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AN EGYPTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON EVENTS  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. We're very honored and delighted to have the Egyptian foreign minister, His Excellency Ahmed Abul-Gheit to address this Leadership Forum today.

The minister is the complete Egyptian diplomat, as you will soon discover. I've had the honor of working with him as a colleague in my years in government when he served as the very capable and diplomatic chef du cabinet of Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa at the time, and he proved himself to be a great friend of the United States in those years when we established the U.S.-Egyptian strategic dialogue. He went on to serve with great distinction as Egypt's ambassador at the United Nations, and it was therefore a natural transition for him to become the foreign minister.

Excellency, we're delighted to have you here.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Thank you very much.

MR. INDYK: What we are going to do this morning is have a conversation first. The minister is quite informal in his approach, as you have already gathered, and therefore I'm going to ask him a series of questions, we're going to have a conversation here, and then we'll open it to the public and the press.

But before I do that, I want to welcome Egyptian Ambassador Nabil Fahmy and a number of other ambassadors here from the diplomatic corps. Thank you very much for coming.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: And be kind to me, please.

MR. INDYK: Minister, I must say that speaking for myself personally and, I think, for many people both here in Washington and across the Middle East, people were shocked yesterday with the bombing and assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who's known well in this policy community in Washington. And I wondered what your reaction was to this and how we should understand this. You've been to Syria and I think to Lebanon recently. Can you just give us an Egyptian perspective on what happened there?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Well, it is still premature for one to reach conclusions, but the event itself is a horrible event and it complicates the picture both in Lebanon and around the region. Hariri had a certain cause of action and he was trying to re-emerge again as the prime minister of Lebanon if he would have been allowed to contest the coming elections. I think elections are to take place sometime in April. So that is one. The second thing, the second important element is that how this killing, sad event, would contribute to the internal Lebanese situation. I would hope and I would pray that nothing else would take place on the Lebanese scene. Because if we would start a cycle of killings and counter-killings and this faction is targeting this leadership,

Lebanon might slide to a situation where it might resemble what had happened in the mid-'70s, when we had the civil war. I hope not.

But judging from my experience knowing the Middle East, I think people will discover after a quick investigation who was the culprit for such a horrible thing. It will come out, and hopefully it will come out soon. I'm sure that lots of intelligence services all over the world are now on the subject trying to see what— It is not easy to hide the collection of 350 kilograms of explosives, putting them on a — moving it and putting it in such a place. People will come to their conclusions. But in all honesty, one has to allow himself time to reach his conclusion. You have to, I think, define first who did it, prior to judging what had happened.

MR. INDYK: Well, from the bad news maybe we can move to the good news of Sharm el-Sheik. Since you played an important role in support of President Mubarak's initiative there and you were there, I wonder, can you tell us — What comes out of that? How do you see the next steps? And a second, related question is, beyond the process of disengagement from Gaza and the rebuilding of Palestinian capacity, where does the process go after that?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: First, what had happened in Sharm. What happened in Sharm, that the two parties had, by Egypt, managed to draft a language on a certain number of understandings, understandings that covered the cessation of hostilities against all

civilians, all kinds of hostilities; that the Israelis would allow the Palestinian security organs to control the five cities and the localities around such cities; that a joint commission would be established to discuss and consider the expansion of the Israeli withdrawals from a number of other cities, aiming at finally reaching to the lines of the 28th of September 2001—we had Area A, Area B, and Area C well defined. There would be a release of prisoners and a commission to consider criteria for further releases. So it is a bunch of measures, understandings, but paramount is the cessation of hostilities; the improvement of the quality of life for the Palestinians; those who have been disbanded from the West Bank or Gaza, their right to return; and what have you. That is what had happened. It is the resumption of relations between the two sides there in the cracks of what had happened in Sharm, the initiation of the process anew.

Then you're asking about the future, the immediate future. I would claim that we have to work across a number of priorities. They might come one after the other, or combined. I mean by this we have first to focus on the implementation of the understandings, the very firm obligations that each took up on himself to execute. They will have to be done. So that is priority 1. And there, everybody has to play his own role, whether it is the Palestinians, the Israelis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, the Americans, and the rest of the quartet. That is priority 1.

And there again, we will try, as Egypt, to do what we can do in terms of the understandings. We will help the Palestinian security organs to assert their control on the ground by retraining, by rehabilitating, by allowing the security organs to emerge. That is one. We would deploy Egyptian border guard forces on the borders between Egypt and Palestine. It's a stretch of land that does not exceed maybe 11 miles, so we will be deploying on our part of the borders. We will be, possibly, sending very few number of Egyptian security officials to see the needs of the Palestinians, to help them to coordinate their act internally, inside Gaza. We will of course express support to the leadership as long as it is conducting itself on the implementation. That is priority 1.

Priority 2, we have to keep pushing for the implementation of the Israeli plan to withdraw from Gaza fully, to evacuate the settlements in Gaza, to evacuate the four settlements in the northern part of the West Bank. And that will take time. And there, this has to be done in a manner that would ensure peace, security, stability, and cooperation between the two, the Israelis and the Palestinians. Because imagine if they would fire on each other as they are withdrawing. It won't work.

In that context we have to understand and we have to be practical, pragmatic. There might be events, incidents. And there, we have to establish whatever mechanisms to work and to trigger actions,

how to control whatever might happen or not happen. If it doesn't happen, well and good for all of us. If any incident would trigger anything, we have to have that ability to respond. As I keep saying, a checklist. A checklist. You have an explosion somewhere or someone firing on somebody, then what is the checklist? The checklist calls for such—one, two, three, four, five. Then you do it. You do it with the understandings of the Americans, of the British, of the quartet, of the Israelis, of the Palestinians, of everybody. That is also amongst the ideas that one has to think of as a preparation for the future.

Then let's assume that things went well—hopefully. Then we have to build up the Palestinian potential, the dividend for the Palestinian. You have to allow the Palestinian to breathe and to emerge. That fellow for five years lost possibly 60 percent of his income, doesn't have work opportunity, doesn't have anything. Those young people sitting on street corners discussing what to do. Then you have to give them work opportunity, to give them hope that things might improve in the humanitarian situation and the economic situation. There, the responsibility of all.

We in Egypt will be working, again, according to our own limits and according to our own capacity. We are not a rich power. So we will do whatever is needed on our part, meaning the Egyptian-Palestinian economic commission that has been trying to lift up the Palestinian potential and economy will be revived, and it will work. If

they want to buy cement purchases that are across the border, it will be available; steel rods, it will be available; whatever that would create.

But there, I think it is paramount on the United States, in the European Union, Japan, countries that have the potential to get enough resources for the Palestinian to build an economic environment that would—

The Israelis have also a responsibility there, because they will have to open up. If calm is taking hold, then open up your society and allow those hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to come to work. And that is a good thing, because they link. And the linking together would bring in dynamics that have been lost over the last five years of conflict.

MR. INDYK: A lot of people in Congress say why should we put up \$350 million now—which the president has asked for—when the Gulf Arabs haven't paid their pledges.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Well, we go to them, the Palestinians have gone to them. They received certain assurances that support will be coming. When people are encouraged that things are being done well, people will come forward. You ask the European and he tells you, well, but why am I to put resources, money—then it is demolished? I built a bridge and it is broken to pieces. I put an electric station and here it is. So.

These are the priorities. But we have to understand that it will not stop at that, because if it stops at that, then people will resume



fighting again after awhile. So the important thing is how to ensure that the road map is connected to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank. And how to move on the implementation of the road map, that is—

I, for one, feel that, well, if we will connect Gaza, the withdrawal, to the road map, then we have to have a perception on two elements, or factors. Are we discussing an abeyance, the philosophy for a settlement, or are we really aiming at an end game? If we agree that there would be an end game for all this, then we have to discuss the end game up front—not necessarily up front tomorrow, but up front meaning in the course of the priorities I laid down.

MR. INDYK: In terms of a formal negotiation on the —

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Not necessarily. Not necessarily. You excel in this. You personally excel in this. It's very dangerous, mind you.

[Laughter.]

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I have known him for so many years.

MR. INDYK: Do you think—

[Laughter.]

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: First time I saw him, that is personal—I was at Dulles Airport.

MR. INDYK: Just remember, there's mutual shared destruction here.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I came on the 24th of October '91 for brief talks with Dennis Ross, representing the Egyptians in preparation for the following three days of discussions in Madrid. And I see him in the airport going his way to Madrid at the time. Wasn't it so? Margaret Warner was also there.

So that is the end game, that we have to perceive an end game. If we do not perceive an end game, then we're heading nowhere.

The second thing—

MR. INDYK: Some people here suggest that President Bush would articulate some principles for the end game that would help to guide the parties.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Very nice. And important.

The second thing is not only the end game. The second important thing, I think, is the time frame. Are we to reach for an end game that would possibly end by the year 2098, or are we to have an end game with a perceived time frame that would allow all of us to breathe and to live together—stability, whatever, cooperation that would take hold in the Middle East? These are the two points that one has to reflect on while the process is taking off.

Then, if they are encouraged, both of them, sincere, serious, and the Palestinian house has been organized over summer—because we

will witness a series of developments within Palestine—we will have parliamentary elections for parliament. It will be contested and it will be a very, very tough contest. Then we will have also something else—the reorganization of the main pillar of the Palestinian national movement, Fatah. Fatah will have its own reorganization and reelection. And strangely, that—it is not a point of criticism, please, for the press—that Fatah elections come after the parliamentary elections. I would have understood that it would—

MR. INDYK: Come before.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: —precede it. Come before.

MR. INDYK: Can I just ask you about—since you went to Syria and you've brought in a Syrian dimension to this Israeli-Palestinian—

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I went everywhere over the last seven months. I visited—I have accumulated, I think, miles in the thousands if not hundreds of thousands.

MR. INDYK: But you included Damascus on your schedule.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Yes.

MR. INDYK: And that seems to be part of an Egyptian strategy to bring Syria into—

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Absolutely.

MR. INDYK: —the peace process on the Israeli-Palestinian front in the initial stages.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Absolutely.

MR. INDYK: And we hear a lot of complaints not just from the Israelis, but Palestinians as well, about Hezbollah backing for more attacks now to break the cease-fire. Can you tell us something about how your talks are going with the Syrians on this front?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Yes. As a background, we for the last, say, year have been trying to compose or establish a Palestinian position that would support cease-fire talks with the Israelis, aiming at the implementation of the road map. So we have been engaging all kinds of different shades of Palestinian national movement, from Hamas to Jihad to Fatah to the democratic front to the popular front to what have you—13 of them. And we were in a certain point of time successful, where we had a cease-fire for 52 days. Then it was broken.

Nowadays we are working again on that project, where we are bringing Hamas, the political leadership—I'm not talking about the military arm of any of such organizations because we do not know them. They are underground. So you work and you focus on the political.

So we bring them to Cairo. They have been there last week; they will be coming—hoping that at a certain point in time they, who's Fatah, would agree on the parameters for a settlement. Also, concurrently, they are conducting themselves, amongst themselves as Palestinians, helped by us that the understandings that have been reached with the Israelis have to stick. We have to honor them. And we will see.

Of course, you have to understand that that is all transitional. And if you miss that it is transitional, then you miss it at your peril—meaning, well, we will stop firing, we will accept what Fatah is trying to do or what the Authority is trying to do and the president of the Authority is trying to do, till we see where are you taking us. And because of this, I say the end game and the time frame and what have you. So that is the background.

So we go to Syria and we tell the Syrians, listen, we understand that such organizations are also—you can reach them. Can you? And he says, yes, we reach and we reach well and we are supportive of your effort and we are asking them to cooperate with you and to build that structure you are aiming at. And we verify. And it comes to us back that, yes, the Syrians have been telling them work with the Egyptians, work with the Jordanians, try to structure a situation where the Palestinian, at the end, is being served and served well.

So these were the purposes of such visits. That is on the Palestinian-Israeli. But on the Syrian-Israeli, we also engage in discussions, what do you want out of whatever offers that you can do or make to the Israelis and the responses, and we convey to them such offers. Because what we detect is that Syria is eager to—you refer to Syria as eager to link in the process. You refer to Hezbollah. The problem with Hezbollah, it is not a Palestinian organization. It is a

Lebanese organization. So that is, again, an element that goes beyond the equation. It extends to other players.

We have to understand that Palestinian settlement will not solely establish a comprehensive peace. Comprehensive peace will have to include also Syria, whereby the whole concept of the Arab summit of Beirut, land for peace, normal relations for full peace, that will also be applied.

MR. INDYK: So much for the foreplay. Now let's get to the heart of the matter.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: But I thought that we were in the heart.

MR. INDYK: President Bush in his state of the union address called on Egypt to play a leadership role, similar to the one that you describe now as Egypt's very important leadership role in the peace process, to play a leadership role in promoting democracy in the Middle East. The people in this capital saw in the Egyptian government's arrest of Ayman al-Nour, a leader of one of the opposition parties, and President Mubarak's announcement that he was going to run for another term in office as Egypt's answer to President Bush's call. I wonder whether you could just address that, how Egypt is going to respond to this call that it should play a leadership role.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Well, the Egyptian society is developing and is embracing modernity and democracy in stages, a

gradual approach to whatever problems we are facing. That is a fact of life. You raise two issues—the Ayman Nour arrest and the president's decision to put his name for reelection. On the last one, we in Egypt have a process, a democratic process, perceived by the Egyptian constitution, and it is a constitution that has been drafted prior even to President Mubarak's assumption to power. It has been always there, the Egyptian way of electing a president and ensuring also stability in the country. Meaning: President Nasser suddenly dies. There is a process. President Sadat is assassinated. There is a process.

What is the process? You might agree with it, you might disagree with it, but it is a process that is there in the constitution. The process is anybody can put his name, or a group of people putting a name of someone to parliament—to parliament—where parliament will deliberate. And then, if one person amongst one or many gets two-thirds majority in parliament, then that particular person's name is put to a referendum for the nation to endorse. That is a process.

Nowadays there are deep discussions taking place in the Egyptian society, media, press, and I hope that you read the opposition press and the media and even the national press. It's full of discussions of articles, of meetings, of deliberations, of is it wise to open up the Egyptian constitution for amendment; is it to change the constitution or two amend that what articles are needed to be looked at, the timing of

doing so. That is what is happening in Egypt right now. And I see a very healthy, healthy—

MR. INDYK: Debate.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: —debate, a debate that if you in all honesty—and I'm very sincere in saying this—if you allow yourself the leisure of what is being written in the Egyptian media and the press and on TV and what have you, you might be sacked as foreign minister because you will be spending hours and hours not doing your job, but reading such material. Because it is huge. You might spend 10 hours, 15 hours a day just trying to read between the lines of what is being written. Hundreds of pages a day. And people in the streets and demonstrating and—it is a very vibrant society. And thank God it is a very vibrant society because it has been a society and modernity for the last two hundred years. It isn't something that, you know, you see Egyptians and you can immediately detect how they have been sort of—

That is one. On Ayman Nour's arrest. He has been a member of parliament, I think, two terms before, or that is his second term. A term of a member of parliament is five years. Over the last few months he has been trying with a group of people—some of them are our friends, we know them very well—to establish their own party by the name of al-Ghad. Al-Ghad is "tomorrow." So in order to establish a party in Egypt, you have to have 50 signatures. Fifty people would sign endorsing establishment of a party. And you have to present a platform



for the party—what is the objective of the party, is it to do this or to do that. If it is logical, then a commission within what we call Shura Council—which is something resembling the Senate—would allow the establishment of such a party. So he made that request, and a party has been established. A party has been established, a party that does not have representation in parliament but one, which is Mr. Ayman Nour himself, Dr. Nour. Up till now everything is okay.

Then it seems that someone detected that in the context of registering the party, 1,500 endorsements were presented, and they discovered that, I think, around—as I read in the statements of the attorney general—1,100 of such endorsements were forgeries, false. How they were detected—1,100 were issued from one branch of the government registry or district by the name of Maiaji [ph], all of them on one similar page with one similar seal. And even the seal was identical to all of them, and the position of the seal. So someone made a complaint and the attorney general acted on it.

The end of the game is he has been arrested after immunity has been lifted off. The attorney general is on the case. Two possibilities there: that the case will be thrown out, the attorney general didn't find anything wrong; or that it will be put to court. To be released or not, I assume that usually he would be released on bail or released. That is the situation as I know it.

MR. INDYK: Thank you. We have about half an hour for questions. I would ask you to identify yourself to the minister—

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Half an hour or 20 minutes?

MR. INDYK: You're the boss.

And since we don't have a lot of time, to make your questions short and the minister shall make his answers short, too.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Listen, if the questions are soft and easy, I will make my answers short. If the questions are hard, then I will consume the 20 minutes.

[Laughter.]

QUESTION: Not to worry. Mr. Minister, I'm asking if you'd be a little more—

MR. INDYK: Identify yourself, Barry.

QUESTION: Barry Schweid, Associated Press.

Would you please be a little more specific about what Egypt is prepared to do for security? You told the *Washington Times* three battalions on the border with Gaza. I don't know how large an Egyptian battalion is. What will they do? And more important from my point of view is you say a few people will go into Gaza to help, to advise. Why, if Egypt wants to contribute to security, would Egypt not go in and play a role in Gaza itself?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: That is a very valid question. Now, the Egyptian-Israeli borders extend for, let's say, 150 miles, from

the Mediterranean down to the Red Sea. But on that stretch of land you find Gaza. Gaza, where Egypt-Palestine connect. That is around 10 to 11 miles. So we will be deploying 750 border guards on that stretch of land. And you will tell me about why are you deploying such forces on that stretch? I'll tell you. Because that stretch is being used to smuggle whatever material. And the smuggling did not arise yesterday or last year. The smuggling has been there over the last 35 years. And the smuggling was often merchandise from the Israeli side into Egypt. So it is a long-standing relationship between Palestinians and Israelis who have been working to make profits. So we will be applying 750 on that stretch of land.

You understand also that the Camp David accords and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty allows Egypt to deploy police forces—not border guards, not an army with punch. So now we will be working with the Israelis to deploy further two battalions on the rest of Egypt-Israel, extend them from the tip of the Gaza, Egypt, to the Taba point on the Gulf of Aqaba. You will say, but what is the interest there? And the interest is, there is lots of smuggling—contraband, drugs, slaves, traffic in women, traffic in workers trying to come through Egypt from certain localities in Africa, to cross to Israel and from Israel to Europe. And that is creating difficulties for the Egyptian and for the Israeli. So the logic is to reach an understanding with the Israelis where we deploy and we try

to close our part of the border and they close their part of the border.

That is one.

On Gaza, the objective is to increase and to help the Palestinian to take control of his own territory. And they have enough forces and they have enough punch, but the forces over the last four years have been—I wouldn't say "destroyed," but with the pressure of the Israeli army on the Palestinian security forces and police forces, it disintegrated. So you are reviving it back. How would you revive it back? By bringing the officer corps to Egypt for retraining, for receiving the new mission, for allowing them to work as a united force. We will be also helping the establishment of, let's say, operational rooms, control rooms, headquarters and what have you. Not only us, but also the Americans and the quartet and the Europeans.

But to imagine Egyptian forces going back to Gaza, I wouldn't advise. I would advise against it for one simple reason: Why do we have to put our boys—and you didn't miss, of course, when three Egyptian police officers were killed by a tank shell, an Israeli tank shell, three months or four months ago. It created havoc in Egypt. And people said but why they are fighting on us? So why would we put our boys in that kind of difficulty?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Minister, for your remarks. I just—

MR. INDYK: Identify yourself?

QUESTION: David Makovsky at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I know you very, very well.

QUESTION: Well, he was the one who said I should identify myself. Well, it's good to be with you.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: You see, what you don't know is that I lived in this country for 14 years, since '74 up till today. So I know a lots of people, from this gentleman to lots of others.

QUESTION: Well, it's good to have you back.

My question to you is you have an Arab summit coming up next month, an Arab League—

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: The Arab summit, yes.

QUESTION: And Abu Mazen is making major efforts. I think we would all agree in this room he has a very difficult job. And the question is what can everybody do to help Abu Mazen. What can the United States do, the Israelis do, the Europeans do? And also, what can the Arab states together—Egypt just started at Sharm. But what role do you foresee at the Arab League summit to help Abu Mazen?

I'll give you two examples. He has said a formulation, "We insist upon our rights, but we will resolve our issues peacefully." And that, I know, is Egypt's position and Jordan's position. But should it also be the Arab summit's position? And I know you're going to say, well, we have an Arab League initiative that we can re-endorse. But that is "at the

end of the rainbow, if there's full peace we will normalize." But can you see that at every juncture of progress that the Israelis and Palestinians make together, the Arab summit could incentivize such progress by saying, essentially, we will have an Arab road map so every step the Israelis and Palestinians take towards each other, we will take towards integrating Israel into the region, not just at the end of the rainbow, but to get to the end of the rainbow?

Thank you.

MR. INDYK: The great thing about David's question is he gives you the answer to it.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: That is a great idea. Really, David, that is a great idea. And one has to reflect on your idea.

As background again, if I may, when we had Sharm el-Sheik and I returned to Cairo the same night, the following 14, 15 hours I received a number of phone calls from a number of Arab foreign ministers saying that we received some calls from the Israeli foreign minister, and the Israelis are eager to resuscitate and regenerate enough warmness in the relationship that went down over the last four and five years—what do you think? They were asking. And I told them that is your decision, but things are moving and we will be moving and the Palestinians are moving, and you decide for yourself.

There is that tendency of coping where an improvement is taking hold or place. If there is an improvement, people who have

established positions vis-à-vis Israel, whether in this or that country—I will not name countries, but it is for them to decide—they will come forward, I think, building a controlled relationship till they see. So every bit of the road will be supported by— But the idea is very good.

That is one. Two, there is the tendency now of meeting amongst a group of countries in preparation for the summit in Algeria. The Jordanians, the Palestinians, the Egyptians, the Syrians, they are reflecting now on at least a ministerial meeting, then possibly a summit. What will be the discussion? The discussion is to relay to a Middle East offer, settlement in relation to Algeria. So we have still ample time to work on whatever ideas to be put there in Algeria. But the Arab plan is there, and it is clearly indicating willingness of the Arab world to recognize and to establish normal relations and return to the emergence of the Palestinian state on the territories that have been occupied since '67.

A very good idea.

MR. INDYK: Marvin Kalb.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I read your book on Kissinger.

QUESTION: Marvin Kalb—

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: And you do not change the ties.

Still always red.

[Laughter.]

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Yes. He is fascinated with red ties. Like Secretary Baker, green ties.

[Laughter.]

QUESTION: You stun me, Mr. Minister.

My question, sir, relates to the American role in the peace process now. Would you find that it would be facilitated if the United States, as the U.S. has done on a number of occasions in the past, were to appointment a very high-level— perhaps even a secretary of state, to take it up as their principal responsibility to try to move this process forward now? Everyone speaks about this being a precious moment.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: That is a very difficult question. I do not want to say a position on this. However, if I venture to say something, I would advise against it. Why is it so? Because I want the secretary of state himself.

MR. INDYK: Herself.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I want the advisor to the president himself to be engaged. I do not want someone who will negotiate and then come back to try to convince the secretary or the advisor that that is a good deal. I want them engaged.

Unless it is a former president—

[Laughter.]



MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: —who has the clout of not only asking for an appointment, but pushing the door and entering and saying this is what has to be done.

But the secretary of state himself, in order to be engaged, is the recipe for an energetic course.

MR. KALB: Thank you, sir.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Thank you. That is my personal thing, Ahmed Abul-Gheit, not the Egyptian foreign minister.

MR. INDYK: I'll second it.

QUESTION: Mohammed [...] with Al-Jazeera.

Sir, there's a wide perception in the Arab world that President Mubarak convened the summit of Sharm el-Sheik to escape pressure about reforms. This is the perception in Egypt also. Were you surprised that during your meeting with the vice president yesterday the issue of reform didn't come up?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I didn't—

MR. INDYK: Would you repeat it?

QUESTION: There's a wide perception in the Arab world, Egypt included, that President Mubarak convened the Sharm el-Sheik summit and his effort in the Middle East peace process in order to avoid, escape the pressures from this town about the reforms. Were you surprised that your meeting with the vice president, Dick Cheney, last night— the issue of reform didn't come up with him?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: The Egyptian-American relationship and the meetings between Egyptian officials and American officials is a going concern, has been there all along. This subject might be raised, some other subject is missed for a time or for that particular meeting. It's a strategic relationship. This is the superpower of the world and this is the regional power of the Middle East, and they connect to each other and they talk and they coordinate and they work together, and it is a healthy, bumpy, healthy relationship. We differ, but we do not clash. And when we contradict each other, we talk to each other. It is a good, healthy relationship. That is on the American-Egyptian [*sic*]. On Sharm, well, it seems that Egypt has been escaping over the last 35 years if we keep escaping to implement a Middle East settlement in order to avoid reforms. That is, please, going beyond the logic.

MR. INDYK: Since nobody else has asked about Iraq, I would like to just ask you about Iraq. Do you have time?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: We have three minutes. Because, in all honesty, there is an ambassador here who had a program for me that possibly—

MR. INDYK: You're using up the time here.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: —possibly that [inaudible] wanted me, and I don't know what is the objective of this.

MR. INDYK: So can I ask about Iraq?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Yes, please. Because it's very tight, very tight schedule. I will come back to Iraq, and there is no difficulty there. Please. Shoot.

MR. INDYK: The ambassador gave us 10 more minutes.

[Laughter.]

MR. INDYK: On Iraq—

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Yes, please.

MR. INDYK: Just, you know, from the perspective of Cairo, how do you see things developing there? What was your view of the elections that took place and now the results? Are you concerned about some kind of breakup of Iraq, or do you see the process moving forward now in a more positive direction?

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Now, let's not touch what had happened over the last two years. Let's focus on what has happened only last week and the immediate future. We have had an election process that led to certain parties coming to power. My advice is that whoever had won the elections and the U.S. will have to work on an attempt to reconcile the Iraqi internal scene. Those who did not participate, those who are leading the insurgency, you have to attempt and to try anew to reconcile the internal Iraqi scene.

There in Sharm el-Sheik, on the 23rd of November last year, when we had the foreign ministers of the G-8 as well as the foreign ministers of neighbors of Iraq, Iraq itself and Egypt, we agreed on a

certain course supporting elections, which is a good thing, reconstructed development a good step in the right direction, that the Iraqis and the Iraqi Provisional Government, the— or Transitional Government then, was required and called upon to try to reconcile the Iraqi internal scene. There have been attempts, not successful—obvious. Now we hope that all Iraqi factions would be included in the attempt to compose a government and also to formulate a constitution, to draft a constitution. That is a must, because if certain Iraqi factions, groups are not included, then firing would continue. That is the way I see it. That is one factor.

The second factor, which is also of importance, is that there has to be a major, major attempt to establish a strong Iraqi army and services. Why is it so? Because an Iraqi army that is established, well-equipped with services, will allow the foreign forces to disengage and to wither away from Iraqi cities. As they are moving out of the Iraqi cities, we will not have the firing, we will not have that kind of tension within Iraqi society. Hence, over time, hopefully a short period of time, we will take Iraq out of such a situation and it is stability, it is peace, it is cooperation, it is whatever good things for a country that has been really under pressure over the last 30-some years.

Thank you.

MR. INDYK: As you say, insha'allah.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: Thank you.

MR. INDYK: As you can see, Mr. Minister, there are many more questions. But you've been very generous with your time and your views, and we are very grateful for that.

MINISTER ABUL-GHEIT: I have to be rushing, please, because I have another appointment. I'm sorry.

MR. INDYK: And thank you for sharing your views with us. We wish you good luck.

[Applause.]

[END OF TAPED RECORDING.]

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