



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Future of US-Egypt Relations: A View from the Next Generation

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

9:00 – 11:00, December 9, 2009

The Hollings Center, in coordination with the Woodrow Wilson Center, hosted a panel to present findings from a conference hosted over the summer by the Hollings Center and Egypt's International Economic Forum in Istanbul that convened a select group of 25 Egyptians and Americans from their late 20s to early 40s for a unique dialogue on how each country perceives the other and how to strengthen the relationship in the coming decade. The panel featured **Amy Hawthorne**, Executive Director, Hollings Center for International Dialogue, **Ashraf Swelam**, Acting Director General, Egypt's International Economic Forum, **Lara Friedman**, Director of Policy and Government Relations, Americans for Peace Now, and **Norann Zaghloul**, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and former Vice President, Egyptian American Cultural Association. The event was moderated by former ambassador **Nicholas Veliotes**, Chair of the Hollings Center Board of Directors.

Swelam explained that the meeting in Istanbul was devoted to asking about the state of the U.S. and Egypt relationship, which the group decided has not evolved beyond cold war strategies and the Arab/Israeli issue. The Camp David accords opened the door for late regional peace agreements in the Arab world, but U.S./Egypt cooperation has failed to deliver on its promise. Asking why it faltered, a minority opinion of the group, in fact, believed relations are working the best that they can while the others believed that the military relationship, which is the most important, remains secretive and is losing its strategic rationale. Within the conference, this failure was attributed either, by the Egyptian delegation, to the lack of U.S. support for Egypt as a regional leader, or, by the American group, to Egypt's inability to define its own role in the region.

The conference also highlighted the political, military, and economic asymmetry of the relationship in which the U.S. is seen as the dominant partner. Swelam argued that it is important to recognize this disparity because it is unlikely to change and it will help manage unfounded expectations. He explained that **Egyptians feel the U.S. still focuses on Israeli issues within the U.S./Egypt bilateral relationship, creating an inconsistency that prevents ties from deepening**, and that there is a level of discomfort between the two countries as they distance themselves from each other's policies and fail to support each other on the international stage. Despite the appearance of shared interests, on closer examination two countries are actually seeking different goals on issues such as Iran and the Sudan. Lastly, he stated public opinion is another major hurdle, with Egyptians holding strong opinions about the U.S. and Americans holding few and rather simplistic perceptions of Egyptian motives.

Hawthorne then discussed the conference's attempt to open a dialogue outside of policy circles. While not creating consensus, the group did develop several guiding principles. First, they argued that **the Egypt/U.S. relationship should no longer be considered special, but should instead it be normalized like that with any other nation**. Second, the relationship needs a complete reinvigoration by refocusing on a partnership away from the Israeli situation and the Camp David accords, which has little widespread support in Egypt, and addressing the U.S.' asymmetric dominance. The main recommendation is the countries need to broaden the scope of the relationship within each society. With Camp David as the foundation, the countries need to build

new goals and start new projects to engage the support of the Egyptian people and to construct a new leadership role for Egypt in the region.

She continued to explain that area of **democracy and human rights was the most sensitive issue of the conference, but there was a shared belief that the U.S., within a close relationship, expects democratic values to be a priority.** At the same time it is important to note that the Egyptian political system will reject any outside “meddling.” The group disagreed on the priority that democracy promotion should have, but concurred that **any effort Egypt makes to reform its political system will improve bilateral ties.** She concluded with three guiding principles for the U.S.: avoid being perceived as meddling, engage more Egyptian groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood in an effort to increase the transparency of its principles, and rethink aid to Egypt because it hinders the discussion.

Friedman, then, talked about the “trilateral” nature of U.S./Egyptian bilateral ties, with Israel as a constant factor in the relationship. She argued that the U.S. aid package to Egypt is the most defining component of the relationship, but it is a frozen situation. While the U.S./Israel relationship has moved beyond the Camp David agreement to define a unique partnership, Egypt’s cling to aid as an entitlement. Redefining the Egyptian relationship, however, is no longer theoretical as Congress has now begun questioning the aid. Continuing, she argued that Camp David has no relevance to the current generation, but she believed that military aid can go on indefinitely as an entitlement to preserve the relationship and to maintain Egypt’s client-state status. However, the crisis-to-crisis nature of the relationship cannot continue because discussion about human rights and democracy are constantly subsumed by the aid debate. Asking what it would look like to move the relationship forward, she argued that it is necessary for both countries to articulate the value of their strategic interests and explained to the public so they will understand how each country’s needs overlap. Even with that exercise, Egypt stands to lose a good amount of aid by normalizing relations and the debate needs to be recalibrated on Egyptian domestic issues, but the conference had no consensus about how this debate should be reshaped.

Zaghloul briefly described about the Egyptian-American influence on this debate, explaining that the community is largely Coptic with not clear data about its size. The conference argued that the community needs to mobilize around political issues and to expand cultural partnerships and exchange programs. Zaghloul also noted that there is a lack of political activism among second generation Egyptian-Americans.

Swelam concluded with several of the group’s findings about the future of the relationship. While a free trade agreement is not likely, they recommended extending existing Qualifying Industrial Zones and reduces requirements for QIZ goods to interact with Israel. In terms of assistance, they supported existing initiatives to have Egypt and the U.S. to contribute equally to a development trust, the countries should create a memorandum of understanding similar to those the U.S. has with Israel and Jordan, the U.S. should institute positive conditionality on its aid through benchmarks and additional reforms. Second, the countries should focus on scientific and technological cooperation. Lastly, the U.S. should establish an oversight body to monitor USAID projects and participation of NGOs as well as instituted debt relief, as Egypt now pays more to the U.S. in debt servicing than the U.S. gives in aid.

In the Q/A session, Hawthorne emphasized that **the U.S. should expand relations beyond the government-to-government level** and explained that U.S. aid is not seen as addressing the youth employment problem, that violence against women should be addressed, and that there was belief among the group that aid programs should focus on issues to improve Egyptians’ daily lives rather than focusing solely on democracy promotion. Swelam disagreed that the Egyptian people are giving up their dreams of participation by pointing to ongoing protests and lively debates on the subject in the media. He also argued that technology has revolutionized the discussion and that more Egyptian’s should have access to U.S. education. Lastly Friedman argued that until five years ago U.S. aid had been consistent to Egypt, and as such changing administrations have not limited Egypt’s development.