



## Egypt's Evolving Role in Africa: A Sub-Saharan Perspective

A presentation at the Institute of Diplomatic Studies, Cairo  
Monday, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2008

Issaka K. SOUARE

*Researcher, African Security Analysis Programme  
Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, South Africa*

### **Introduction**

Talking about the role of a country in a specific region means, to a large extent, talking about its foreign policy vis-à-vis that region. One could therefore write the title of this presentation as “Egypt’s foreign policy towards Africa” or “Egypt’s African Policy”, and all these formulations will more or less mean that same thing. As it is clear from the title, this presentation will deal specifically with the role of Egypt in Sub-Saharan Africa through the lenses of a Sub-Saharan observer and analyst. However, given that there are many factors that a country must take into account in formulating its foreign policy choices, I will start by analysing the main factors that inform Egypt’s foreign policy actions vis-à-vis Africa.

### **Egyptian foreign policy-making: important factors and constraints**

The foreign policy of a country is largely defined by a number of considerations or factors. Prominent among those are a) its geographic location; b) its historical and socio-cultural heritage and links; c) its national interests; and d) its financial and political clout. The ideology – religious or political – that the leaders of a country espouse may also have a significant impact on its foreign policy orientation at one point or another. It is in the context of these four or five factors that one may analyse Egypt’s role in Africa and its policies vis-à-vis the continent.

Geographically, Egypt is located at the crossroads between the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa. This description implies also that Egypt is located in Africa, and it is therefore an African country. Sub-Saharan Africa is understood here to be all of Africa apart from the six countries of what is geopolitically known as North or Arab Africa, that is Egypt itself, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. Sudan is the only majority Arabic-speaking country in Africa that is

considered in almost all geopolitical maps as being part of Sub-Saharan Africa and not North Africa. As it is obvious in the map of Africa, apart from bordering the Middle East, Egypt is not the only country with these geographical characteristics, but it is Egypt that is the subject of this presentation.

With regard to its historical and socio-cultural heritage and links, Egypt is largely an Arab-Islamic state. Although Egypt, as the rest of Africa, was only arabised and/or islamised, both Arabism and Islam have come to be rooted in Egyptian history and social-cultural fabric and imaginary. So much so that taking Egypt from any of these two entities today will mean an amputated Islamic or Arab world. The Cairo-based *Al-Azhar University* is arguably the oldest (more than a thousand years) and the most prestigious centre of Islamic scholarship in the world. And if one were to take away the Egyptian contribution to contemporary Arabic language and literature you would surely leave that language a lame man.

In fact, the starting point of contemporary Arabic literature is almost unanimously put at the arrival of Napoleon's French forces in Egypt in 1798 and the developments that ensued that interaction between European and Arab cultures. There would be no contemporary Arabic literature without the contributions of Egyptian authors such as Ahmed Shawqi, Taha Hussein, Al-Aqqad, Al-Mazeni, Abdurahman Shukri, Najib Mahfouz and many others.

In the *Philosophy of the Revolution*, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the architect of the July 1952 revolution in Egypt, tried to theorise Egypt's foreign policy on the basis of the three policy centres that one can easily surmise from the above-mentioned two factors. He identified these centres as the three circles of Egyptian foreign policy, namely the Arab, the Islamic and the African circles. He therefore did not find any contradiction in Egypt belonging to and playing a leading role in the Arab League (with its headquarters in Cairo), the Organisation of African Unity and the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

Just as to what extent Egypt accords more importance to one or the other of these three circles is a matter that changes according to times and circumstances. From a Sub-Saharan perspective, however, and without this being a criticism per se, it would seem that the Arab circle is predominant if not more important to Egypt than the African one, not least by the official name of the country – the Arab Republic of Egypt.

It is these two factors that largely inform Egypt's national interest, which is the third factor that defines a country's foreign policy. From its geographical location bordering the Middle East, and its social-historical (Arab-Islamic) links to the countries of this region, events that happen in this part of the world are susceptible to impact either positively or negatively on Egypt's national security and economic prosperity. No event is more illustrative of this than the Israeli-Arab conflict. This conflict has, on at least four occasions (1948; 1956; 1967 and 1973), drawn Egypt to open war with Israel. Political stability in this region is therefore of great concern for Egyptian national security and thus national interest. Also, given its limited natural resources and the abundance of these

resources in a number of countries of this region, it is in Egypt's national interest to maintain good relations with Gulf Arab countries.

From its location north of the Nile Basin and its dependence on the Nile River for its very existence, ensuring the continuous flow of the Nile waters from countries of its origin, namely Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia, is one of key national interest concerns for Egypt. And of course, maintaining its friendly relationship with the United States, the world's only superpower, and the generous financial assistance that the latter provides it with (estimated at more than \$50 bn since 1978) is another key foreign policy objective that Egypt considers part of its national interest.

Finally, and here I'm talking about the fourth factor that defines a country's foreign policy, one must not forget that Egypt is a Third World African state with limited economic resources at its disposal (but relatively prosperous within Africa), and that is politically rivalled by other actors on all of its geographical borders. The financial and political weight that a country carries may constitute an advantage or a constraint on that country's foreign policy choices and actions. Egypt's financial and political status constitutes both.

With regard to this status constituting a constraint on Egypt's foreign policy actions in Africa, it is worth noting that countries such as Nigeria, Libya and now South Africa rival Egypt and spearhead initiatives that Egypt could do in order to have a more noticeable Africa-focused foreign policy. Also, other North African states tend to exclude Egypt from the club of Maghrib countries, considering it more *Machreq* or Middle East-oriented than *Maghrib*. This is rather evidenced by Egypt's exclusion from the Union of Maghrib Arab (UMA) countries. This is largely informed by the fear of these countries of Egyptian domination. Another reason of this situation may also be the fact that, with the exception of Libya, they were all under French domination and still maintain close ties with Paris, which is not the case for Egypt. Yet in the Arab Machreq, Egypt is considered as African and countries such as Saudi Arabia would want to preserve the leadership role in that region.

But despite all these constraints, perhaps because of them, Egypt has been forced to devise creative strategies to ascertain its three circles policy and it has not been unsuccessful in that. These strategies have sought to transform some of these constraints into advantages, hence my assertion that Egypt's financial and political status constitutes both a constraint and an advantage in its foreign policy. It is now to the African chapter of these three circles that I now turn, bearing in mind what I have said above.

### **Egypt's strategic role in Africa**

To measure a country's role in another country or a set of countries, one needs to take into account the contribution that the acting country makes to what the partner country or countries consider as important issues to them. And here one can identify a number of issues of particular importance to Africa and analyse the role played by Egypt on these issues. Given that the whole of Africa (save Ethiopia and Liberia) were colonised by

European powers and that Egypt regained its independence before any other African country, the first issue to measure Egypt's role in Africa will therefore be African decolonisation. With decolonisation comes the need to safeguard one's newly regained sovereignty. What role did Egypt play in this in Africa? Then comes an array of partnership issues, such as economic development, education and conflict resolution and conflict management (peacekeeping), just to mention a few of these key issues.

### *African decolonisation*

The Cold War logic that prevailed in at least the first few years of their country's independence meant that fighting colonialism and/or neo-colonialism was a paramount concern for the revolutionary regime that was at the helm of Egyptian affairs under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser at this time. From this common vision drawn from a common cause, Egypt was a close ally of almost all African countries in their struggle to regain their independence. As some countries regained their sovereignty and had a similar vision for African liberation, Egypt worked hand in hand with these countries, such as Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana and Sekou Touré's Guinea, to achieve African independence. Egypt extended its helping hand to liberation movements across the continent through both direct financial assistance, military training and political and diplomatic advocacy for their cause at all international forums.

In my book on *Africa in the United Nations System*, I note that the first African country to sit on the Security Council of the UN was Egypt from January 1946 to December 1947. Without being interrupted by another African state, Egypt sat again on the Council from January 1949 to December 1950. It took almost ten years after this before another African country was admitted to the Council. That was Tunisia from January 1959 to December 1960. The first time when two African states met in the Council was when Egypt again (but then merged with Syria as the United Arab Republic) and Liberia were non-permanent members of the Council from January 1961 to December of the same year. While Liberia served only one year that time round, Egypt continued to December 1962. Making use of this position at the United Nations, Egypt added its voice to other independent African states to advance the cause of African liberation on the world stage.

In fact, the first resolution of the United Nations specifically aimed at the Apartheid system in South Africa was adopted in September 1952 and was sponsored by Egypt and 12 Asian countries. This resolution was a reaction to the oppressive response of the Apartheid regime to the non-violent "Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws" that the ANC and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), together with organisations representing the Coloured people as well as some white opponents of the system of Apartheid had launched on 26 June 1952. Egypt and these other countries had requested the insertion in the agenda of the 7<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly held in September 1952 an item entitled: "The question of race conflict in South Africa resulting from the policies of apartheid of the Government of the Union of South Africa."

In his autobiography, *Where Others Wavered*, former Namibian President, Sam Nujoma recalls: "When in 1963, the first group [of Namibian freedom fighters] went for military

training in Cairo, this was possible because President Gamal Abd el-Nasser of Egypt had offered me training and tickets”. Nujoma concludes by noting: “Nasser was a dedicated supporter of African liberation.”

### *African development through African organisations*

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was created in 1963 to help non-independent African countries to liberate themselves from the yoke of European colonialism and to coordinate the efforts of independent ones to preserve their sovereignty and achieve economic sustainability and prosperity. Egypt played a pivotal role in the formation of the OAU and in its sustenance over the years. In the early 1980s, Egypt established the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation with Africa. This fund has since been offering Egyptian experts and consultants in different fields to various African countries. Egyptian universities also attract a significant number of African students. And today, Egypt is one of the five African states that contribute 75 per cent (15 per cent each) of the annual budget of the African Union that replaced the OAU in 2002. The other four countries are Algeria, Libya, Nigeria and South Africa.

In 1998, Egypt joined the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and three years later, in 2001, joined the Sahel and Sahara Union (SEN-SAD), two key region economic organisations that seek to advance inter-African economic integration. Egypt is also a founding member of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), in which it is in charge of the agricultural file.

These few examples are an indication of the scope of the cooperation between Egypt and the rest of Africa.

### *Egypt and conflict management in Africa*

For various reasons, armed conflicts have come to be one of the main threats faced by many post-colonial African countries. The role that various partners of these African countries play in preventing and solving these conflicts is therefore important. Egypt has played a very positive and constructive role in this regard. First, unlike some countries, both in North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, Egypt has not been involved in destabilising other African countries either by a direct attack or a proxy war. Second, Egyptian authorities have sent peacekeeping troops to a good many African conflict zones, especially under UN flag. It was also at the 1993 OAU summit, held in Cairo, that the establishment of an African Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution was announced.

## **Conclusion and policy recommendations**

Understanding the dynamics, the constraints and the different factors that Egypt must take into account in formulating its foreign policy choices and actions, it is fair to argue that Egypt does play an important role in Africa, not least its financial contribution to the

AU. This notwithstanding, there is a wide perception in Sub-Saharan Africa that albeit Egypt may be making more financial contribution to African issues today, the symbolism that its active and, to some, militant involvement in African affairs under Gamal Abdel Nasser has decreased if not disappeared. Egyptian delegations at meetings of the Arab League have, in recent years, tended to be more important in their composition than what are usually seen at OAU/AU summits.

For a considerable length of time, appearances of President Hosni Mubarak have been rare at OAU/AU summits. Compared to other North African countries, such as Qaddafi's Libya and Bouteflika's Algeria, one observes that these countries have striven to be present at almost all OAU/AU summits. Of course Egypt fares better in this comparison than other countries such as Tunisia, but we are talking about Egypt's current role in comparison with its previous one. It is understandable that the Egyptian authorities be mindful of security concerns, especially since the attempted attack on the life of President Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995. But one must accept that this could have happened to him anywhere in the world.

The technical cooperation between Egypt and many African countries is a laudable initiative and this should be maintained at its current level if not strengthened.

In peacekeeping in Africa, while it is true that Egypt tries to be present in almost all UN peacekeeping missions in the continent, there surely is a need for Cairo to consider increasing the number of its contingents according to the size of its military capacity. While all contributions are appreciated regardless of their size, Egypt should consider doing more than mere symbolic (by sending like 10 to 30 personnel) contributions in many instances. And here I appeal to the Egyptian authorities to consider a serious contribution to the AU operation in Somalia. Egypt can also play a leading role in the political settlement of the conflict in that country.

Another conflict situation where Egypt could consider playing a leading role is the issue of Western Sahara. From my personal interactions with diplomats of the Polisario Front, Morocco and Algeria, and from my knowledge of the complexity of the situation, I know this is not an easy terrain to ride on. But this does not mean that one cannot try. Indeed, given Egypt's neutral stance on this conflict and the good relations it seems to have with all concerned, I think it stands a good chance of bringing the parties closer to a mutually acceptable solution, should it use the right approach.

And finally, the conflict in the Sudanese region of Darfur constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity for countries such as Egypt to play a leading role in. Some have wrongly described this conflict as a conflict between Arab-Muslims and African Christians. All the parties are clearly Muslim. But while I say this, one cannot deny the fact that Darfurians, notwithstanding their Islamism, are largely non-Arab speaking and that those that are at the helm of power in Khartoum are mainly Arabs or Arab speaking. It is therefore true that the conflict is between Arabs and non-Arabs. There is a difference between "facts" and "perceptions", but perceptions do matter. With the perception that the conflict in Darfur is between Arabs and Africans and the other perception if not the

fact that Egyptians consider themselves more Arabs than Africans, an effective resolution of the Darfurian quandary may be very defining in Arab-African relations. Should Egypt succeed in using its influence over the regime in Khartoum to put an end to the human tragedy in Darfur, this will go a long way into affirming Egypt's strategic role in the African continent.

## References

- Nkrumah, Gamal, "The Golden Age of Arab-African Relations", *African Renaissance*, vol. 1, no. 1, June/July 2004, pp. 15-26.
- Said, Mohamed Kadry, "Egypt's Foreign Policy in Global Change: The Egyptian Role in Regional and International Politics," *Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies*, 5 December 2006.
- Sharawy, Helmy, "Arab-African Relations: From Liberation to Globalisation," *African Renaissance*, vol. 1, no. 1, June/July 2004, pp. 43-54.
- Souaré, Issaka K., *Africa in the United Nations System, 1945-2005* (London, Adonis & Abbey, 2006), chaps. 1 & 2.
- Souaré, Issaka K., "African Membership in the Arab League, Commonwealth, la Francophonie and CPLP: Implications of Divided Allegiance for Regional Integration in Africa", *African Renaissance*, vol. 2, no. 1, January/February 2005, pp. 65 – 73.
- United Nations, *United Nations and Apartheid: 1948-1994* (New York: United Nations Publications, 1994), pp. 10-11, para. 32.