

JULIO 1995

La visión de Egipto en el Proceso de Paz en Medio Oriente*

por Ihab Wahba, Vice Canciller de Egipto

I have come from Egypt, a place distant in the geographical sense, but not with regard to our intimate interaction. We have established rather close ties primarily with the millions of Argentinians of Arab origin, as industrious and active as we are in this country. Our volume of trade is over one hundred and fifty million dollars a year, which is a testimony that long distance has no significance when it comes to exchange of goods. The set of agreements we have concluded over the years is more than impressive; they cover trade, economic cooperation, scientific transfer, protection of investment, tourism and many other fields.

President Carlos Menem has visited Egypt three times so far. Argentina has been interested in what has been taking place in our area and plays an active role in the international forums which are working to promote peace in our region. We are very glad that your humanitarian project, The White Helmets Commission, deals with extending humanitarian assistance to emerging problems such as The West Bank in Gaza, which has a new importance and priority. Soon, Argentina is going to host the G15 Summit, which underlines the importance you attach to the concept of corporation.

Your country is active in peace keeping operations all over the world from former Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Angola, Mozambique, the Western Sahara, Rwanda, and the borders between Iraq and Kuwait in the Middle East. We are also highly impressed by the economic progress and the achievement you were able to realize in the last few years through sound and successful policies.

I am here in Argentina with a selected delegation, presenting ministries as business people from both the private and public sector. We are very grateful for the reception and the interest you have shown in our mission. We in the Middle East believe we are ushering in a new phase of stability and advancement which could utilize the enormous potentialities and resources of the region. In the past, our resources were wasted in wars and confrontations. Now it is time to have our resources directed to better usage. I think that we in Egypt realized that rather early. Our concept was very clear and simple. We, in the Middle East, are a family of nations. We live together, we share borders, thus cooperation and not confrontation is essential. Peace is achievable, it is a just peace, and that there is no domination of one party or another. The aspirations of the people have to be recognized. Mutual trust has to be built brick by brick and then the sky will be the limit for what can be achieved in this regard.

In 1979, we signed a peace treaty with Israel as a first step towards a comprehensive settlement of the problems in the Middle East. Side by side, we signed another very important agreement entitled "Framework of Peace in the Middle East". The basic principle in the treaty was total peace. There would be some confidence building measures and some security arrangement until the parties realize that they do not need these measures any more. Signing this agreement was the breakthrough point with Israel. We agreed that all Israeli troops –including the seculars– should be withdrawn. At the time, the Israelis could not understand what the problem was with the seculars and why they could not be allowed to stay. We explained we were willing to accept people provided they come through the front door and not by occupation or invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. We understood that this was not easy for the Israelis, and so we agreed on certain measures within the Sinai.

We divided the Sinai into zones, one limited armament and another partly demilitarized,

* Sesión académica en el Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales, el jueves 20 de julio de 1995.

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and it worked. Then, we put international troops on the border for peacekeeping. We also put multinational forces and observers due to the fact that –at that time– the Soviet Union refused to cooperate and could not accept this idea or type of agreement. Therefore, we had to invent a new concept.

In the beginning, our policy and our philosophy were not easy to comprehend or digest in the Arab countries. However, in retrospect, I believe we were right. Two or three foreign ministers resigned in protest of what the president had in mind. Even within Egypt it was not easy to understand the wars after all the suffering and the deaths of so many people. It was not easy for many Arab countries to understand and appreciate this policy due to the long animosity. We were withdrawn from the Arab League, which has its headquarters in Cairo, and our membership was frozen. We had a very hard decision to make. We were boycotted by everybody. I had no diplomatic relation with any Arab ambassador.

The decision we had to make was: either we capitulate to the boycotts and we rethink our measures, or we continue as long as we believe in what we are doing and as long as we believe that what we are doing is the right thing. We managed to continue and resist that pressure. If we had changed our mind, I do not think that we would have reached the stage we are at now. We would have reached the stage of the conferences, for example, and the attendance by all front lined states. Not only front lined states but other states from the area also went to the conference as observers, ready to help and ready to cooperate. This was a fundamental question that we had in mind. We believed in what we did and we did it in peace and we continued.

What we are telling the Israelis now is the exact same, because if the Israelis hesitate or change their position under certain pressures from within, then there will be another deadlock. If the Israeli government is under pressure from the seculars and the extremists, we are definitely heading towards a deadlock. The same would apply to the Palestinians and the Palestinian authority. If they capitulate to the pressure from the extremists in Gaza or the West Bank, nothing would happen.

I'm very glad now that the parties recognize that, as long as you believe in what you are doing and believe it is the right path, you should continue and resist all kinds of pressure. We can consolidate peace not by hesitation but by taking even bolder decisions. It is much better to take risks for the sake of peace than risking another war, confrontation or stagnation. Stagnation could be even worse.

On October 30th 1991, almost 12 years after the first peace initiative with Israel, a very important development took place at the Madrid Conference and at the hospices of both the United States and the Soviet Union. The conference was held with the participation of all the parties on the conflict –Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt together with Israel. Not less important was the participation as observers of many other Arab countries not on the front line of confrontation. They all gathered there with an enormous amount of hope and determination to reach a breakthrough by means of peaceful negotiations. The terms of reference for such a conference were clear: embodying in short international legitimacy and will. Bilateral as well as multilateral negotiations were launched addressing such vital issues of common concern as armament, security, order, environment, economic development, and the problem of refugees. The idea behind the multilateral negotiations was that they were to act as confidence building mechanisms running parallel to and supporting the bilateral negotiations. By doing so, the future of the area would become clearer and the feeling of security would be greater.

In this way, the multilateral negotiations serve as incentives for the successful results of the bilateral negotiations. Here we have some disagreement among the Arab states and among the frontlines. For example, Syria and Lebanon do not participate in the multilateral agreements. Therefore, we must consider how we can discuss cooperation, water and other issues when we have not yet reached peace agreements. This is one point of view, but in Egypt we think that we should use the multilateral agreements as incentives and as confidence building steps to support the bilateral agreements.

Many tangible results took place in Oslo, Norway in August 1993, when an agreement for the declaration of principles on Palestinian interim self-government was initiated. This declaration was duly signed in Washington on the 13th September 1993 with the presence of the foreign minister of both the United States and Russia, who acted as witnesses to this important and historic document. For the first time, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) –who were representing the Palestinian people– and Israel exchanged mutual recognition. At a certain time the Israelis will tell you they did not know who the Palestinians were but now Israel recognized the PNA as the representative of the Palestinian people.

Things have changed. The declaration specified the objectives of the negotiations which should cover the framework of the authorization period and outline the modalities of the election, the jurisdiction of the Palestin-

ian Authority as well as the subjects of the negotiations regarding the final status of the West Bank and Gaza. There was an interim arrangement and hopefully very soon we will have a negotiation on the final status.

Some issues, such as that of Jerusalem and the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza were left for the negotiation on the final status. That in itself was an important development. Although it could seem like it is not a good idea to defer this question of Israeli settlements and Jerusalem, we in fact look upon it as something positive. It means that all issues, including that of Jerusalem, shall be tackled in the future. No issue can be excluded from the negotiation as a result of unilateral action or position taken by one party or another. Israelis are always saying "Jerusalem is our capital" and that is a topic that is not up for discussion, but in that declaration, they made it very clear that this issue would be on the table for future negotiation as well. It is this issue as well as the settlements which are in fact the cause of many problems the negotiations are now facing.

Another concept was developed in this agreement called the Gaza First. We will start with the autonomy of Gaza and Jericho, and then we will deal with the rest of the West Bank later. It was useful again to see things in practice, not only in theory. A detailed agreement on Gaza and Jericho was signed in Cairo in May 1994. The Palestinian Authority was inaugurated in post Gaza and Jericho, shouldering the responsibility of transforming this path from territories under occupation to a free and viable territory.

*Agradecemos la asistencia provista
por Miranda Shanahan para
publicar este artículo.*

Para citar este artículo:

Wahba, Ihab (1995), "La visión de Egipto en el Proceso de Paz en Medio Oriente", [disponible en línea desde enero 2015], Serie de Artículos y Testimonios, N° 102 Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales. Dirección URL: <http://www.cari.org.ar/pdf/at102.pdf>