

**HARD TALK**

By Dr Waheed Abdel Meguid

## Social Protests End Stagnation



The situation in Egypt today is like water overflowing from a bottle that had been tightly corked off for a long time. A society that has been stagnant for decades is now beginning to move, causing new interactions that give the impression that it's spilling over.

But the water overflows with no rhyme or rhythm. In fact, its movement is mostly haphazard and spontaneous, unlike the movement of boiling water which at least seems systematic.

But the eruptions taking place in Egyptian society today don't simply create hot air bubbles. The social protests that have been going on over two years are sketching a new image whose features have not yet crystallized.

The social movement is still in its first phase but what is certain is that Egyptian society is witnessing a transformation that cannot be stopped, and whose social ramifications are spreading from one social sector to the other.

The protests were spearheaded by factory workers but then the professionals complemented the scene. The teachers spoke out against their low wages and hence were able to secure special raises which only applied to them.

It seems that this was the cue for other professionals who began demanding special salary scales in what amounts to a social phenomenon.

Only recently, the doctors, supported by the Doctors' Syndicate, followed the initiative of the school teachers to demand increases to their low salaries.

What's new and dangerous is that the doctors have also threatened to start a general strike at all hospitals and public medical facilities. This would constitute a rare occurrence in the history of social protests because a doctors' strike on that scale would threaten the lives of thousands of people in need of immediate treatment.

No reasonable government would ever take the risk of pushing its doctors to the point that would lead to such a strike.

But agreeing to such wage demands is not the solution because the crisis has accumulated over decades and now includes all sectors.

When a crisis reaches such levels, it becomes necessary to find a total solution, not simply handle the deteriorating situation with the government's quick, haphazard fixes.

The doctors aren't alone in their demands for special salary scales. University professors have also started escalating their financial demands. And just recently engineers finally won a court ruling to end a 10-year-long government control of their syndicate funds.

When demands for special cadres become so widespread, they are no longer "special" and it would be wrong to deal with each one independently. And since the core of the crisis is shared by all the various sectors, then treating each case individually would be a fatal strategy even if the regime believes it has achieved tactical victories by doing so.

The crisis essentially goes back to a deep distortion in the ailing wages schemes which bear no relation to reality.

The only solution to this inflated crisis is to review the wage scheme with three essential issues in mind.

First is raising the minimum wage and redefining the maximum salaries — which are currently not subject to any measures and have in some cases reached astronomical heights that neither match work load or experience — in order to secure funding for the minimum wage increase despite the budget deficit.

Second is respecting hitherto ignored criteria such as adoption of work ethics, efficiency, and experience. Without such criteria, people may think they deserve much more than what they get.

And third is tying the revision of salary schemes with an economic and political reform program that will give the dejected workers some hope for a better future.

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GAMAL A. G. SOLTAN

## Egypt: restore border control and develop a new policy

The recent breach of Egypt's border with Gaza accentuated the risks implied in the current situation in the Strip. Losing control over that border for ten consecutive days proved to be embarrassing for Cairo. Bending to the plot implemented by Hamas operatives embarrassed Egypt even further. Far more serious than just the embarrassment, the infiltration of suspect terrorists into Egypt is a major security concern for a country that has been in a continuous war on terror for the past 30 years.

The collapse of order at Egypt's border with Gaza encouraged both Hamas and Israel to capitalize on the developing situation. Seeking both de facto recognition as the legal authority in Gaza and the relaxation of the Gaza blockade, Hamas demanded the dismantlement of the multilateral arrangements regulating the crossing between Egypt and Gaza, allowing Hamas a say if not a monopoly on the operation of the Palestinian side of the crossing.

On the Israeli side, some watched with joy as Hamas took former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan with Gaza a step further. Shifting the burden of Gaza from Israel to Egypt and the elimination of Israel's legal responsibility over Gaza is an Israeli dream that is coming true thanks to Hamas. Moreover, the far-

etched proposals entertained by some in Israel to enlarge the tiny but overpopulated Gaza Strip through the annexation of adjacent Egyptian territories demonstrate the recklessness in dealing with pillars of regional security and order that has been encouraged by Hamas' plot.

Restoring order on Egypt's borders with Gaza was the immediate concern in Cairo. It took ten days to end the breach. Now the developments of these ten days require an overhauling of Egypt's policy toward Gaza. The Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007 widened the gulf separating Gaza from the West Bank. The ideological and political rivalry between the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas government in Gaza makes it unlikely the current fissure in Palestine will be bridged in the near future. The Hamas-controlled Palestinian entity in Gaza is likely to survive for a long time.

A long-term policy rather than the ad-hoc arrangements of the past is badly needed. Egypt's approach to Gaza is guided, or rather constrained, by a number of considerations. For one, Cairo should not be perceived as participating in the Gaza blockade. Contributing to the suffering of fellow Arabs could hurt the legitimacy of any Arab government.

On the other hand, Egypt should not contribute to the consolidation and legitimization of the Hamas regime in Gaza.

A radical Palestinian entity on the Israeli-Egyptian border could further complicate the already strained relations between the two countries. Moreover, containing the Hamas-led government in Gaza is an integral part of the efforts of moderate Arab governments to curb the rise of radical Islam in the Middle East. The blockade imposed on the little strip exposes Hamas' weaknesses and might, in the long term, cause the fall of Hamas from power, or force it into reconciliation with the legitimate PNA in the West Bank.

Third, moves that would change the current legal status of Palestinian territories could further destabilize the region and threaten vital Egyptian interests. Such changes should be only in the direction of the establishment of a united Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Transitional or interim arrangements are welcome as long as they contribute to the materialization of the two-state solution.

Egypt needs to strike a balance among these three major considerations. Hamas should be denied the leverage of using the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza to further enhance its power. It is the political and ideological choices of Hamas, not Egyptian policy, that further worsen humanitarian conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza. Yet Egypt should also avoid being depicted as if it is contributing to the Gaza blockade. Necessary com-

modities should be allowed into Gaza in a regulated way. Should Hamas, the PNA and Israel continue to fail to reach a working arrangement toward this end, border crossings on the Egypt-Gaza border could be a substitute. Alleviating the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza while denying Hamas the opportunity to claim victory should be the principle guiding the movement of goods into Gaza. Movement of individuals, on the other hand, should be highly restricted: an uncompromising policy toward attempts to replicate the recent breach of the border should be made clear and credible.

The success of a new Egyptian policy toward Gaza is better served if Egypt succeeds in securing the cooperation of interested actors, particularly the PNA, Israel, the US and the EU. Unfortunately, the chances of winning Israel and the PNA's cooperation look limited. But Egypt should not remain hostage to Israeli and Palestinian politics. On the other hand, there is a reasonable possibility of winning the cooperation or at least the understanding of the US and the EU, particularly the latter.

At the same time, avoiding the complete alienation of both Israel and the PNA is essential for Egyptian national interests. Egypt should keep consulting Israel on all relevant issues, including security arrangements at the border with Gaza. It should also make clear that a change of policy to-

ward Gaza does not breach Egypt's policy toward the PNA as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

For Egypt, the border breach might be a mixed blessing. The crisis at the Gaza border allowed the Egyptian government the opportunity to defuse mounting domestic pressure to help the people of Gaza. At the same time, the flooding of Egypt's borders with hundreds of thousands of foreigners and the accompanying violations, invoked in Egyptians a latent national identity that is sometimes overshadowed by the supra-national Arab and Islamic identities. It also invoked past memories — when Egypt was dragged into conflicts provoked by reckless regional actors.

Decision-makers in Egypt have always believed that the situation that developed in Gaza after last summer is not sustainable. The pilgrims' crisis of last December, in particular, demonstrated the difficulties implied in the situation. However, winning the needed domestic and international support for a new policy was unlikely prior to the incidents of recent weeks.

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## The EU's Kosovo catalyst

Kosovo's declaration of independence has put stability in the Western Balkans back on Europe's agenda. Unless the European Union acts quickly, the whole region could slide backwards, with dire social, economic, and security consequences. The EU needs a comprehensive regional approach, focusing on the remaining steps that would lead each country towards membership.

The Western Balkans — a term used only since 1999 — comprises Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo, with a combined population of roughly 22 million. Economic developments in the region are promising, with almost all its economies posting high growth, fueled by increasing industrial output and exports. Inward investment is steadily rising, as business seems to believe that the remaining political and security challenges — the possible negative effects of post-independence Kosovo and Bosnia's malaise — will be overcome sooner rather than later.

Much work has already been done to re-establish and improve regional relations. The EU-led Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe has since 1999 successfully stimulated regional cross-border cooperation, for the first time since the breakdown of Yugoslavia. Energy, transport infrastructure — roads, railways, and waterways — and crime prevention have all benefited. The Stability Pact has now been transferred to local control, re-emerging as the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, ready to develop regional and multilateral standards for its members.

The recently revived Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is meant to be the main regional engine for trade and business generally, and will adhere both to WTO rules and the parties' obligations towards the EU. Similarly, the South-East European Cooperation Process is one of the relatively new regional organizations that contribute to candidate and potential candidate countries' preparations for EU

membership, providing the first genuine region-wide policy forum where both EU members and candidates participate.

But these bodies must not be seen as substitutes for the far more comprehensive accession process, which only the EU itself can initiate. And yet, despite the region's favorable prospects and relatively small size, the Union has been slow in doing so.

Certainly, the pace of candidate countries' approach to the Union depends on the speed of their reforms. And Europe, with the vital support of the United States, worked hard to stop the carnage of the 1990's and subsequently to help rebuild the Balkan countries.

But the EU has so far failed to prepare the Western Balkans for accession, in line with its leaders' promise at their Thessaloniki summit in 2003 to admit the Western Balkan states when they meet the Union's standards.

That promise was not a matter of charity; the Balkans would add value to the EU. To be sure, the EU's lengthy internal crisis over the proposed constitution was a major distraction, and damaged the Union's reputation in the Balkans. Let us hope that the new Reform Treaty will help to reassure the critics and pave the way for a new — and more robust — phase of integration.

If not, one would have to ask what had happened to the European spirit of the 1970's and 1980's, when countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain, which had just emerged from dictatorship and civil unrest, were welcomed into the European community of democratic states. Political decisions taken then were far more risky than those at hand in the Balkans, and the Greek and Iberian success stories demonstrate the wisdom of the courageous decisions taken at that time.

What about today? The most recent EU members, Bulgaria and Romania, are both in the Balkans and both are examples of countries with special needs. While the EU at first took their accession negotiations a bit too casually, it subsequently

decided to continue monitoring the two countries even after accession in order to ensure that they develop the effective administrative and judicial systems that are an obligation of membership.

The EU must learn from this experience to develop an accession strategy for the Western Balkans, whose development has been delayed by a complex post-conflict transition process. Their special needs should be taken into account in any new

EU approach, giving them hope while mitigating the fallout from Kosovo.

It is in Europe's interest as much as it is in the interest of the region to accelerate the integration process. A reinvigorated accession process would contribute to the EU's consolidation, both territorially and politically, while strengthening its role in its wider neighborhood — the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and around the Black Sea.

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Asharq Alawsat's Feb. 18 cartoon depicts a "safer and more efficient mode of transport."

BASSIM AL-SHARA

## Shia meets Sunni in a Baghdad park

Mohammed Omar Ali sits on a bench under a tree in Al-Zawra Park, looking around impatiently for any sign of his friend. Ali, 31, has not seen Ayad Murtadha for almost a year since he and his family, who are Shia Muslims, were forced to leave the Baghdad neighborhood where the two friends grew up together.

Murtadha, 32, is Sunni, but sectarianism has not affected his friendship with Ali. When the men finally reunite with tears, hugs and non-stop conversation, it is clear that the capital's sectarian battles have failed to break the bond.

According to the United Nations refugee agency UNCHR, more than 700,000 Iraqis have been displaced by sectarian violence since 2006. Many of the capital's once mixed areas have become either purely Sunni or purely Shia after militias forced families out for belonging to the other religious branch of Islam.

Improved security in Baghdad has enabled Sunni and Shia friends to once again

spend time together in safety. However, many are still reluctant to visit particular neighborhoods where one sect dominates and are instead choosing to meet in Al-Zawra Park.

"These get-togethers are the only thing that makes us optimistic about the future," said Murtadha.

Al-Zawra is a famous 10 square-kilometer park located near Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone. The park's centralized location and the tight security in the area have made this a popular gathering point for Baghdad residents of all sects and ethnicities.

Lines of people waiting to enter the park stretch for hundreds of meters at weekends. Park officials say the number of visitors has soared from just a few thousand per month in early 2006 when violence was on the rise in the capital, to over 1.5 million in December 2007 when Iraq was celebrating the major holiday Eid Al-Adha.

"The park is so well protected that it's very hard for militias or terrorists to infil-

trate it," said the official.

Cars must pass through several checkpoints on the approaches to the park, and all visitors are searched before they enter.

Mohammad Sad, 27, a university student from the Sunni-dominated Al-Adhamiyah neighborhood, said the park is the only place where people do not have to fear the militias based in other Baghdad neighborhoods.

Sad frequently meets up with Shia friends in the park. "When you enter Al-Zawra Park, you have a special feeling," he said. "You feel like you are no longer in Baghdad because it is so mixed with people from different sects."

Sad said he took a position against Shia Muslims after he heard that the Mahdi Army — the powerful militia of the firebrand Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr — was killing Sunnis. "Sometimes I even hated my Shia friends," he said. "But when I thought about my childhood and my memories with them, I realized that they had nothing to do with

what was happening."

For sociologist Ahmad Dhiya, these reunions are a positive sign that the country will survive sectarianism.

"Young people in Baghdad need a life without violence, and they're tired of the sectarianism that the various armed groups propagate," he said.

Dhiya said the park provides an important social outlet for Iraqis and believes it is helping to repair rifts among the capital's fractured population.

Some Baghdad residents interviewed by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) acknowledged that the sectarian violence has tainted relationships between Sunni and Shia.

Raid Jafar, a 30 year-old Shia from the Baya neighborhood, said that although he is happy to meet his Sunni friends in the park, he admitted that he does not trust Sunnis as much he did in the past.

Jafar said his feelings towards his Sunni friends changed after his brother was killed by Al-Qaeda militants in a neighbor-

hood called Al-Sayidiyah.

"I was so angry that I thought seriously about killing any Sunni in revenge," he said.

He now tries to avoid talking about politics or his brother's death with his Sunni friends, instead concentrating on personal issues, gossip and work.

Still, Jafar said that he hopes that sectarian rifts will heal and that "what is left of the relations between the two sects will be protected."

Others have similar hopes. "There is a small bright light coming out from the darkness in Iraq," said Sad. "It is slowly getting bigger and brighter."

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