

# EGYPTIANS EXPECT A SHIFT IN STYLE, NOT SUBSTANCE

T

WHATEVER THE OUTCOME IN NOVEMBER, MOST EGYPTIANS DO NOT EXPECT ANY MAJOR CHANGES IN BILATERAL RELATIONS.

BY SHOHRAT AREF

here is a consensus among Egyptians that there will be no drastic changes in U.S. policy regarding key Middle East issues whether John McCain or Barack Obama takes office in January. The situation in Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the current standoff with Iran over its nuclear program will all be high on the agenda of the new administration, regardless of whether it is Republican or Democratic.

That said, many experts do believe U.S.-Egyptian relations, which have not been in the best shape under the Bush administration, will improve if Obama is elected. This is for two reasons. First, he is seen as more likely than his opponent to recognize Egypt as an important strategic partner and a driving force in regional peace-making. Second, Obama is expected to engage personally in Middle East diplomacy early in his administration — unlike McCain, who appears likely to operate with more or less the same detachment Bush has shown in this regard.

---

*Shohrat Aref is a diplomatic reporter for the Cairo-based Middle East News Agency. She specializes in U.S. politics, reporting from Egypt and the United States. The author wishes to thank Ahmed Gheith, MENA's editorial managing director, for his assistance in conducting interviews for this article.*

## **Egyptian-American Relations: A Warming Trend?**

Ambassador Abdel Raouf Al-Reedy, who worked for 10 years as Egypt's top diplomat in the United States and is currently head of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, describes the temperature of the current bilateral relationship as "cool." He sees a sort of formality, particularly as compared with the administration of Bush's father, and attributes it to the current president's adoption of a one-sided policy favoring Israel. He would expect bilateral ties to be much better under an Obama administration, in light of his readiness to listen to other countries in the region.

Ambassador Dr. El-Sayed Amyin Shalaby, executive director of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, agrees that relations with Washington are not in the best shape. He cites weaknesses in all three diplomatic pillars put in place back in the mid-1970s: the search for peace in the Middle East, cooperation in the Persian Gulf region and the maintenance of U.S. economic and military assistance to Egypt.

He also identifies a prevailing feeling that the Bush administration has not been responsive to the need to promote solid ties with Cairo over the past seven years. But he does detect a greater appreciation within other American institutions, especially Congress, of Egypt's

## F O C U S

importance as a force for peace and stability — a view that he hopes will be reflected in the new administration.

Dr. Adel Soliman, executive director of the International Center for Future and Strategic Studies, a Cairo-based think-tank, offers a somewhat different perspective. He agrees that the bilateral relationship is based on a common desire for peace and stability in the region. But he blames the current differences on the Bush administration's interference in the domestic situation in Egypt under the slogan of promoting democracy and human rights. Soliman adds that there is no doubt that Pres. Bush's speech in the Israeli Knesset earlier this year, in which he strongly supported Israel's settlement policy in the Palestinian occupied territories, has had a very bad impact on Egyptian and Arab public opinion.

### ***The opposition in Egypt foresees better chances for strategic ties with the United States under an Obama administration.***

At the same time, Soliman acknowledges that the Egyptians are not good at conveying their message to the American public to clarify views on certain issues. For that reason, he calls upon the Arab communities in the United States to unify their stance, with the aim of defending the interests of the region.

Dr. Abdel Aziz Shadi, a professor of political science and economy at Cairo University, characterizes bilateral ties under the Bush administration as “declining” due to Bush's focus on combating terrorism and promoting political reforms in the region. In his opinion, Bush wants to impose his vision on the Arab countries without taking into consideration the cultural and social nature of those societies, which need more space to adopt such reforms.

If Obama wins the election, bilateral relations might

## THE REMINGTON

**Per diem accepted all year round**



**2 Blocks to Main State Department  
Rent by Day, Week, or Month**

- One bedroom fully furnished condo
- Deluxe full size kitchens
- Washer/Dryer in unit
- Free private phone line/local calls
- Free cable w/ premium channels
- Free weekly maid service
- Parking available
- Pets accepted
- Free internet access in the lobby



**601 24th Street, NW · Suite 102 · Washington, DC 20037**

**Tel: 202-223-4512 · Fax: 202-452-9541**

**E-mail: [reservations@remington-dc.com](mailto:reservations@remington-dc.com) · [www.remington-dc.com](http://www.remington-dc.com)**

get back to normal, assuming he adopts former President Bill Clinton's approach of maintaining the U.S. focus on promoting democratic reforms in Egypt and other Arab countries — and so long as he does that more effectively than Bush has. Shadi believes Obama will appeal to public opinion in the Arab region to convince them to adopt such reforms. Conversely, if McCain is elected, he will keep the current U.S. hardline policy in place.

For these reasons, the opposition in Egypt foresees better chances for strategic ties with the United States under an Obama administration. Mounir Fakhri Abdel Nour, a former member of the Egyptian Parliament who is now secretary general of the Al-Wafd Party and a member of the Egyptian Human Rights Council, grants that whether McCain or Obama wins the election, the new president will continue to advocate the adoption of political reforms in the Middle East and around the world. However, he expects Obama to be more diplomatic in his approach.

### **A Return to Multilateral Diplomacy?**

Beyond the bilateral relationship, there is the broader question of how Obama and McCain would address often-contentious regional issues.

Many Egyptians support withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, which they believe have led to instability in the region; but they differ on how rapidly the drawdown should occur. Those who advocate gradual withdrawal do not want Iraq to be left in a mess that could lead to civil war; in addition, many Egyptians are afraid of Iran's growing influence in Iraq, which they expect to accelerate after the withdrawal of American troops.

Amb. Al-Reedy predicts that if Barack Obama wins the election, he will work to keep his promise to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq — contrary to John McCain, who has repeatedly expressed his intention to adhere to Bush administration policy, even if it means staying in Iraq for 100 years. However, he expects Obama's main priority to be a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops in a way that will not leave the country in shambles. In contrast, Al-Reedy says, McCain will be more interested in making Iraq an effective part of the U.S. strategy to con-

### ***Egyptian experts disagree about how quickly a Pres.***

### ***Obama would move to resolve the Palestinian-***

### ***Israeli conflict.***

be much different depending on who takes office in January. Specifically, he predicts that Obama will take a multilateral approach in his foreign policy, centered on listening and working with the United States' traditional allies in the Middle East and elsewhere. While he is currently constrained by the need to present himself as a centrist to win the election, he will still seek to follow his own path if elected. For instance, it will not be easy for Obama to maintain his readiness to negotiate with Tehran over its nuclear program against pressure to take a hard line. But he will still place more emphasis on a diplomatic approach than Bush has or McCain would.

The two analysts agree that Obama will follow Bill Clinton's example by actively engaging himself in diplomatic efforts to reach a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This will be even more true if the current negotiations between Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert produce a framework for further talks.

Dr. Soliman concurs to some extent. Yet while he does not foresee any major shifts in the strategy underlying U.S. foreign policy under Obama or McCain, he does see potential for a shift in the tactics the new administration uses to implement it. For one thing, he cites a tendency for Republican administrations to resort to force to solve problems — unlike Democratic administrations, which tend to favor diplomacy.

For his part, Dr. Shadi notes that the thrust of U.S. foreign policy is set by the interplay of various American institutions, including Congress. Thus, the broad outlines of American diplomacy do not depend very much on the outcome of elections. However, each new president has room to set his own priorities. For example, if Obama wins in November, he will devote more attention to working with the European Union on the energy issue than would his opponent. Nor will he focus on the war

trol the Middle East as a whole.

On the other hand, Al-Reedy is also convinced that no future U.S. president can afford to disengage himself from regional diplomacy the way George W. Bush has. Thus, a Pres. McCain may have to be more active than he would like.

Amb. Shalaby also foresees continuity in America's Middle East policy. But the style would

on terrorism to the degree that Bush has, or favor sending more troops outside the U.S. into new conflicts.

Unlike other experts, however, Dr. Shadi does not think a Pres. Obama would move quickly to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Instead, he will first give himself some time to master this complex issue and articulate a new vision. In contrast, a Pres. McCain would continue to pursue the neoconservative policy mapped out during the two terms of the Bush administration.

Hazem Ahmed Gheith, a political science student at Cairo University who does not belong to any party, also does not foresee any major change in U.S. policy under either Obama or McCain. He cites Obama's recent speech before the American Israel Public Affairs

***The Bush administration has not been responsive to the need to promote solid ties with Cairo over the past seven years.***

light of the senator's willingness to work with the Democrats on certain issues.

Whatever the outcome in November, most Egyptians do not expect any major changes in bilateral relations or in the image of the United States. They remain hopeful that the atmosphere will improve, particularly if Barack Obama is the victor. But they are beginning to recognize the need to foster closer ties to American institutions like Congress to defend their interests. ■

Committee, in which he explicitly supported the existence of Israel, backed the continuation of efforts to isolate the Hamas movement and called for reforms in the Palestinian Authority.

If McCain is elected, Gheith expects his administration to represent an effective third term for George W. Bush. But he believes some aspects will be different in

**Featuring:**

- Tens of Thousands of Books From Around the World
- Original Artwork and Crafts
- Stamps, Coins, and other Collectables

**THE 48TH ANNUAL  
AAFSW BOOK FAIR**  
Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide

**October 17-26, 2008**  
**Diplomatic Exhibit Hall at Main State**