sell the peninsula and...

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[laughing]

... for how much? And Gaza, more seriously, Hamas and Gaza.

Nabil Fahmy: Okay, yeah, on the issue of the Syrian refugees I think it's not correct to compare the Morsi phase position with the present government's position, for a specific reason. (inaudible) Morsi he did not face a securities problem, on the ground in Egypt. When Morsi left the authorities in Egypt, as you can witness, have continuously face security problems on the ground. Um, our political support for, for Syrian refugees has not changed, nor has, frankly, uh, our continuous efforts to address problems as they've emerged. Where there's been a tightening, it's been a function of, we've had demonstrations, we've had violence, we've had smuggling, so security authorities naturally will look more rigorously at all these issues and they will naturally want to make sure that people have their papers or don't have their papers, as well as possibly even limit the number.

So it's not ... you're comparing apples and oranges here, but politically no, we have not changed our position on, on the Syrian refugees. I know for a fact that the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Interior have an open dialogue, continuously, um, how to make sure that uh, (inaudible)... Syrians, by the way, enter legally into Egypt are given the same rights and access as Egyptians to our hospitals and our education and all that. So this is really a problem of the security situation on the ground, not a political difference between the present government and the previous one.

Hamas and Sinai. There is not going to ever be a sale of Egyptian territory to anybody anywhere.

[laughter]

I've been addressing this issue since 1999 when I was here. I don't remember having been asked about it before but I can tell you it's... goes back four presidents. None of them have done it and this one won't do it either. Um, the issue of Hamas, Hamas is not a national securities threat in the sense of a state-to-state conflict, but where borders are not secure, where they may or may not be smuggling, because the situation inside Gaza, or otherwise, then you have a security problem. So I would look at uh, the problems with Gaza as being of a security nature but not of a national security nature that Egypt's not gonna be threatened by Gaza. I mean, that's not the magnitude of this but if you have smuggling occurring or a terrorist passing through, uh, and you see this reflected in Sinai in particular, uh, there's no question that this is a problem. We will, and I differentiate here between Palestinians in Gaza, even between some Hamas members and those who are more inclined to use force and violence. And there are then, by the way, it's number of court cases that are before Egyptian courts where Hamas officials

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have been accused, so this isn't the case where, a situation where there's no fire behind the smoke. There is a problem, but it's a security problem. The Gaza situation....

Male: And the Egyptian initiative, (inaudible).

Nabil Fahmy: Sure. In spite of everything happening in the region, the only part that could really talk, and in spite of our tense relations with Hamas, to talk to the Israelis and Hamas, and have an effect on the ground. Um.... in terms of the landscape, was (inaudible). I don't think anybody, including Egypt, could have solved it the first week, or the second week, or the third week. Neither side really wanted to reach the point of closing this early, but Egypt was the most appropriate, most probably (inaudible) to find another deal, will stand for a couple of months, at most a year, probably less, provided, or unless, excuse me, that there is a peace process that engages the (inaudible) issue in a much larger sense. And I can give you the reasoning behind the Hamas position and the Israeli position but Egypt's role in this case was that of, it's an obligation we have, we served... it's crisis management, it wasn't crisis solution, it's crisis management, and we did it out of a moral obligation but also because of our own security concerns on the border but it cannot be left where it is. It will erupt again. The ongoing negotiations that will occur will be about some of the prisoner exchanges and so on and so for but for awhile at least the (inaudible).

Paul Salem: Thank you. A final round of questions. I'll take one from each sector. So I'll start with the gentleman there in the third road.

William Lawrence: Hello, William Lawrence, George Washington University, (inaudible), and formerly associated with the U.S. Crisis Group. First of all, a quick editorial comment as former co-chair of the U.S.-Egypt Science & Technology Fund for four years I can say that incredible things were done with U.S. assistance for Egyptian science and American science and I can endorse that that money's been well used, contrary to a lot of things that are said. I want to press you further on Egypt-Libya. If Egypt correctly lose large as you outlined in Middle East and North Africa it lose massively in Libya. Large numbers of Libyans are living in Egypt, including former supporters of the former regime. Uh, there's a war going on where one side of it would like Egypt to intervene. Uh, there's this new 10 point plan that the Egyptian government helped develop which included a clause about no foreign intervention and yet there's a, there's a potential for Egypt getting sucked into this conflict in, in Libya. Um, when you were talking about ISIS you mentioned that there needed to be maybe a military solution than a political solution. Um, can you imagine a scenario where Egypt gets sucked into the Libyan conflict, um, or do you feel that the conflict has to stop at the border, uh, and that Egypt won't cross over anymore and get involved as a, as a player in that conflict?

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Paul Salem: Thank you, thank you. You had your hand up Mr. (inaudible)?

Man: Mr. Fahmy, you were the first foreign minister in Egypt after the fall of Morsi on um, June the 30th, and only a few days after you took office you had a press conference where you declared your policy and the new policy of the new Egypt that was, uh, just coming up at that time. Uh, and you spoke about the necessity of opening new grounds and of having more options and all that. Uh, you engineered the new relations with Russia, you took a number of initiatives, very important initiatives, in Africa and with the Arab world, but I do know for a fact that central your thinking is the importance of having strong relationships with the United States. Um, in fact you spent four years of your diplomatic career consolidating, very successfully, this kind of relationship. Do you think that Egypt is in a better position now or in a worse position, to uh, consolidate and to build this constructive relationship with the United States, given the fact that both the two previous regimes were on excellent terms with the United States, whether we're talking about the Mubarak Regime, uh, and there have been statements from both sides on that, or even the Morsi Regime? Only a few months after he was in office we were hearing some American officials talking about the statesmanship of President Mohamed Morsi, something that they don't like to be reminded of now. But uh, um, are we in a better position to keep up these very important relationships with the United States that you believe in?

Paul Salem: Thank you. Last question here on the left side?

Man: (inaudible), Voice to America. As a foreign minister you managed to improve the U.S. stands toward what happened in July 3rd, but we just heard the American diplomat insisting that Egypt should allow opposition right to peacefully protest and establish reconciliation. Would that be viewed as U.S. (inaudible) especially if it's tied to U.S. aid to Egypt? Thank you.

Paul Salem: Thank you. Our time is a bit short.

Fahmy. Sure, I'll give you quick answers.

Paul Salem: Thank you.

Nabil Fahmy: Egypt will do everything it can not to be sucked into Libya. The initial position will be if you don't close the border, um, then you won't face the brunt of whatever power we have. That being said, um, there's complete chaos in Libya and there may be a point where it just becomes untenable to ignore the situation on the ground, but the fundamental position is we will not interfere beyond our borders unless there's a national security, uh, concern. So we're not inclined to do that. We do it only

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as a last resort. Um... and it would really have to, I would add, it would have to have a real effect, a sustained effect. Um, U.S.A.-Egypt, you're right.

I believe the relationship between the two countries, I many respects for America is it's imperative for the (inaudible) interest and for Egypt you can't ignore the largest country around the world if you want to be a global player. So I do support the relationship. Um, you ask an excellent question. Are we better or worse off? I've been arguing since I was in (inaudible) here in 2005. We need to be less dependent on the U.S., because I could see that this issue of dependence was making us lazy, and was making the Americans overindulgent on what they would expect us to do, and they would be surprised when we were saying, "No, we're not gonna do that." Um, we will be in a better position to develop relations the more we get our situation domestically stabilized, and the more we stand on our own feet and focus ourselves regionally.

Ultimately America's foreign policy, values aside, values are part of it, but ultimately it's managed the same way, the economy policy is managed, I don't mean this in a negative sense, it's about profit and loss, risk taking, what's the value of this, and Egypt's an important player, uh, in the region. Um, all that being said, this won't be an easy ride. There are still fundamental suspicions on both sides, there still is hesitation on both sides, you will see an upturn with the ISIS, ISOL situation, the issue of terrorism, but the fact that we got the Apache helicopters announced for the fourth time. Um, when ISOL happened in Iraq it's a bit bizarre. We're not gonna use the Apache helicopters in Iraq. So if you really supported terrorism, anti-terrorist activities in the Sinai it should have happened four or five months ago. We need each other, but this is gonna be a rough ride for awhile. Um...

Paul Salem: On the U.S. saying to allow protests and inclusion or something... conciliation.

Nabil Fahmy: Look, guys. Egypt has to decide how to develop its own country. We need to do a better job in ensuring that all of our stakeholders feel that this is their country, those who agree with this government or those who do not agree with the government, as long as they put their nationality ahead of their ideology and deal with their differences peacefully. Anybody who comes and tells me he is a communist before he's Egyptian has a problem with me, but if says I'm an Egyptian communist then we can have a debate. If you want to do it peacefully the debate can continue. You want to use force then not. This thing applies to Islamist and by the way, the Muslim Brotherhood is not the only Islamist in the region.

So the idea that Islam is not part of the value system in Arab politics is incorrect, and one has to be very careful about that. But if you take the lesson of the last couple of months, if I was a foreigner and I looked at Egypt I would conclude that Egypt

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understands it's part of the world and that it will respect human rights, (inaudible) of human rights and all of that and it was working towards that direction. But it's also facing very difficult security situations on the ground, it's facing a political transformation and it's going to take time. I also conclude that if Egyptians have to choose between what they see as their stability and security, and what you see we should do first, they will choose their stability and security. So work with us, yes, but don't attempt to tell us when to do it when. Uh, keep working with us. And I want to see a more open Egyptian society, a more modern society, a more engaged society for everyone who's peaceful and Egyptian, not because it makes America happy, but because it serves Egypt's interest. Thank you very much.

[applause]

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