

**Current Situation in Egypt and the Middle East\***  
**HE Dr Nabil El-Araby, Foreign Minister of Egypt\*\***

It gives me great pleasure to address this distinguished gathering at this Institution on the current situation in Egypt and the Middle East. First of all, I intend to make a few remarks on recent developments in Egypt and the Middle East, to be followed by some comments on the special relationship between India and Egypt; and finally some other comments, and 'opening up' some areas with respect to the question of Palestine.

It is for me a nostalgic trip to India because I stayed here for two and a half years from 1981-83. Though, it was not long but I and my family enjoyed every moment of it. I have developed friendship, high respect and admiration not only for the Indian people as such and with their norms; but also for the administrative system that India follows, and also the Indian think tanks. Today, India is one of the great powers. The whole world should benefit from its experience and continue to emulate it in many fields.

Earlier, when I was here, the relations between the two countries were quite strong. I do not recall that I have been to any gathering with Indians, without someone telling me a story about President Nasser and Pandit Nehru, and about our relationship; how we, Egypt-India-Indonesia-Yugoslavia and Ghana, managed to establish a group of non-aligned countries that were acting sincerely and genuinely as the conscience of the mankind in International relations. Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) played an important role in international relations. I think we should try again, with India as a big brother, to work together to revive these old relations between us. Wherever I went, I felt the warmth and genuine friendship of the Government and the people of India. I was reminded of the past era i.e. to say we should work together to revive the golden era. In Egypt, we continue to share our special relations with India. With the growing trade volume that now stands at some US \$ 30 billion, we should revive economic cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

My trip to India, as Ambassador Gharekhan said, is my first bi-lateral visit at the International level. It is an indication, how much the Government of Egypt is interested to build-up on our relations with India. I see amongst you, even here today, many friends whom I have met before and I am happy to be with you today.

My first point really today is: What happened on January 25th this year? Egypt witnessed a major transformation and revival. The Egyptian people took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations, in now famous 'Tahrir Square'. I believe that if the Pyramids could speak, they would say that they are envious; because everyone who comes to Egypt now, wants to go to 'Tahrir Square' and get photographed there and not go and see the Pyramids!

The people on the streets came from the middle class, intellectuals, young men and women, who were calling for liberty, democracy, social justice and a change that was long overdue. They were not slum dwellers, as many had expected, including myself as well as some of my Egyptian friends and colleagues here. We had expected that may be some slum dwellers would go to the streets, at any time, calling for a change in their economic standards; but they were well off people, at least most of them. They had never been interested in politics before. All of a sudden, all of them felt a genuine urge that they needed a change. The general theme was 'We want change' - we want to be able to speak freely and want to get better jobs. Yes, they also wanted democracy and rule of law, and to end corruption in the Government. All of a sudden, so many people went there - you cannot imagine how it was! I went, of course; my wife, my daughter and two sons were there, I have a grandson of 18 and a grand daughter of 14 who also went there. They had never discussed politics before. They all went there, stayed on the streets and were happy to be participating in something that was taking shape.

It is true, like what had been described by Harold MacMillan 50 years ago, "A wind of change has blown". That time a wind of change had happened in Africa and African countries were de-colonised. This time the wind of change has started in Tunisia, came to Egypt, went elsewhere and we all feel that 'change would come'. We are very lucky in Egypt that this change came with a minimum of bloodshed. No doubt there were some casualties. There was violence at one time but that soon ended and we are lucky again that the military, particularly the Army did not participate actively in quelling these demonstrations; they could have acted to finish them. But they took a courageous and a correct decision that whatever orders they might get, they would stick with the people instead. I hope, without offending anyone, that other countries in the region would have also done so. But that doesn't seem to be the case. We have managed to change the regime in Egypt in eighteen days in a peaceful manner.

At present, Egypt is in transition. Transition to democracy is always difficult, full of pitfalls and will take some time. You cannot change, from an autocratic regime to full democracy, in a day. It is not like that. We should look only at Eastern Europe which can give us some examples, and also Spain before that. Though it takes time, I believe we are on the right track. The road map, at least for now, includes parliamentary elections this coming September; to be followed by electing the Constituent Assembly, a new Constitution for civil and democratic Egypt - followed also by Presidential elections. So, one can say with a degree of certainty that in less than a year, we hope that full democratic rule will prevail in Egypt. But, in addition to the general aspects of transition, we also believe that the economy has been affected. It is important now to see how we can generate revenue from tourism, overcome slow down in production and some other factors.

Something happened in Egypt, which I certainly have not seen in any other country. Once this revolution started, somehow, the Police force, just vanished. In such a situation, you find that a lot of petty crimes do take place. That affected tourism right away. But luckily most of this has disappeared now and the situation has really improved, as of late. A referendum was held to amend a number of Articles that relate directly to the coming Parliamentary and Presidential elections. New rules have been promulgated to govern the establishment of new political parties. The election process, as well as a new rule of unified worship, that provides equality for all religions and practices of their religion, is taking shape now.

With respect to political parties, democracy means that every person or a group of people have the right to form a political party. In the past, we had the political parties; but these parties, in order to be able to work, had to go to a

certain committee and this committee was composed of members selected by the ruling party. If they found that a particular party could have some credibility with the people, they would never allow it to be established. So, it was a vicious circle, without trying to renew the blood and to make sure that not even some minor manifestation of democracy could take root.

Egypt now is in a new era. Once the Cabinet, of which I have the honour to be part of, was established in March, we decided after some meetings that we want to review our policies – domestic policies and international relations. We decided to open a new page, review the mistakes of the past and make sure that we do not repeat them; and to look for our roots in Africa, Asia and definitely also in the Arab world. Egypt is committed now, to respect and adopt measures and policies that would bring about justice, accountability, political rights, non-discrimination and political freedom; as also liberalise by undertaking further studies through an International committee, and undertake ratification of several key International treaties / conventions on human rights. We want Egypt to be a State ruled by law. These conventions include the 'Convention of Forced Disappearances' and the optional protocol to 'Convention Against Torture'. Another Committee has met already and decided that Egypt should ratify the 'Statute of the International Criminal Court', which will happen as soon as we get the new Parliament.

Yet, many challenges remain in the area of Human Rights. To bring domestic freedom, amidst continuous guerrilla activity, security and economic difficulties – social dialogue, conciliation and consensus remain key guarantees for overcoming differences and tensions, whenever they arise. The promotion and enhancement of each democratic Human Right credential is 'work in progress'. We are confident that with the spirit of high morality of our youth and the support of our friends in the International community we will be able to build bridges that will help us to pass and go through the transitional period. In effect, many other things that are taking place in Egypt now, inspire the whole world with the values of 'peaceful change' that would bring about full respect for Human Rights and political freedom.

Now, I turn to International relations. In the first Foreign Policy area, what has happened in Egypt is, what in International Law is called – 'Succession of States'. That is to say, when a State becomes a new member of the International community, it is entitled under the law to start with a clean slate. Namely, that the State would say; today for example, South Sudan has accepted in a referendum to secede from the North and establish a new State – on the 9th of July, there will be a New state of Sudan. A country like that is entitled to say, "These conventions and treaties I accept and these I will not accept". This is established International Law.

But, our case is different – in our case it is a change of command. We are not entitled to do that. From the very beginning, even as soon as President Mubarak stepped down; even before the Government I belong to was sworn in, the Supreme Military Council made it clear that Egypt is bound by every treaty, convention and agreement it has entered into. That is correct in terms of the International Rules and this applies to Egypt also.

You will recall the time, when two war ships belonging to Iran wanted to cross the Suez Canal – the previous Government would have stopped them. The new Government, I mean the Military Council itself, allowed it to pass because of our obligations emanating from the 1888 Constantinople Convention which regulates and governs the passage of ships through the Suez Canal. We have no right to stop the countries, which are not in a 'state of war' with Egypt. So we are applying, from the very day President Mubarak stepped down, the International Law in our international relations. But, the Government has also decided to review its International relations and open a new page with everyone. At present, we believe that with new Egypt, we are entitled to tell every country in the world, "We are here, this is the new policy; we will like to cooperate with you faithfully and with full speed". The Government has decided to review and strengthen its Afro-Asian roots and work closely with traditional and historical friends, such as the host India.

Here, I should also say that as part of the 'opening up', we decided to review certain policies which were not popular with the people in this region and do not really fit with the new Government that says, "We are a new Government with new thinking and we would like to co-operate with everyone". One such case was, of course, Iran; because, the previous Government did not want to have anything to do with Iran. Iran is not an enemy, in any case with Egypt; and we made that very clear to them. Another one, which really touched every Egyptian, was the question of the 'Siege of Gaza'. The new Government reviewed all our commitments – if there were any commitments. We found that the only legal commitment that binds us is the Fourth Geneva Convention, with respect to occupied territories, which makes it very clear that "It is illegal and it could be considered a war crime, when you participate in laying siege to a civilian population". So, that was one of the first things which received our attention. I am very happy to announce today i.e. on 28th of May, 2011, the 'Gaza Siege' has been lifted.

It is also important to refer to: How we envisage, where we stand today? It is clear to us that we have traditional friends – good friends who stood by us. We never forget the position of India and Pandit Nehru, who was Prime Minister in 1956 – when we were attacked by three countries. India was one of the few countries who stood by Egypt. Notwithstanding only what you may have read in the papers, public statements, about the support extended to Egypt, I must also tell you that, I met a person by the name of Dr B Sen, who told me that, during that period, he went more than once to Egypt, sent by the Prime Minister of India to President Nasser to advise him on certain matters, relating to handling the situation emanating from the attack on Egypt in 1956.

Today, our challenge on being here in India is: How to engage with India in fostering better, closer and wider relations; how to engage in joint ventures and magnify our bi-lateral commercial trade that should really be the objective of both our countries. We should strive to attain a situation where we can work together, for the benefit of the two countries. Let us intensify our political consultations, exchange visits and delegations with a view to constructing an edifice of confidence and strategic partnership. I propose really to seek to usher a 'new golden era' of Indian-Egyptian cooperation.

Now I turn to 'The Middle East Situation'. Here, I would focus only on the question of Palestine. As I said earlier, the Middle-East is really witnessing major changes. The winds of change have blown in full force in the Arab world. The so called 'Arab Spring', I am sure, will have a significant impact that will eventually change the destiny of the area. The

revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have brought hope in an era of freedom that would unleash the potential of the people in the region. The people's movement in certain countries (I am not naming any one country) should lead to the achievement of legitimate aspirations of the people. Hopefully, it will happen with no bloodshed. We hope that in Egypt, any change that I have referred to, would come from within; and will not be imposed from abroad – an Egypt where political freedom and rights are respected and protected. That is, in my view and in the view of my Government, very important because we in Egypt, as in India, have always stood-up against foreign intervention. We also stood-up against foreign exploitation. We would like to see the change coming from within the Country and with the help of the people within the Country.

At the same time, while the whole world is mobilised to support the rise of the people in our region, all efforts should be made to end the occupation of the Palestine occupied territories by Israel. The Palestinians deserve to live in peace and dignity in their own independent sovereign State, with East Jerusalem as its capital – and side by side in peace with Israel.

I recall reading a few days ago a very important article in the International Herald Tribune by President Jimmy Carter, himself playing an important role in ushering peace in the area. But, he failed regrettably. He regrets very much now that he could not continue till the end. He had one term (as the US President) and at a certain moment he could not proceed to attain this goal. But, he has been following what is going on in the area for a long time. He has written three books, which are very important; and I would recommend them to all those who are interested in knowing about Egypt. President Carter refers to what President Obama has said a few days ago, about the need to establish a state of Palestine. The state of Palestine would live side by side with Israel, within, and it has to be within the 1967 borders – with agreed adjudication or switch of land (whatever you want to call it). But the main point is that the parameters would be '1967'. This was attacked fiercely by Israel's Prime Minister, Mr Netanyahu.

Let us look at what President Carter said and then I would touch upon what Mr Netanyahu said. President Carter said, "There is nothing new here" – which is true. Partition of Palestine into two States – one Jewish and one Arab, was the integral part of the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 adopted on 29 November, 1947 which Israel used as the legal foundation for the establishment of the State of Israel. If you go back to what Ben Gurion announced on 14 May 1948 – to quote word by word, "On the basis of the strength of the General Assembly Resolution", i.e. exactly the two State solution.

Then later on, after 20 or 30 years, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242, while India was a Member of the Security Council. Perhaps, Ambassador Gharekhan can say more about it – how this Resolution was 'cooked', more than I can. I was there anyway, but Egypt was not a member of the Security Council at that particular time. The Resolution made it clear that to have peace and stability, one had to have two main methods amongst others. These were, "withdrawal of Israel from the territories occupied on June 5, 1967; the other was to end belligerency", which applies to both sides – we had to end belligerency. Israel accepted that.

Then at Camp David Israel accepted, with us in September 1978 that Resolution 242 would apply to every other country that was willing to enter into peace with them. Now, Palestinians are willing to enter into peace with them. The Israel Government has accepted Resolution 242 basing their existence on Resolution 181, which divided Palestine into two states – one Jewish and one Arab. At the same time, corresponding obligations emanating from Resolution 242, will apply to any other country or any other people who would like to live in peace with Israel. So they accepted all that 30 to 40 years ago; and now, Mr Netanyahu believes that it is not possible because the borders are indefensible. I was reminded today by one of my ambassadorial colleagues here that the matter is very clear to everyone. Even his daughter asked him: What does that mean? If Israel had successfully defended its borders in 1967, why do they say – these are now indefensible? It makes no sense really.

So what is needed now is for the International community really to garner all its efforts to end the conflict. What has been going on in the efforts to seek peace ends up being called peace process, which has been going on for 18 years. What is this peace process? It has never graduated outside the 'process' stage. So, what is needed now is to leave aside the policy that conceptually one can call 'Managing a Conflict', and enter into another stage which should be called, 'How to End the Conflict'. What is needed now after 60 years of bloodshed, of suffering by the Palestinians, is to end the conflict. To end the conflict, we in Egypt along with Palestinian colleagues and others have been surveying the history of the conflict. The history of the conflict is 'in the proof' that proves, "In every decade or so, when a concrete step was made it was done in what might be called an International conference". In 1949, after the first Arab-Israeli war the neighbours in the area, four Arab countries and Israel signed an Armistice Agreement, wherein the International Conference was called by the UN Security Council in the Greek island of Rhodes in the Mediterranean.

Later on in 1978, Egypt entered into peace treaties at Camp David; first, the framework and then the Peace Treaty on March 26, 1979. Earlier after the 1973 war, Egypt entered into two disengagements with Israel; and Syria entered into one disengagement with Israel. Later on, President Clinton reached the same conclusion, as before him President Carter had, and called for a Conference – which did not succeed. It is very clear that if you want to have peace, to end the conflict, you have to go for an International Conference, to meet under whatever auspices. Actually, a Resolution came out after 1973 war – Resolution 338 which gave a very imaginative formula, a Conference under 'appropriate' auspices. We can have it under UN auspices, under European Union auspices, or under anyone who is acceptable to the two sides. This conference should try to work fully and faithfully to conclude peace.

If we look back, we will also find that it is not possible to conclude peace between two parties, when you have a party which is very powerful and another party which is much weaker. We also believe that to help the Palestinians, the International community can do something based on the onus of morality, with law and the political situation around; that is to say, recognise Palestine as a State. When you enter into an agreement with one State which is weak, with another that is much stronger, there is a possibility of finding a solution, if the framework has been agreed upon by the International community, as also in part by the countries themselves. So, we are trying that again now. We are meeting and discussing; of course, India is one of the most important members there. We discussed that NAM should work to get enough support to show that International Community has recognised the State of Palestine.

Finally, let me end with a brief note on the willingness of the new Egyptian Government to establish good relations and strengthen our ties with India. This is a very important and major decision that we would like to implement, as soon as possible. We in Egypt believe that ‘The golden era of exemplary co-operation be attained as soon as possible’. We are working together within the NAM, the origin of which goes back over 50 years with the legendary leaders of that era. We do hope that our leaders these days will stand up and try to emulate their predecessors and that we will grow together, both India and Egypt, for the good of the entire International community.’

Thank you very much.

\*Text of the talk delivered by **HE Dr Nabil El-Araby** at USI on 28 May 2011 with **Shri Chinmaya R Gharekhan, IFS (Retd)** in the Chair. This was the first talk delivered by him anywhere in the world after taking over as the Foreign Minister of Egypt.

**\*\*HE Dr Nabil El-Araby** took over as the Foreign Minister of the Arab Republic of Egypt in March 2011. On 15 May 2011, he was also elected as the Secretary General of the Arab League. Earlier, he was Egypt’s Ambassador in New Delhi from 1981-83.

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