**The Diplomat’s Son Who Became One of the Founders of Al-Sisi’s Foreign Policy**

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Egypt's Diplomacy in War, Peace and Transition

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Ismail Fahmi, Egypt’s foreign minister from 1973 to 1977, published in the 1980s a fascinating autobiography that afforded an intimate, behind the scenes peek into Egyptian diplomacy. Among other things, Fahmi describes his shock when in October 1977, President Anwar Al-Sadat, still dressed in his pajamas, summoned him to his quarters at the picturesque Romanian resort town Sinaia they were staying at, and revealed to him for the first time his intention to visit Jerusalem. The poignant discussion between the two lasted eight hours and concluded with sever differences in their opinions. Several weeks later, when Fahmi understood that he had failed to convince Sadat to forgo his initiative for peace with Israel and that Sadat was determined to go ahead with it, he submitted his resignation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When the senior Fahmi ended his diplomatic career on a harsh note, his son Nabil (b. 1951) was yet a young statesman at the beginning of his career. In the ensuing decades, he rose in the diplomatic ranks and held senior positions, chief among them Egypt’s ambassador in Washington from 1999 to 2008 and Egypt’s foreign minister between 2013 and 2014 in the transitional government that was established after the ouster of the Muslim Brothers. His book summarizes fifty years of Egyptian diplomacy, which he observed from various roles. However, this not only an autobiography, but also an attempt to analyze Egypt’s foreign policy from the academic point of view of someone who served from 2009 to 2014 as the founding dean of the Faculty of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo.

The book is divided into four parts: the first is devoted to Fahmi’s personal and professional biography; the second discusses challenges and opportunities in Egypt’s foreign policy, beginning with the shift to peace with Israel, through Egypt’s efforts to turn the Middle East into a nuclear weapons free zone, to the complex relations between Egypt and the United States and Russia. The third part is dedicated to the two revolutions that Egypt experienced in January 2011 and June 2013 and the roles that Fahmi filled in this tumultuous period. The fourth and final part offers a look into the future of the Middle East and Egypt at its center, from the point of view of Fahmi as a seasoned diplomat. The text combines the author’s personal experiences and insights with relevant primary and secondary sources.

The importance of this book lies in its focus on Egypt’s foreign policy after the decade of the ‘Arab Spring’, whereas most of what has been written on Egypt on this period relates, naturally, to the internal changes experienced by the country. The timing of this publication corresponds with the increased efforts made by Egypt in recent years to update and redefine its regional and international orientation. Egypt, known as “the elder sister” and “the mother of the world”, has watched the emergence of the rich gulf countries and non-Arab Middle Eastern countries, who are perceived as challenging its leading regional status.

A significant part of Fahmi’s book is dedicated to Israel. Readers who are expecting the son to admit the errors of the ways of his father, who was one of the symbols of opposition to the peace agreement, will be disappointed. Even after four decades, Fahmi justifies the resignation of his father, arguing that Sadat’s initiative disrupted the ability to achieve a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace and solve the Palestinian problem (p. 8), and granted Israel a “premature normalization” that harmed the interests of the entire Arab nation (pp. 60-61). In his view, this dire outcome was a result of Sadat’s capitulation to Israel’s demands, which succeeded in removing Egypt from the circle of conflict without being required to prove that it (Israel) indeed desires peace (pp. 62-64).

Fahmi’s criticism is based on the assumption that Sadat had the ability to force Israel into a better agreement, if he had been more patient. However, he does not discuss at all the possibility that an Egyptian insistence on a comprehensive peace would have thwarted the Egypt-Israel peace. This is a likely scenario in light of the fundamental opposition expressed at the time to the move itself by the Arab rejectionist front, led by Syria, the PLO, Iraq, and Libya, as well as the unwillingness of Menachem Begin’s government to accept a territorial compromise in Judea and Samaria. Furthermore, while the senior Fahmi criticized Sadat when Egypt was being subjected to an Arab boycott, the junior Fahmi refrains from presenting an updated calculation of the long-term benefits—territorial, political, economic, and security-wise—that peace with Israel had granted Egypt, versus the short-term costs it had suffered.

It is apparent that Fahmi’s frigid attitude toward the peace with Israel reflects not only a blind loyalty to his father but also a deeper critical stance. Israel is presented in his book as uncommitted to the Oslo process and as primarily responsible for its failure. In this context, Fahmi mentions Israeli actions such as expansion of the settlements (pp. 74-76, 110-113), but neglects to mention, for example, Palestinian terrorist activities. Fahmi even admits that he himself encouraged the Palestinians to harden their positions in the negotiations with Israel (p. 88). Furthermore, Israel is described in his book as an aggressive state that introduced weapons of mass destruction into the Middle East. He admits that Egypt’s diplomatic efforts to force Israel into signing the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) failed, but refrains from conducting the requisite soul-searching regarding the contribution of Egypt’s “cold peace” policy to Israel’s continuing, guiding sense of existential threat (pp. 119-128).

And indeed, Fahmi’s account of the conflict with Israel does not remotely provide readers with a full and honest picture. Thus, for example, he regards the normalization developed during the Oslo period between Israel and Arab countries such as Jordan and Qatar, before reaching a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as “placing the carriage before the horse” (pp. 76-82). Yet at the same time, he barely mentions other, equally important reasons that caused Cairo to view with skepticism, from the outset, the positive form of peace that was developing between Israel and Jordan. Thus, Egypt was afraid that in the realization of the vision of a “new Middle East,” Israel would figure as a prominent economic and technological force and would threaten Egypt’s own leading regional status. Furthermore, another Arab country joining the circle of peace and desiring a “warm” peace (contrary to Egypt’s “cold” peace), meant that Egypt no longer enjoyed the exclusive ability to determine the character of relations between Israel and the Arabs and thus harmed its regional leadership.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Regarding the 2000 Camp David Summit, in which time Fahmi was serving as the ambassador in Washington, Fahmi adds an original element to the discussion of the historical responsibility for its failure. Contrary to the prevailing trend in the research literature to pin the blame on Arafat’s intransigence or Barak’s hastiness,[[3]](#footnote-3) Fahmi instead concentrates on the American party. As he puts it, the conditions were not yet ripe for an agreement, in light of the distrust between Barak and Arafat, but Bill Clinton insisted on reaching a permanent agreement before the conclusion of his term (pp. 91-94). While choosing to place the majority of the blame on the United States, Fahmi also clears Egypt of the charges directed toward it at the time, according to which it refrained from applying its full weight to make the Palestinians compromise on the issue of Jerusalem.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A major chapter in the book is dedicated to the relations between Cairo and Washington, which Fahmi defines as “indispensable but uncomfortable”. He describes the ups and downs of these relations under the various administrations, in the context of the American military involvement in the Middle East, the struggle against terrorism after 9/11, the pressure put on Cairo regarding human rights and democratization, and the “Arab Spring” upheavals. Fahmi agrees that Egypt was in need of reforms toward the end of the Mubarak era, as his ability to govern the country undermined. Nonetheless, he expresses misgivings regarding the attempts made by the United States, both during George Bush Jr.’s time and mainly during Barack Obama’s term, to force the American agenda on Egypt and interfere in its domestic affairs (161-189).

Fahmi presents in his book the prevailing Egyptian narrative, according to which the United States preferred a Muslim Brothers government over a government by the army or even by the liberal forces and the business elite. He does not unequivocally state if this is a false conspiracy or actual reality, but as the foreign minister after the removal of President Muhamad Morsi, he applied the conclusions from what was perceived as Washington’s “betrayal” of Egypt. On the one hand, he worked to rehabilitate the relations with Washington, recognizing their importance, but on the other hand he shaped a new foreign policy that championed a more balanced approach through expanding the relations with Russia and China (pp. 189-200).

Whether because of a lack of historical perspective or due to a fear of stepping on political landmines, the author rarely touches upon Egyptian foreign policy during the era of Abd Al-Fatah Al-Sisi. Nevertheless, and even though he served as foreign minister for just one year, doctrines that he shaped during his term continue to inspire Egyptian diplomacy: support of a regional, state-based order focused on national identities rather than trans-national Islamist ones; a demand to halt the interference of Turkey and Qatar in the domestic affairs of Egypt and Arab countries, while keeping an open door to normalizing relations with them, contingent upon a change in their conduct; diversifying Egypt’s sources of support while reducing its reliance on the major powers and establishing regional and sub-regional alliances with African and Eastern Mediterranean countries; giving high priority to geo-economic considerations in forming Egypt’s foreign policy (pp. 18-19, 274-275).

In summary, Fahmi’s book offers a comprehensive and personal look at the major foreign and domestic issues faced by Egypt in recent decades. However, the book has several weaknesses: first, Mubarak’s lengthy reign, to which the majority of the manuscript is devoted, was devoid of exhilarating dramas as in Sadat’s days or during the ‘Arab Spring’, and this hamstrings parts of the book. Second, although Fahmi was indeed a talented and wise diplomat, as a player in history he served most of the time as an official following the instructions of his superior, whether he liked them or not, and his concrete influence was rather limited. Finally, Fahmi appears in his book as someone who is not eager to confront superiors in the past or the present, adopting a diplomatic rhetoric even as a retired diplomat. Thus, readers who are interested in a more critical view of Egypt’s foreign and domestic affairs will have to go back to the book authored by the senior Fahmi or seek a different source.

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1. Ismail Fahmi, Al-Tafawud min ajl al-Salam fi al-Sharq al-Awsat [Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East] (Dar Al-Shuruq, 2008, second printing), pp. 303-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Indyk, *American Peace* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved/Ofakim Library, 2009, in Hebrew), p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example, Benny Morris, *One State, Two States* (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2012, in Hebrew), pp. 95-105; Moshe Sasson, *Talking Peace* (Jerusalem: Maariv Library, 2004, in Hebrew), pp. 277-280. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rami Ginat and Meir Noema, *Egypt and the Second Palestinian Intifada: Policymaking with Multifaceted Commitments* (Brighton, Portland, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), pp. 35-37 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)