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**ENHANCING EGYPT'S STANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AS THE REGIME'S MAIN EXTERNAL TASK**

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MAIN EXTERNAL TASK

by *Philippe Droz-Vincent*

I will follow in this paper the hypothesis of neo-authoritarianism as presented in the general concept paper. The Arab regimes have faced numerous challenges. They have adapted themselves but without any substantial change on their authoritarian nature. Yet Egypt is not ruled in the twenty-first century as it was ruled in the 1970s. There is a general persistence of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, but there are also transitions of (or within) authoritarianism¹.

What does security mean for Egyptian decision-makers? If by security we mean a right to whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development (according to the vague notion of survival), Egypt is located in a Middle Eastern region plagued with threats of all kinds. Threats range from classical "national interests" (the Nile's free flow of water and minor territorial contestations with Sudan), to the maintenance of a balance of power in the "cold peace" with the region's would-be hegemon (e.g. Israel), to threats from the other Arab regimes that may change from being "friend" to becoming "enemy" (the Arab boycott of Egypt only eroded in the 1980s)... to foreign powers' interference (the Middle East remains a very "penetrated" region) or to the "transnational" dimension acquired by identities (Arab solidarities or Islamic attachments) or by specific issues (e.g. the progress in the attainment of Palestinian self-determination, the suffering of the Palestinians or the fate of the Iraqi people under embargo in the 1990's then under American occupation). The saliency of this wide array of threats is reinforced by the fact that the Arab regimes, as a way to seize opportunities or just for fear, have a great propensity to the "securitisation" of many issues (to borrow the expression from Buzan, 1991), i.e. to present them not just as topics that are part of public policies, but as existential threats.

The Middle East is indeed a region with no security system (comparable to Europe for instance) or stable balance of power (Israel has refused any system of dissuasion) and even with no boundaries because ideological influences or transnational mobilisation cross borders from Morocco to Pakistan (the "Greater Middle East" as a reference point, different from its political interpretation as a privileged zone of intervention defined after September 11 by the G W Bush administration). The "peace process" phase of the 1990s that was due to change the whole security structure of the Middle East permanently looks more like a temporary phase. Negotiations failed in the Camp-David II summit, conflict resumed with the second *Intifadha*, hopes dashed and attitudes of extreme hostility have resurfaced (Ross, 2005). The Middle East remains a very volatile security system. Territorial disputes, ideological competitions, status rivalries and ethnic or cultural divisions reinforce each other and place heavy constraints on the foreign policies of the Arab states. For Iran a dispute with any Arab neighbour risks becoming a

¹ Let us just recall that the "transitional" literature had no teleological vision incorporated as its main tenets by its precursors: they were studying "transitions from" (authoritarian classical rule) not "transitions to" (democracy).

rift with all its Arab neighbours. Hence the concerns in Egypt's decision-making circles about a "Shiite crescent/arc" emerging in the Arab world and contesting the status quo, as a civil war is mounting in Iraq in 2005-06 and as *Hizballah* is leading Lebanon in a war with Israel in July 2006. The same applies to relations with Israel. The local struggle for territory between Israel and the Palestinians set up and substantiated a much wider hostility between Israel and the wider Arab world that is shadowed by a conflict between Israel and the wider Islamic world. The transnational qualities of Arab nationalism and of Islamic affiliations are amplified by the axial Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Hence Egypt can't fully normalise its relations with Israel (and maintains "a cold peace") while Israel drags its feet for establishing a Palestinian state. And the resumed confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians following the failure of the Oslo peace process reinforced the "coldness" of the Israeli-Egyptian peace. The great (Arab-Israeli) wars of the past years are now obsolete but regional security challenges have since proliferated. After the heightened years of the 1950s and 1960s when the Pan-ideologies had a potential for shaking the region, threats have become much more diffuse and ambiguous but remain vivid. The crosscurrents of Arab nationalism, Islamic solidarity, anti-Israelism (anti-Zionism) and anti-Westernism blur across the internal and regional levels in contradictory ways affecting attitudes and opinion among ruling elites... and in the so-called "Egyptian street". Hence Egyptian leaders are very careful when managing their regional stance (e.g. the replacement of the flamboyant Amr Mussa by the quieter diplomat Ahmad Maher in March 2001) and are very suspicious of the offensive American moves after September 11 to "reshape the Middle East".

At the same time insecure Arab regimes with obsessive concerns about making themselves secure within their state at the helm of their political system (e.g. securing the regime, not just the state)² have found some degree of legitimacy or at least leverage in this threat-inducing environment. The insecurity of most Middle Eastern regimes spills over into regional security policy. Conversely, regimes boasted about their "regional missions" to explain all restrictions in their respective political systems and cloaked the "emasculatation" of their respective political scenes behind high ideological discourses. For regimes that can't fully claim to represent democratically a given people (the political rhetoric has always to meet a reality check, to some point), it remains essential to find some basis of legitimacy beyond their borders. Repressive authoritarian regimes have gained ground over Pan-ideologies and transnational mobilisations by using them (and by the way they have kept them afloat). The Egyptian nation-state is a strong nation-state as compared with other Arab states of more recent origin and often considered as artificial envelopes (Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia not to speak about Jordan). But the nature of the regime is leaning Egyptian decision-makers to fulfil a "regional mission". Of course this mission is nowadays quite different from its "Nasserist" version of the 1950s and 1960s. It revolves around the fostering of a strong Egyptian stance in the Middle Eastern region. Here was the source of the strong popularity of Amr Mousa as Foreign Minister (until his replacement in March 2001) when he showed a firm stance vis-à-vis Israel or when he played the drumbeats of Arab nationalism as a way to assert Egyptian authority. Egypt rediscovered Pan-Arab themes in 1994-95 in Cairo's dispute with Washington over the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, when the

² On the distinction between the state defined as institutional positions and the regime defined as the "roads" used to fill these positions (that may be large avenues or more tortuous and blocked trails), see O'Donnell (1973).

Egyptians refused to adhere to the treaty so long as the Israelis themselves refrained from signing it (then the Egyptians buckled under American pressure). The Egyptian stance provoked a strong popular chord in the Arab world. But there is a reverse side to this regional projection. Politics is not just about ideas and legitimacy and the regimes have to find resources to sustain their respective political system. This logic applies to Egypt whose economy is its biggest source of weakness (Waterbury, 1983). The three sources of national income (tourism, remittances from Egyptians working abroad especially in the Gulf and taxes from the Suez Canal transit... plus shrinking oil exports) do not allow for a freehand financing of the Egyptian system. This makes a big difference with the oil producers in the Gulf, with Iraq endowed with water and oil or with states that benefit from profligate aid from the Gulf like Syria. The Arab regimes have benefited from stalled situations to negotiate access to rents, arms procurements and international flows of aid³. This is also the core of Egypt's special relation with the United States since Egypt's diplomatic shift in Camp-David I (1978-79). The alignment ("bandwagoning") with the United States has earned Egypt one of the largest US economic assistance aid in the world and helped improve the country's strategic situation. It is questionable whether the Egyptian regime would be able to make deals with Israel of the same kinds if Egypt was a democracy.

The Egyptian regime maintains a two-fold security policy aimed at fulfilling these often-contradictory objectives. Firstly, Egypt's "militarisation" policy, i.e. the accumulation of capacity for organized violence (even at a time of peace) is to be understood as a way to maintain Egypt's regional stance. Egypt has not been much threatened since it signed Camp David I, but the Egyptian regime has proclaimed the need to maintain a large and competitive military establishment. And the sheer size of the Egyptian army makes the military an influential actor that maintains a high profile. The crucial place of the military sector in Arab politics was defined in a war-prone area and the Middle Eastern security system was born fighting. There is a kind of "path dependence" from this period (the so-called praetorian era) that explains a lot of subsequent developments. Yet from the beginning there was a disparity between the short duration of the fighting itself and the huge consequences of the preparation for war for regime authority and state-society relations (Heydemann, 2000). War preparation served more decisively to entrench regimes than to prepare directly for wars. Things have changed since with the increased "civilianisation" of regimes (see below), but the military sector has remained a key actor in the Egyptian regime and the Middle East plays a key role in arms markets. The military build-up is driven by considerations of prestige and diplomacy and should not be taken at face value as a preparation for war in a threats-plagued region. The most symbolic aim is to maintain Egyptian armed forces commensurate with that of Israel (this is not deterrence, even conventional deterrence, something Israel... and the US would not allow). Egypt's arms industry is the largest in the Arab world producing under licence US Abrams tanks, aircrafts, and helicopters...

³ There were feelings in the 1990's in Egypt that the advancing peace process would diminish Egyptian role (it doesn't mean that the Egyptians are responsible for its failure). The autonomous path gained by the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the Israel-Jordan peace treaty and the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations mechanically diminished Egyptian brokering stance in the Arab world. Other Arab countries complained from the Egyptian contemptuous stance toward them, the Egyptians considering themselves as the ones who opened the way to Arab-Israeli direct negotiations and were unduly punished by an Arab boycott.

Military industrialisation is based more on a psychological rationale rather than a functional one (the concerted build-up of a military industrialisation capacity). The Egyptian officers corps where most officers have been influenced in military academies by the generation of old-fashioned Arab nationalists are very sensitive to these dimensions. By the way it is also a convenient way for a regime coming from a military (but that has “autonomised”/“civilianised” itself) to keep strong links with the military establishment. The military is characterised by a strong sense of corporatism (transmitted through the military hierarchy, but also a common identity cultivated in schools, military clubs, traditions or customs), a strong self-image and high societal esteem, which fosters the officers’ identification with the success or failure of their country’s policies. Egyptian officers constantly lobby for high technology weapon systems. The Egyptian officers corps have witnessed in 1991 the quick defeat of the Iraqi army that was depicted as n°4 in the world and again in 2003 the technological superiority of the American-British military offensive. The Egyptian military aims at building a “capital-intensive” military by the modernization of its armed forces according to the requirements of the “revolution in military affairs”. No regime can hope survive with an economically constricted and humiliated officer corps. The regime has been forced in recent years to adapt “militarisation” to the accelerating rate of socio-economic change. The Egyptian regime had to curb military expenditures in the 1990s when its capacity to engage in military spending came to conflict with financial constraints (Sadowski, 1993). The military has loosened some grip on the wealth of the Egyptian state. Yet relative high levels of military expenditures have persisted and the military remains a well-serviced budget-hungry sector. Hence the need for Egyptian military to have unrestricted access to outside aids, arms procurement and the importance of the US-Egyptian military cooperation. US military cooperation has helped Egypt modernise its armed forces and retain a status as a significant military power with the latest jewels (tanks, helicopters, aircrafts...) the military is craving about. US Foreign Military Financing (FMF) helps the Egyptian regime to service the corporate needs of its military (\$ 1,3 billion a year). The United States also provides training, military advice and expertise (e g during the biannual large “Bright Star” military exercises)⁴. But the US alliance has a more wide meaning.

Secondly, Egypt cultivates a strong strategic alliance with the United States. Egypt shares with the US numerous strategic objectives: the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the security in the Gulf, the broader stability in the Middle East, the fight against extremism and the country’s economic and political development (Quandt, 19 and 1988). The Egyptian-American alliance has brought concrete gains for Egyptian national interests. It is the context (and the limitation) of the Egyptian strong regional activism. Numerous regional mediations have been conducted by the Egyptian Foreign Minister and by the intelligence chief Omar Suleiman in the first place on the Palestinian-Israeli file. The Egyptian diplomatic activism has served to restore Egypt’s prominence as a regional power. Egypt’s regional role is one of its main international assets. The Egyptian diplomacy for sure aims at putting Egypt in its right full place at the head of the Arab region. It tries to benefit from the special characteristics of the

⁴ Egypt does not host US permanent bases even if it has a highly supportive role as US partner. Egypt has continued to show sensitivity about any permanent US presence on the US soil (negotiations to use an Egyptian port failed in 1981).

region as an incomplete security system and to square them with the regime's interests⁵. Yet Egyptian decision-makers have no doubts that they don't have the means of their self-proclaimed ambitions and often place their initiatives under the tutelage of the American patronage. Here enters for Egypt the importance of the US alliance, in pair with Israel. The alignment with Washington has promoted Egypt's vital interests, but Egypt has failed to resist the irrevocable insertion of Israel as a powerful third party in Egyptian-American strategic relations. Egypt has struggled since Camp-David I to stay on an equal footing with Israel in American eyes (and aid allocations). Egypt has tried since the 1990s to mitigate its US alliance by improving ties with Europe because it has found the European policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict more balanced than the US stance (Egypt signed a Partnership Agreement with the EU) and has shown a special French tropism (President Mubarak has cultivated close relations with François Mitterrand or with Jacques Chirac). But Egypt has never hoped to counterbalance its strategic relationship with the United States. Egypt may develop alternative (and more balanced) visions as compared with the United States: it could convene an Arab summit designed to place the newly elected Israeli Prime Minister in 1996 (Benjamin Netanyahu) before an Arab consensus, it helped maintain contacts between Israel or the United States and Syria and defused many tensions, it withdraw its ambassador from Israel with the beginning of the second *Intifadha*, it urged the United States to intervene when violence began to rage in the Palestinian territories, it urged again the United States to take a clear stance as the United States was in an awkward position to do something to invalidate *al-Qa'ida* "linking"/equating its terrorist attacks with the defence of the Palestinian people (as the American post September 11 internal debate was sidelining those who were advocating for a clear "engagement" in the Palestinian file as opposed to those urging for an Iraq only policy). But Egyptian decision-makers have been cautious to bring their regional interventions in strict line with US objectives and moves. The Palestinian-Israeli has been a prime choice where the Egyptian diplomacy has tried by dint of a pragmatic foreign policy to fill the vacuum left by the "hands off policy" of the Bush administration or generated in 2003-04 by the US engagement in Iraq and the upcoming presidential elections. Egypt took the "road map" in 2003-04 as a workable plan (even if it was strongly biased toward Israel by its insistence on a violence cessation first) and worked with Israel on a plan for its withdrawal from Palestinian territories. Egypt was very much involved in 2004-05 in stopping the smuggling of weapons under the Philadelphia corridor (the border between Gaza and Egypt) or in the training of Palestinian security forces according to the basic tenets of the "security reforms" fostered by the Quartet. It was pivotal in the efforts to organise a cease-fire between various Palestinian fractions when the Palestinian authority began to collapse. The management of the situation in Gaza after the Israeli unilateral withdrawal in Summer 2005 was done with Egyptian help. The Egyptian diplomacy entered in numerous talks with the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon (in February 2005 it conducted the first summit with Ariel Sharon since the Israeli Prime Minister came to power)⁶. Hence, Egypt's strategic relation with the United States has

⁵ There is behind the Egyptian activism no return to the "Nasserist" policy aiming at dominating the Arab world (and that was decried especially by the Syrians as a kind of "colonization"); it is no tool to project physically Egyptian power but a very symbolic presence through diplomatic activism.

⁶ Cairo made numerous symbolic gestures in 2004 especially when the Israeli embassy's spokesman gave an interview on an Egyptian TV program. Yet Egypt's ambassador to Israel had been recalled in Cairo since the beginning of the second *Intifadha*.

remained the primary context of Egyptian regional policy, although Egypt's dependence has also been a very hotly debated topic especially in Parliament.

Latent tensions, disagreements and mutual scepticism were numerous in the past: the Egyptian government tried to rehabilitate Libya, Sudan or Iraq, considered throughout the 1990s "rogue states" by Washington, while the United States was promoting direct confrontation with them; Israel nuclear arsenal considered as a threat to Egyptian national interests and regional stability was another source of tensions with Washington. Yet the daylight between the positions of Cairo and Washington was never recognized by either of both parties. Strains have deepened in the post September 11 era that acted as a revelatory. Egypt has supported American efforts to fight "global terror" but opposed the American "loose" definition of terrorism (and its use as a deciphering key to the Iraqi or Palestinian situations); the narrow and often Israeli-biased prism through which the United States have looked at the Palestinian situation has created rifts with Egypt; Egypt's formal opposition to the Iraqi war in 2002-03 (Egypt maintained that "regime change" in Iraq was an Iraqi internal matter) and its calls for a diplomatic solution acted as a symbol for a country that in the recent past stood firmly behind the American projects in the Middle East. Finally the American "offensive" interventionism in the Middle East in the name of "democratic dominoes" raised suspicions in Egypt and doubts about its efficiency to effectively solve the many problems of the region. The Iraq war sparked off a lively debate regarding the Egyptian regime's ability to uphold national interests and Egyptian intellectuals of various political taints (Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, Tareq al-Bichri) denounced "Egypt's withdrawal from history" i.e. Egypt's marginalisation in the region, its subservience to US interests and its inability to chart an independent course or even a coherent foreign policy⁷. The Egyptian-American relationship has never relied on broad based public support and has always been an elite bargain. Yet after September 11, perceptions have changed and negative feelings have surfaced openly. Finally, Washington new shift of strategy toward reform and democratisation ("a forward strategy of freedom") in the Middle East focusing on Egypt (along with Saudi Arabia; Iraq, Syria, Iran were destined to follow another quite different "regime change" path) and the numerous criticisms (and expressions of contempt) levelled in Washington at the authoritarian, stagnant and corrupt Egyptian regime seriously destabilised in 2002-03 the American-Egyptian relationship⁸. Yet perceptions however important don't ipso facto translate into policy changes. Gradual change and dialogue on reform with the Egyptian regime became in 2004-05 the primary choice for a G W Bush administration that has been engulfed by the intricate Iraqi problems (then bogged down in a complete morass and disaster) and that has set aside aggressive democracy-promotion (except at the rhetorical level). All in all a strong strategic alliance with the United States, however transformed, remains of prime importance for Egypt.

⁷ The American pressures on Egypt and the strongly felt dwindling regional role of Egypt led to questions levelled by Egyptian intellectuals as to whether the weaknesses of Egypt (regime rigidity, economic difficulties, corruption...) may hinder Egypt's role. Conspiracy theories were often invoked answers.

⁸ The United States came increasingly to see the authoritarian reform-proof Egyptian regime as a breeding ground for extremism (cf the high number of Egyptians part of the September 11 commando or in the high levels of the *al-Qa'ida* network). The American policy-makers began to attribute the region's problems to the Arab authoritarian regimes and pressed for reforms of all kinds.

The regime as the guarantor of the state (or change within strong stability)

Although substantial regional threats may continue to loom, the authoritarian primary concern is internal politics. The Egyptian regime's main claim to power/legitimacy has been its ability to maintain "stability" in the country as the guardian of the state. This is the "saviour model" justification. It took the place of the "realisation model" adopted in the 1970s and 1980s by numerous authoritarian military-originating regimes (i.e. the enduring claim that they realised something for their people, that they built roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, factories...). The later model has gradually eroded with economic reforms, the growth of the private sector and under the weight of globalisation: prolonged fiscal crisis and economic reforms/privatisations heavily biased toward crony capitalists have "hollowed out" the state apparatus and its hegemonic reach in Egyptian society. But the "statist tradition" remains vivid in Egypt. There is a strong tradition of managerial rule by a state bureaucracy in Egypt and a long history of corporatist political engineering coming from the state (that was "abducted" by the military in 1952 and has been inherited from rulers to rulers until now). This "statist culture", what Tareq al-Bichri analyses as "the consent the Egyptians have expressed to be governed", remains buoyed by a strong coercitive apparatus.

Firstly, the regime as the guardian of the state is said to have saved Egypt in the 1990s from terrorism and Islamist seizure of power. But it has become a police state. The Egyptian state has applied massive repression (massive arrests, generalised torture practices, trials before military courts...) and made great use of the myth of an Egyptian secular state besieged by violent Islamists and resorting to repression in a deadlocked situation. The confrontation began in the 1980s; the 1990s saw an intensification of violent clashes between Islamist groups and the security services in Cairo (Imbaba) and in Upper Egypt. The spiral of violence culminated with the Luxor massacre in 1997. The fighting between the government and *al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya* in the 1990's left 1 300 among civilians or policemen dead and 15 000 to 20 000 (?) Islamists jailed. The regime gave free hand to the security services to combat Islamist groups and implemented amendments to the penal code and to the law on state security courts. Hundreds of civilians were transferred to military courts with fewer legal protections. The Ministry of Interior had the direct command (under the supervision of the presidency that presides over the police) in counter-terrorism operations. During the 1990s, the regime chose to rely primarily upon the security forces to combat Islamists violent groups. But the army stepped in to assist the often badly trained Central Security Forces. And every times the terrorist threats peaked, military top brass commissioned articles in Egyptian (Arabic) newspapers explaining their concern with stability in the country. In 1999-2000 the regime was buoyed by its victory over Islamist violent groups (and by a stable economy). *Al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya* has laid down its arms and renounced violence and *al-Jihad* has been split between those who fled abroad (headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri), those who remain underground and those in prisons who have formally abjured jihad against fellow Muslims. The legacy has been a state apparatus whose brutality has become a routine practice. The prolonged state of emergency has criminalized public life. The 1992 anti-terror law has been used to arrest and prosecute not only those accused of committing violence but also those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The police force has taken a leading role in combating terrorism and has

been expanded in numbers (the Central Security Forces) and in prerogatives (from safeguarding “public security” to protecting “public order”). The secret police has also been expanded with the efficient offensive of Islamist groups against the Egyptian state and has gained a prominent role in the political repression. Generalized torture has been a landmark of President Mubarak’s regime. The state security courts were abolished in 2004 but the emergency law in force since 1981 (and reinstated every three years) has allowed for “recurrent detention”. In this context, the post September 11 American “war on terrorism” has created parallels with the Egyptian regime’s war against radical Islamist groups, as the Egyptian officials ironically alluded to (even if its loose American interpretation has created rifts, see above).

Secondly, at the same time the regime has continued to cultivate strong links with the military. On the surface the army performs a less political role in comparison with President Mubarak’s predecessors. There is indeed a “civilianisation” of the state in Egypt when compared with the situation in the 1950s and 1960s. Military men are no longer dominating the top positions of the Egyptian state (as ministers, director of public sector companies, high bureaucrats or governors) and the regime has increased its leeway away from the military establishment. The days have gone when a small clique of officers could seize power by mobilising a few military units. Middle Eastern states are now huge Leviathan with large bureaucracies and the military is too weak and ineffective to control the state apparatus (Luciani, 1990). It is rather the presidency that assumes full control in Egypt with its own network of trusted individuals, crony entrepreneurs and the National Democratic Party (NDP)’s high nomenclatura. Although the Egyptian authoritarian regime suffers from “a crisis of legitimacy” (Hudson, 1977), it has been able to secure more legitimacy (indeed a “weak legitimacy”) in the eyes of key social groups than its potential competitors or opponents. The presidency is the centre of power. At the same time the military remains an important component of the Egyptian authoritarian apparatus. Hosni Mubarak is a former military officer who seeks the trust of the military establishment. The difference between the military and civilian channels of influence becomes blurred at the top of the Egyptian states: numerous high decision-makers have a military background (Zakaria Azmi, secretary general of the presidency, Safwat al-Sharif, secretary general of the NDP...). The regime called on the army in numerous situations when it was about to lose control (Islamist uprisings following the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, riots started by the Central Security Forces in 1986) or when the police proved inefficient in the 1990s to quell Islamist attacks. The military establishment has always answered positively to the President’s requirements. The Egyptian regime ongoing reliance on the armed forces mirrors its lack of accountability and invigorates the weight of the military within the political system. Officers have become part of the authoritarian state as members of the elite. The endeavours of the Egyptian regime were thus not so much geared towards “demilitarisation” or pushing the military “back to the barracks”, but rather towards the progressive “institutionalisation” of the military apparatus into the authoritarian state (Bellin 2004)⁹. The trend of the disappearance of uniformed men from high posts does not contradict the thoroughgoing integration of the military into the formal and informal authoritarian decision-making networks. However, this “institutionalisation” is not to be

⁹ Bellin (2004) speaks of the “institutionalisation” of the military... although such a characterisation that has some limits in the Egyptian case when compared with the Turkish case of a strong institutionalisation of the military in the state.

confused with “professionalisation” (in Samuel Huntington’s sense), although it has a “professional” element in that cronyism, patrimonialism and political affiliations in the military are increasingly complemented by formal, meritocratic, and professional promotion criteria. Some results of this transformation have been the appointment of more competent officers to high posts, the emergence of corporatism, and greater cohesion within the military.

As a consequence, the security sector has become a strong interest group (of a special kind) inside the Egyptian regime. The army has been at the forefront of these developments. On the one hand, the army with its economic capacity in accordance with its “militarisation” objectives has “organisationally” invaded the civilian economy. The defence industry has converted many production facilities to manufacture civilian goods for the domestic market and the army has developed a wide network of farms, milk processing and bread production facilities, as well as poultry and fish farms. It is involved in the lucrative reclamation of desert land and runs numerous tourist resorts. The army is not a Schumpeterian entrepreneur in the strict sense but is rather a “parasitic actor” knowing better than others how to play by, benefit from the rules of the game in the intricate Egyptian economy under reform¹⁰. On the other hand, the army’s economic activities serve as a life jacket for protecting the living standard of the military personnel from the adverse effects of economic liberalization (*infitah*). Army officers are now a privileged group living in a kind of “military society”, i.e. a closed-off social group living secluded from civilians in exclusive suburbs or residential areas, further distinguished by corporate privileges such as access to military-only facilities (schools, hospitals, clubs, leisure facilities, military shops, etc.), cheap housing, transportation facilities, easy access to low-interest credits, access to scarce consumer goods at cheap prices, better medical care, and higher salaries than employees in the civilian public sector (half of an average Egyptian household’s budget goes to cover the cost of food, the other that of housing; public sector employees have lost more than half of their purchase power in recent years with skyrocketing inflation rates). Officers have also access to military networks to find lucrative jobs after their retirement. Once a group with whom the Egyptian middle classes identified, military officers have become a status elite with whom the average Egyptian has little in common and living in a closed “military society”. This model of rent-seeking privileged individuals extends beyond the army to the whole security sector. Talks of corruption are numerous. One of the most profitable sectors of corruption is state land and the real estate market. Military and police officers have greatly benefited with Sinai land, villas on the Northern coast west of Alexandria or on the Suez Canal zone. The new security elite is wed to the political status quo. In numerous other cases (especially in Asian countries), governments have empowered themselves by establishing big and hegemonic armies and making the armies fend for themselves through economic activities. In most cases the armies were driven out of business at a surprising speed when governments fostered economic reforms. In Egypt (as in Arab polities), this is less so as the regime remains authoritarian and keeps tight control of the pace of change (a stalled and careful *infitah*).

¹⁰ In other words, the military knows how to make use of its comparative advantages like the cheap manpower of its conscripts, its access to technology and highly qualified civilian engineers, its heavy equipment infrastructure, privileges such as disguised subsidies, tax exemptions and absolute financial autonomy, its monopolistic right to produce goods of “strategic interest”, and its sheer size which enables it to alter market conditions and circumvent regulations.

The regime's newly found stability is explained to an important degree by the restructured security sector. The relationship between the military establishment and the Egyptian regime can't be understood without taking into account the thorough transformation that the regime has imposed on the armed forces. Sadat shook up the officer corps by eliminating a number of powerful and politicised officers, thus achieving, at last, what Nasser had yearned for, i.e. control over the military. Consequently, the Egyptian army is no longer a locus of politicisation where officers can discuss politics as freely as in the 1950s or 1960s. Twenty to thirty years of interaction with the authoritarian regimes have left their mark on the armed forces, which are now characterized by over-centralized authority, hidden lines of command (i.e. the monitoring of military activities behind the scenes), and rivalries between different organizations of military and security/paramilitary services (police, special anti-terrorist branches, *mukhabarat* services...) that counterbalance each other. The presidential or royal palace is the centre of power. Promotions of military personnel are based on loyalty to the regime or at least passivity, rather than on field ability or skills. The top brass of the military are often enticed by material and immaterial benefits and become an integral part of the regime's power network. Officers of lower rank usually maintain a lower profile and are primarily concerned about their personal (sometimes semi-legal) economic interests, while otherwise acting as docile yes-men who lack the will and/or capacity to take initiative, preferring not to be identified as innovators or individuals prone to make the first move and restricting themselves to the roles of quiet modern technocrats and apolitical specialists. All in all, the political quiescence of the military is not the product of the military's "(re)professionalization" or its return to an external mission (the defence of the country) but of its close relationship with their regime and the benefits it gains from it. The military today hardly poses any immediate challenge to the regime, not least because it is among the main beneficiary of the authoritarian status quo. Its new role and activities leave it ample room for self-enrichment, and thus, albeit often indirectly, for continued membership within the inner circles of "politically relevant elites" (Perthes, 2004). Conversely the Ministry of Interior and the increasingly powerful secret services (General Intelligence, State Security Investigations branch of the police) have gained a growing influence, as well as a small special branch of the army, the Presidential Guard (the Defence Minister and the army chief of staff have this background). A new alliance of top military leaders, police commanders and secret police top brass has cemented at the top of the Egyptian state, along with the new capitalist cronies and new technocrats promoted in the NDP by Gamal Mubarak¹¹.

The "redrawing" of security: security sector as a tool for the survivalist regime

The Egyptian regime has managed to consolidate its hold on the Egyptian polity by strongly integrating the security sector in its authoritarian apparatus. Yet, the robustness of this apparatus is called into question from another point of view, because it gives the impression of strongly governing a debilitated political system (for a different interpretation, Springborg, 198). Politics is not just about who is benefiting from what

¹¹ Gamal Mubarak was appointed in

(the basic question in political science if one follows R Dahl). Politics also entails giving a direction to a political community. Here lies the blame for the Egyptian regime that lost its capacity to imprint a project on the Egyptian polity and only manages competing forces and groups to protect its grip on power¹². The very nature of the Egyptian authoritarian system weakens any new alliance between the security services and new (businessmen)/old (technocrats) interest groups, because the rigidity of a polity steered by ageing politicians without any sense of national project is its most important and significant feature. Furthermore, the sense of the state is eroding and is threatening the “political contract” at the top of which the security sector in Egypt is lying. The “retreat of the state” is not just physical (privatisation of parts of the state-run economy, relinquishing of basic welfare state functions, retreating from social services left to Islamist organisations...) but is also “conceptual”. There is a growing sense of neglect in Egyptian society: the state succeeded in its war against “terrorism” but failed in protecting the lives of its citizens... and hundreds of passengers burnt to death in a burning third class train that nobody stopped in Upper Egypt in February 2002 acted as a metaphor of the Egyptian people governed by an incompetent and corrupt authoritarian regime it could not replace. There is a growing sense of social violence in Egyptian society (tribal vendettas in Upper Egypt, police brutality...) and corruption has reached on a massive scale. The Egyptian social fabric is in a process of gradual disintegration in ugliness, hypocrisy and cynicism, amid growing sectarian tensions (between Copts and Muslims and with a reawakened Coptic question)¹³. The Egyptian polity is increasingly truncated into competing interest groups revolving around the presidency without any cement coalescing them together. The middle classes (a pivotal group in Egyptian history... and the social base of the army and of the police) suffer from the economic reforms: they are deprived of the possibility to buy an apartment, they see their dwindling purchase power reduced by inflation and are witnessing the agonies of the lower classes in the privatised Egyptian economy. The slow rate of change fostered by the Egyptian regime is dangerously weakening the Egyptian social fabric (a case American decision-makers are making against the Egyptian government after September 11 to urge them to shift to “promoting democracy”). The challenge is reinforced by other developments related to regional politics.

At the same time, the regional Egyptian stance has proved a very dangerous trap for the regime. The Egyptian regime has increasingly become caught between a rock and a hard place. 2002-03 proved a hectic period for Egyptian decision-makers. The failure of the Camp David II negotiations and the breaking out of the second *Intifadha* opened the way to a dangerous distancing between the official position of the Egyptian government and the mobilisation of the “Egyptian street”, with the return of Israeli violent retaliation moves and Palestinian suicidal attacks broadcasted on live by new Arab satellite media like *al-Jazeera* (that broke state information monopoly in Egypt). Secular leftists, Islamists and even human rights activists began to speak the same

¹² Even very narrowly based military regimes in the 1950’s and 1960’s found ways to create around them a “moment of enthusiasm” (Binder, 1978) and to mobilise their people with a project.

¹³ Sectarian tensions surfaced in Upper Egypt in the 1980’s with Islamist resurgence. But the clampdown on Islamic groups did not alleviate these tensions. There is also growing international pressure dealing with the Coptic question in Egypt (coming especially from American human rights organizations) and a growing number of Coptic organisations in the diaspora. The Egyptian government took great care to manage this problem and to highlight its concerns in public reports and TV programs (Copts were appointed in the NDP’s leadership and the Coptic Christmas was designated as a national holiday).

language of Arab-Islamic nationalism. Egypt's typically apolitical masses were awakened. The highest wave of popular anti-Americanism in Egypt propagated by opposition political parties, professional unions or committees of solidarity with the Palestinians calling for boycotts has taken place under the Mubarak regime... that let the outpouring of public anger express itself in public to some degree as long as it was manageable. After September 11 anti-Americanism and anti-Israelism (America and Israel being seen as being one) skyrocketed and found new fuel with the American involvement in the Middle East, as the war raged in Afghanistan and as the preparation for the Iraqi war accelerated in Washington. The conundrum increased with the G W Bush administration's unqualified acceptance of the Israeli interpretation of its own situation as a "war against (Palestinian) terror". The Egyptian regime was in complete disarray. The government had hemmed in demonstration held in 2000-01 in solidarity with the second *Intifadha* with an overwhelming security presence. But the regime showed growing tolerance for public demonstrations in January, February and March 2003 (yet angering more openly the United States and Israel)... the NDP staged its own demonstration to stay abreast of public opinion and the regime even coordinated with the Muslim Brothers to canalise the anti-war movement into peaceful demonstrations. The stress was especially felt by the Egyptian regime in 2002-03 when the United States was openly preparing the invasion of Iraq: it declared opposition to war and to regime change by foreign diktats while remaining committed to its strategic relationship with the United States. The Iraq war highlighted the gulf between state and society with an Egyptian government caught between popular demands and external pressures. Mobilisation has receded since then but never abated.

The end-result is a situation of latent mobilisation in Egypt. Firstly, a new generation of activists using e-mail and mobile text messages has grown active in the *Kefaya* movement or in multiple protestations with the slogans '*hadha mesch balad-na*' (this is not our country). They are not deterred by the number of security personnel deployed before each demonstration, by massive arrests and by threats of transfer to emergency state security courts. Protesters are moved by calls for civil disobedience against a repressive, manipulative and personalised state, are trying to recapture back some freedom in a public space that was monopolised by the state (see the foundation document of the *Kefaya* movement written by Tareq al-Bichri) and are publicly indicting the government, in a way that was unimaginable a few years ago. In the recent past, politics was left to a small elite (participation shrank to 10% of the electorate) and political parties whose activities, leadership and fundraising have been maintained at a weak stage to service the NDP's hegemony were submitted to bullying/intimidation (see the closure of *al-Cha'ab* newspaper and the bullying of the Labour Party) or were anaesthetised in largely rigged elections. The last bastion where social activists had taken refuge, in professional unions or in the non-governmental sector, was exposed to legislative restrictions in 1999 and 2002 and social activist were sued before military courts (a 1992 military decree was first promulgated after the 1992 earthquake in Cairo to block foreign support to NGOs and then used to gain control on their activities). In the new Egyptian social movements, activists of past generations, the leftists of the 1970's and the Islamists of the 1980s have joined hands with a hitherto younger generation of students and social activists and have shown a new boldness in breaking the ban on demonstrations and denouncing presidential positions. Demonstrations are also held by popular committees in support of the Palestinians (e.g. after the

assassination of the *Hamas*' leader Chaykh Yassine) or in support of the Iraqis (e.g. during the Falluja uprising), but usually spill into direct criticism of the Egyptian government and even of the President (a political taboo in Egypt for a long time... broken with new slogans like "*Mubarak zayy Sharon*").

Secondly, protestations have recovered a new life with a debate on constitutional reforms and on elections monitoring, in a kind of convergence between the new social movements and more institutional actors, the judges. 2005 heralded as "the year of elections in Egypt", with a referendum on May 25 on an amendment to the Constitution, presidential elections on September 7 and legislatives in November and December, has given more salience to the protest movements. 2005 signals the end of the political lethargy of the Egyptian masses in a deadlocked situation whose beneficiary was the regime. Demands for domestic political and constitutional reforms (the lifting of the state of emergency, safeguards for free and fair elections, the transformation of Egypt from a presidential republic to true a parliamentary republic, a fundamental overhaul of the constitution to allow for multiple presidential candidates¹⁴...) appeared in October 1999 with the referendum on Mubarak's fourth presidential term. A lively debate occurred in Egypt about the Syrian succession process when Bashar al-Asad inherited his father's presidential post in June 2000 and denounced *tawrith al-sulta* (the inheriting of power) as an illegitimate practice in republics (Sa'ad ed-Din Ibrahim coined the neologism *Gumlukiyya* = *gumhiriyya*+*malakiyya* to describe the regime). But protest went further. In July 2000 the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court passed a decision that required judicial supervision of elections (it took ten years to hand down this ruling). The November 2000 legislative elections were conducted for the first time with an enhanced judicial supervision. A kind of liberalisation movement from within the state (the so-called "*Intifadha* of the judges" epitomised by the two well-known personalities of judges Makki and Bastawisi) has materialised, trying to put back some form of rule of law, denouncing the instrumentalisation of justice, with an explicit focus on democratisation at a time when Egypt is in search of international respectability¹⁵. Hence judges have made use of the potential of legal formalism and have subverted the use of legal procedures by the authoritarian regime (to dress electoral engineering in legal garb).

The overall picture is that of a weakened authoritarian regime. Of course, it retains strong cards. On the one hand, the regional context that has been created by "the American moment in the Middle East" after September 11 has shifted and has worked to the benefits of the regime. The American pressures helped indirectly the Egyptian liberalisation movement's new boldness by weakening an Egyptian regime under close American scrutiny and made cautious when repressing opposition movements¹⁶. In the

¹⁴ Article 76 of the constitution required candidates to be selected by Parliament with a two-third majority (guaranteed for the NDP). Hence presidential elections took the outlook of a referendum on a single candidate, Hosni Mubarak rather than direct elections with a choice of candidates.

¹⁵ The Egyptian judges are not open opponents but are trying to apply the texts of the law and the provisions of the constitution; hence they are colliding with the regime. They share no quest to transform the Egyptian regime but try to bring life to a hitherto inert political system

¹⁶ The Middle East Partnership Initiative, that is the flagship of American democracy promotion in the Middle East announced by C Powell in December 2002 was denounced as a cultural invasion... in parallel to the denunciations of the Americanisation of Egyptian culture and society in numerous TV talk shows.

summer 2002, President G W Bush threatened in a very symbolic move to block \$ 130 million in economic aid to Egypt if the Egyptian-American sociologist Sa'ad ed-Din Ibrahim involved in the 2000 elections monitoring was not released. As "democracy" seemed advancing in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine, C Rice cancelled her scheduled visit to Cairo in February 2005 (to welcome the first US grant directly to an Egyptian NGO without the approval of the Egyptian government through USAID/Egypt, another bombshell in Egypt) after the arrest of another opponent, Ayman Nour. The Egyptian regime began to think that the G W Bush administration was sincere in its admonitions. C Rice at the American University in Cairo in June 2005 outlined democratisation goals for the country, with a strong impact in Egypt (or at least in its socially mobilised sectors). Yet a few months later in 2006 the G W Bush administration seems more cautious, after the Muslim Brothers won a historic 88 seats in Egyptian legislative elections (approximately 20%??? of the seats)... and after democracy promotion empowered Islamists in Iraqi parliament, in Saudi Arabia's municipal elections, turned them (*Hizballah*) as a pivotal group in Lebanon and helped *Hamas* to win the Palestinian Authority. The Bush administration gives the impression (in Cairo) that the tepid pressure to democratise and enthusiastic embrace of elections has diminished... conversely the Egyptian government is using the Islamist threat to advance its own agenda. On the other hand, Mubarak's surprise announcement in February 2005 that he would ask parliament to amend article 76 of the constitution to allow multiple presidential candidacies was an astute move. It caught by surprise the unprepared opposition and secured his victory for a fifth term¹⁷. He perpetuated his rule pre-empting criticism from the US and neutralising the military's reluctance to his son's candidacy (because no candidate was strong enough to oppose the NDP and the military was due to opine)¹⁸... and the Bush administration seemed to make too much of minor achievements (a multi-candidate presidential election) and too little of major failures (the crackdown on the opposition).

Yet the regime is unable to capitalise on its assets. Its ability to make a proper use of its strong "cards" is questionable. The authoritarian regime has not sought to strengthen institutions. Symptomatically Hosni Mubarak has never appointed a vice-president and chosen between naming a civilian (a challenge to the military pillar of the regime) or an officer (a difficult move when democratisation hence civilianisation are on the international agenda). Instead the Egyptian regime has sought to depoliticise the country and impose order from top to down. During the 2000 legislatures the Egyptian regime facing difficulties (the new judicial monitoring) has chosen to revert back to its heavy-handed techniques (physical obstruction to voters, barring opposition supporters from entering the pooling stations...). In November-December 2005 violence and irregularities increased in each of the legislative elections' three successive phases. After the government failed to stop the Muslim Brothers winning a historic 88 seats, crackdowns by Egyptian security forces have resumed as well as arbitrary arrests among the Muslim Brothers. The enduring *al-Qa'ida* threat (supposedly coming from Ben

¹⁷ And what had been conceded in principle might be denied through the practice of a nomination process easily influenced and possibly tightly controlled by the NDP (the presidential nominee must be endorsed by a number of those elected in the lower and upper houses of parliament and in municipal councils). Municipal elections were postponed in February 2006.

¹⁸ Some resistance was felt in 1999-2000 in the military against Gamal al-Mubarak taking a political role and when speculations mounted that he might lead a new *Hizb al-Mustaqbal*.

Laden and al-Zawahiri) remains a very helpful justification. After terrorist bombings in Taba in 200???, the town of al-Arish was closed off and mass arrests were reported. The much-despised emergency law that grants security forces wide-ranging powers was reinstated in April 2006 although Hosni Mubarak promised during the presidential campaign he would replace the emergency law (by an anti-terrorist legislation!). And before every demonstration central Cairo is inundated with security forces... Hence the regime's increased dependence on the security sector whereas the latter's proper "institutionalisation" into the regime calls for a careful use of it. Security management as a way to manage all the issues Egypt is confronting clearly shows its limits.