

A Conversation with Nabil Fahmy

TM: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Tarek Masoud, and I'm the Sultan Kaboos Bin Said of Oman professor of international relations at Harvard and the faculty director of the Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative. And I'm very pleased to welcome you to this afternoon's conversation with his excellency Nabil Fahmy, the former foreign minister of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

Before I introduce our guest and recite from his glittering list of achievements, let me first introduce my co-host and co-pilot on this enterprise, Ambassador Karim Haggag of the American University in Cairo, and then say a little bit about what we're doing here. Ambassador Haggag, who you can see on your screen sitting to the left of Fahmy, is a distinguished Egyptian diplomat and an expert on the geopolitics of the Middle East. He's now a professor of the practice at the American University in Cairo and the director of the Middle East program in its School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. I've known Ambassador Haggag for more than a decade, and I've found him to be one of the keenest and most insightful Arab foreign policy minds of this or any age. He's also a uniquely generous and empathetic human being, so I'm really thrilled to be doing this with him. Welcome Karim.

KH: Thank you Tarek. It's a pleasure to co-pilot this plane with you today. Much appreciated, thank you.

TM: So, each week, Karim and I will be hosting a conversation with a distinguished Arab thought leader. Our conversations, however, are not going to focus on Arab affairs but on American ones. You're all used to hearing American pundits comment on the crises and dysfunctions of the Arab world. But now that it is the United States that is crisis ridden and dysfunctional, we thought it only fitting that we should reach out to Arab intellectuals to help us make sense of it all. Karim and I are calling our series USA 2020: The View from the Arab World, and in it, we'll hear Arab perspectives on the upcoming election—the current national soul-searching happening in America around issues of racial discrimination, economic inequality, America's changing role in the world, and much more. Our aim in these conversations is to help our audience learn to view the United States during this moment in its history through Arab eyes, much as we have been accustomed to viewing the Arab world through American ones. Our hope is that these conversations will not only illuminate how America is perceived in a part of the world in which many of its vital interests lie, but that the conversations will also give us a glimpse into the mindsets of the thought leaders who are going to make the future of the Arab world. What are they concerned about? Where do they see their region heading? And most importantly how does the world's sole superpower figure into their plans and expectations?

Now to kick off this series Karim and I could think of no better first guest than our guest today. I've personally been a Nabil Fahmy fanboy since I was barely old enough to shave. I first met him in the mid 1990s when I was a college student, and he was an advisor to Egypt's foreign minister at the time, Amr Moussa, whom I had the distinct honor of interviewing for a college

publication which I was involved. Nabil had actually set up the interview, and I got to spend a few minutes talking to him in his office overlooking the Nile. He was eloquent and sophisticated and urbane. He was about as far from the stereotype of the ossified Egyptian public servant as you could possibly imagine. In fact, I was much more impressed by Nabil Fahmy than I was by Amr Moussa. In the years since I watched Nabil's career closely, much like you would watch the career of your favorite baseball player, he became ambassador to Japan, and then he was for a decade, from 1999 to 2008, Egypt's ambassador to the United States. He was Egypt's ambassador when the September 11, 2001 attacks happened. That was a low point I would imagine in Egyptian- American relations, and the fact that it was managed clearly owes a great deal to the efforts of Nabil Fahmy.

Now after all of that, Nabil could have been forgiven for wanting to take a break, retreat to some seaside resort—maybe write his memoirs. But instead, he plunged himself into the only arena possibly more treacherous than the world of high stakes international diplomacy, and that's academia. In 2009, he became the founding dean of the American University in Cairo's School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, and he's held that position ever since, except for a brief and very important stint as Egypt's foreign minister in 2013. And I should note that when he became foreign minister, in a way, he was going home again because that was a job his father had held 40 years before. Now while doing all of that, Nabil actually did get around to writing his memoir, at least after a fashion. He has a new book out. It's called Egypt's Diplomacy, War Peace and Transition. It was published by Palgrave, and though it is a highly analytical look at the last six 60 years of Egyptian foreign policy making, interspersed throughout the book are also personal insights and asides that make it—to use a word coined by the mid-century American novelist Raymond Chandler— unputdownable. So, we are truly thrilled to have Nabil Fahmy with us. Welcome Nabil.

NF: Thank you very much Tarek. I'm honored to be back on one of your programs, and I must say, after that introduction, my night is made.

TM: I should note for everybody who's watching that, of course, there's a seven-hour time difference. So, in fact, it is nighttime in Cairo, and we're really grateful to you for taking time out of your evening to do this with us. So, I'll start and then what Karim and I will do is kind of alternate. I want to start by asking about America and you know, you were born in the United States. Much of your life has been spent managing Egypt's relationship with the United States, so if there's anyone in the Middle East who can understand the US, it's you. And I think when foreigners look at what's happening in the United States now, from the controversies involving the president to the mishandling of the Coronavirus pandemic to the protest that we're seeing in major cities, I think many of them shake their heads and say “Wow this country America is far weaker and far more fragile than I could have ever imagined.” And I wonder what do you, Nabil Fahmy, think when you see what's happening in the United States right now?

NF: That's a very important question. Let me start by saying I don't think anybody can understand

America until he actually visits and flies from east to west or west to east. I say this because you understand the size of America, the wealth, the power of America, the monotony of America, and the diversity of America all in one. That allows you to understand the thought process in many degrees, and that's—I've been saying that all of my friends and colleagues— read the books, come, and visit to understand what's there on the ground. Everything in terms of the wonderful attributes that Americans have and also the weaknesses that they may have, like anybody else or the system.

In terms of what's happening today, America is in crisis. It's not, frankly, only the debate between the two candidates for president. I actually think that America is looking, trying to search for itself and find out what it wants to do. That's a process that reminds me of my junior high school days, when I was in New York, when you were in the back end of the Civil Rights Movement at the time. And on the one hand, I followed proudly Martin Luther King, but I also heard George Wallace in the debate there. That's what you have in America today. It's not only about race though. It's about do you want to be an international power or do you want to be in isolation? Do you want to think only in terms of immediate return? And what helps America in the short term? Or do you feel responsibility towards the rest of the world, be them your allies or not? And I would argue even, do you want to be domestically tolerant or intolerable? These are things you're going through, and it's not an easy process and won't end, frankly, with the end of this election.

When you look at it from abroad, the problem is foreigners look at America from two prisms: Hollywood, the bigness, the larger than life constant aspect of America— good and bad. And they look at America from the prism of power, be that military power, political power, or economic power. If that's your perception, it's very difficult for a foreigner to understand what you will do next given that you don't know what you want to do next. And therefore, the image of America is being heard on both counts, and that's very dangerous because what you do has consequences— not only in America but also around the world.

I think this identity crisis you're going through will affect and cloud both of those views. The idea that everything is part of a wonderful American dream will be looked at a bit more realistically and rationally, which is good because it's unfair to hold you to a standard that's impossible to achieve. But also, the idea that you're always right was always wrong. I might have to admit, and you should not have been assumed to be always right. I would add also that you just had the single superpower, and you're right. Presently you are the single superpower at the end of the day. Power is a function of assets, of authority, of credibility, of a propensity to use those assets, not only in your borders but beyond. And it also has a function of responsibility, and I frankly would argue that your allies and your adversaries will misread America now because the American power prism is being clouded. Will you engage to defend interests of your allies abroad or will you not?

And I argue that on the Middle East in particular. So, I would actually believe that we've talked for the last couple of years about the Arab spring. Although I think it's much more complex than that, I think you're going through a real serious rethinking of what America is, and it's important

for you to do that and end up with a collective America, a tolerant America, a centrist America, an America that supports an international order that is as fair as it can be and as rule based as it can.

TM: So, can we stay on this question about—you know because Karim and I do want to talk about America's role in the world and how what's happening in America is being perceived by its allies and its rivals around the world. But you know, one natural follow-up is, you know, you've described an America that has always had this kind of turbulence that— you know, you said when you were a high school student, you saw some of the same axes of domestic conflict in the United States that we're seeing now. But so, does that not make you hopeful that, you know, the American system is a pretty resilient system? They've seen this kind of thing before, and its democracy is able to absorb these conflicts. Or is there something new this time that we didn't see in the era of George Wallace or when Martin Luther King was assassinated?

NF: I think what's new is expectations that you'd be far more progressed than where you are now after all these years. In other words, one would assume that since you've gone through the issue of being a lot more tolerant vis a vis each other and vis a vis foreigners, by the way, that we would now be talking about a democratic system or a system in America that is much more refined than what it was in the 60s. To see that happening again raises questions. Did you actually resolve those old problems or not? And I can very honestly tell you that there will be people— and that's completely in your right — who will continue to say America is better than other situations. That's fair to say. You can say that and agree or disagree with that. But frankly, most of the people I talk to, even those who concur with that point I just made, also are surprised and say but why are they having so many problems? Why is the situation? Why are they so angry?

I mean you might remember this this term. I know some of my friends on the screens remember. Back in about 25-35 years ago, the term “ugly American ugly American” was a term, used mostly by European allies, who didn't like this new young power coming onto the screen. But the comment, frankly, was not political. It was more that they felt that you were so rich and so loud when you walked around in their arenas. The image of America today, frankly, is again moving back but in a much more serious sense than what it was then. One would have assumed—I suppose Americans would have assumed —that by now, more people want to emulate America. What I actually see is that on these two prisms, the Hollywood prism and the power plays, I actually believe that less people want to emulate America now than in the past because of your problems domestically.

Unless people want to depend on America politically. Because you don't want to exercise the power that you would in the past. Again, I'm not a big proponent of America over-using its power all over the place. But take you back just for a second, if you go back to the Truman doctrine, providing security for different allies around the world, people are questioning today whether you will continue to do that. Go back to the Carter doctrine, which was basically about security in the Gulf area. Go around the Gulf today, and friends and foe will raise the question

will America be a reliable security partner in the future? Now the problem isn't that you should provide security for all. I'm not a big proponent for that. I actually believe we should provide our own security but be assisted by our friends and allies. But if American security is being questioned, it provides an incentive for adversaries, of you directly and adversaries of your allies, to become more aggressive and more hegemonic, and that's very dangerous.

The last point I'd make is that I've always had a problem with the term American exceptionalism. I don't think you're the exception. I think you have a very good story to say, but I don't think Americans are exceptional, more than anybody else who has had a good story around the world. But your argument about American exceptionalism was always based on your concept of right and wrong which was a bit much? and a bit cloudy frankly. But you were trying to argue right and wrong. You're not arguing right and wrong now. You're basically arguing that well let's be practical, let's be realistic. It's not important— what's right and what's wrong. You are not, even as the most powerful superpower, supporting an international order, and that's very dangerous because it has ramifications, not only vis-a-vis your relations with your counterparts but throughout the world.

TM: Yeah, I mean— you know Karim obviously feel free to jump in when ready, but I will just note the irony Nabil of yearning for an America— being in the Middle East—that implements or acts according to some American argument about right and wrong. I mean you could argue that that's what got the United States into say Iraq. It was certainly making a lot of arguments about right and wrong. And if instead, it had been following a much narrower conception of American self-interest, maybe the American leadership would have followed the advice of your former boss and not gotten into it.

NF: Well I'm not questioning them. I actually said I don't agree that you're right. I just say—

TM: So you should be happy that America is no longer making a messianic argument about right and wrong and is in fact just operating according to a narrow conception of its self-interest, which presumably would be readable by anybody.

NF: No, I think it's not an either or option. Right and wrong according to America doesn't interest me. Right and wrong according to the law is what interests me. I'm a medium-sized state, and most of my neighbors are medium-sized states. We need to have an international order based on law to preserve our rights because we're not going to fight every battle militarily or economically. You may be able to afford that, but I can't. So, don't tell me what to do in terms of right and wrong, but you should be a supporter of international order based on rule of law.

TM: So, you know, I think we'll want to get into that a little bit more. But Karim, did you have a question? Go ahead.

KH: So, I think drilling down drilling down on this theme that you started us off with about America through Arab eyes. Now obviously a big part of the story is the current administration

and the current president. And here, I think it would be very interesting to get your view on what seems to be a dichotomy in terms of Arab perceptions towards this particular president. Because on the one hand, we see that the relationship between Arab rulers and this particular president seems to be very favorable. I mean there's clearly a special personal relationship between president Trump and many of the key Arab rulers, including of course president Sisi. But in terms of Arab public opinion, most polls suggest that there is a very unfavorable view towards this president. I mean the recent poll put out in May 2019 by the Washington Institute for Near East Studies shows that only 11% of Emiratis and 9% of Saudis view the president favorably. How do we explain that?

NF: I will give you an explanation, but before I do, let me underline I'm not fixated on the present American president. My critique to America that it's moving away from right and wrong or trying to assume that it only has the right answer, which isn't always consistent with law, goes before the present president. Tarek mentioned the Iraq situation. The invasion of Iraq—it was no legal basis for it whatsoever. I mean, with all of the bloody tendencies of Saddam Hussein, the idea that there was legal basis to enter Iraq in search of weapons of mass destruction does not exist. It was baseless. So again, for America's political needs even before the present president, they forgot right and wrong and decided to do this because it was in their interest or in their desire to do this. I would take you even further back and argue in all honesty, America doesn't have to solve all the problems in the Middle East. But when it stood up against wrong, it helped resolve, and it didn't solve them alone. And I would argue, taking America back to the 1956 invasion of Egypt, Eisenhower stood up against, even though these were his traditional allies, and Egypt was not an ally at the time.

As it moves away from standing up for right and wrong, we suffered the consequences of that. It did not do that completely to my flavor, at least on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. So it goes before the present president. The present president has just simply enunciated in a much more open, and if I may say, crude fashion. That it's all about America first. Let's be realistic. Let's get this done. I'm transactional. I want to get this done. So again, let's not fixate this on president Trump because it's not only that.

In terms of your question, great question. America is going through identity crisis. The Middle East has been going through its own domestic and internal crises. A lot of the countries in the Middle East, including my own, have gone through these transitions over the last decade. And because of that, they have been fixated on—what are the immediate needs, what are the immediate concerns rather than what are the medium or long-term concerns— it's not an issue of choice for them, but an issue of consequence. If you asked the question to Arab leaders today, I suppose any leader today, "Do you want to focus on security first or conflict resolution issues?" they will all say security. If you look at— you mentioned for example Egypt. Egypt and a number of other Arab leaders, they actually believe those who support Trump. They believe that they are challenged by regional and domestic extremism and instability, and that president Trump is opposed to want violent sudden change in the region. So, his position on those issues, on that issue in particular, coincides with their position. There's no question that on other issues, there will be differences in opinion with Trump.

But the Arab leaders that you mentioned are before a difficult choice. Do I focus on security and get that? Or do I get into the larger context of conflict resolution. That question and that order doesn't exist with the public. The public doesn't have to deliver in the short—the public is committed to what it believes its overall objective is. So, I understand. Frankly, I actually think it's quite logical that the public would be less receptive. Let me rephrase that. I would understand that it's quite logical that leaders in Arab world some of them would be closer to president Trump than the Arab public would be because their responsibilities are different.

I've said personally— I'm not speaking on behalf of anyone but myself. I've said openly, major countries, be they United States or be they countries like my own in my own region, major countries need to be able to balance the immediate concerns and the medium and strategic interests. You can't play one versus the other. But just to close on this point, I'm not trying to shy away from it. When I follow the news and polls about president Trump in America— even in America, you have these very conflicted divisions. What some people like is the policies, but hate is the way he explains them and exercises them. Others feel that his policies are way off track in the medium and long-term. So again, America is mixed up with Trump, and the drawing line depends on where you stand. What are the issues that concern you in America? And the same thing applies to the Middle East. For the immediate pressing issues, that's drawing some countries close to Trump while it's not drawing the public in the Middle East.

TM: So, Nabil, to kind of summarize your answer— basically your answer is that the Arab leaders have a close and warm relationship with Trump because on their two main obsessions, Iran and violent “Islamist movements” Trump says what they want to hear.

NF: I just wouldn't use the word obsessions.

TM: Concerns. They're concerned with these two issues.

NF: That being said, I think irrespective of who's elected president in America— be that re-election Trump or the election of vice president Biden— a lot of the Arab countries will have high points and low points. But they will come in a different sequence, and I can explain that if you want.

TM: So but you don't think, for example, that the fact that there is such a divergence— I mean Karim quoted the polling statistics in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In Egypt, 7% of Egyptians like Trump, and yet, Egypt's president has had very warm relations with Trump, and Trump has complimented Egypt's president on a number of dimensions, including his sartorial choices. You don't think that that divergence constitutes a threat or a stressor on Arab regimes that are cozy with an American president, who the vast majority of Arabs view as somehow unfriendly to them?

NF: You know, my background, education wise, is mathematics, so I have a respect for numbers. But I also never look at numbers out of context. Your point you're making Tarek is completely correct. When you see a big divergence between the public and authorities—that's if you want a source of a potential conflict in the medium and long-term. If the difference was small, then it's just a matter of priorities, what has to be done today versus tomorrow. Therefore, my personal position is that while it may be easier to deal with Trump now than another candidate and even in the short term. In the medium and long-term, it will be much more problematic because policy wise, his positions are so contrary to traditional Arab rights, and that will further fuel the difference between the public and authorities in different Arab states. So, you're right. It is a problem, but all I'm saying is that the reason you find the support for Trump now isn't because they're ignoring his other policies. It's simply that they have imminent problems, and they're focusing on them first. And hopefully, we'll go back to the others as well.

KH: So perhaps if we can drill down on the US- Arab relationship and particularly on this issue of security, which as you mentioned is really a priority issue for the region today, given the instability in the Middle East now. It's very interesting because a few moments ago you, I think very rightly, mentioned that the security role that the United States has undertaken is coming under question. The reliability of the United States as an actor for regional stability is questionable, and many say is diminishing. And that's tied to the overall posture of the United States towards the region, which many see is weakening. The United States is seen to be withdrawing from the Middle East and pivoting to Asia, and that's been the case under the previous administration and an issue of continuity with this administration. So how does the Arab world relate to this changing posture of the United States towards the Middle East when for America, the Middle East doesn't occupy the central place it once did in its foreign policy?

NF: The focus for the importance of the Middle East for America was twofold: part of a cold war in competition with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc and secondly, on the issue of energy. There is no cold war. There's no equivalent power to threaten America. So in that sense, the regional competition, while it still exists not only with Russia, it will also slowly exist with China. But it's not at the same level. So, I'll give you a quick story. Back in '73 right after October. Anwar Sadat sent the Egyptian foreign minister to see Richard Nixon, and he met Nixon. And Nixon said you guys threw out the Soviets, but last year if you had told us, we would have given you something because that changes the whole balance in the Middle East. That kind of political paradigm doesn't exist, so that's not there. If the Arab world doesn't recognize it's not there in the same fashion, they're mistaken. The other point you correctly mentioned. US energy needs are not dependent on the Arab world as much as they were in the past. And by the way, the Carter doctrine was about securing US energy needs. It was not about securing US allies in the region, and it actually called the Arab gulf the Persian. So, it wasn't a relationship with the countries. As much as it was a relationship, it was an assertion that we will defend what concerns us. That need doesn't exist now.

I strongly believe that if you're over dependent on anybody you're mistaken. If you're overdependent on somebody who doesn't need you, you're stupid. Not mistaken, but you're

actually stupid. So, I would argue that America will continue to play a strong substantial role in the international paradigm at least for a generation to come. So, manage relations with the United States well and try to get as much support as you can. But your security concerns as Arab countries have to be dependent essentially on your own capacities, locally and regionally. So, I would argue very simply put: 30% national capacity, 30% regional capacity, and 30% international capacity. And I'm not disregarding hard assets, but I'm not simply saying capacity in terms of hard assets. If one tries to counter Iran, counter Turkey, or resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict in a US-Soviet paradigm, that's history. You need to do that in a different path. Doesn't mean you change the rights or obligations or the rules of the game. But it is a different world, and we have to be as Arabs, less dependent on America. It's not Russia in place of America. It's actually America as a plan with certain capacities, and there is a certain return to America for that. But also, engagement with other parties. Well let's just let's be closer to the point. Where is America in the Middle East today? Libya, Syria, the Gulf, the Arab-Israeli peace process. The only one is the avenue? of a peace process, which doesn't exist. But the others, they're not a player.

TM: You know you could make the argument that the reason that the United States is not a player in these arenas is by design. If you look at the last two American presidents, I would say a powerful reason that both Obama and Trump got elected is because they explicitly disavowed the interventions of the Bush administration and prior administrations in the thorny politics of the Middle East.

NF: I 100% agree with you.

TM: And so, I might even look at the "Arab-Israeli" peace process that president Trump is brokering as a kind of washing of hands of that problem. Let's just try to get whatever deal we can get on the table and whoever can accommodate themselves to the reality as it stands, accommodate themselves. And then the US is washing its hands of this. So, I do think that that reality that you just pointed out heightens Karim's question. The puzzle in Karim's question is not simply the huge mismatch between Arab publics and the leadership. It is also why does the Arab leadership have such affection for this particular president, when in fact, he is partaking of exactly the same kinds of withdrawal-oriented policies that Obama did? It just makes the puzzle that much harder to understand. America is nowhere in these conflicts that presumably these leaders should want America to be involved.

NF: Let me just clarify that point. Where his policies are consistent with policies the countries in Arabic the Arab that support him are more with their domestic concerns and threats to their security, not in relation to conflict resolution of the issue. So that's really where there is an immediate overlap of positions. But again, I see that, and I understand that. But I always believe that has to be done; but also, conflict resolution at the same time.

TM: But are we right— Nabil and Karim obviously, you know, tell me if I'm talking too much, which is my habit. But you know, would it be correct for us to say that though you agree with

me that the United States is withdrawing essentially from the Middle East, you don't want it to. You want the US to be more engaged in your region.

NF: I'm not sure. I want it to be engaged differently. I don't want it to be engaged the way it was in the past. I don't want it to be absent because it cannot last. It is the wealthiest, strongest state in the world. If it supports again international order, I can use that to argue my own positions in terms of the regional conflict. If it simply says let's be practical guys. Let's be realistic and accept what is there. Then we're looking into the rule of law jungle, and whoever is wealthiest or strongest today can gain what he can gain, and conflicts will keep emerging as things change. So, I actually don't expect America to disappear from the region. That's not realistic. It will be there. I just want it to play a different role, right? I want it to play a role that on the one hand does not ignore American interests but doesn't ignore the interests of others in the region. And definitely does not ignore the rule of law.

TM: So, let's imagine you're talking to the next US president, and you're telling them here's my assessment of what your interests are in the region and how you should act to advance those interests, while also not violating certain principles. What are American interests in the region that you would you would highlight to keep them engaged.

NF: Let me preempt that by saying it's more complex. I speak more often to my own people than to American presidents.

TM: Of course.

NF: And I would argue, my own people, that we need to be more active about our own issues. We are the ones who started wars in the last century. We are the ones who started the peace process in the last century. We need to start leading the agenda again and taking advantage of friends in America or Russia or China or Europe to help achieve our issues. So, we need to be more active. In terms of what we would like, what America could expect—Look, irrespective of who's your president, you're right of center or left of center most of the time. Let's leave the exception space. You would want a centrist-moderate Middle East. A Middle East that essentially centrist-moderate and in many respects, close to being secular in terms of in the overall system frankly. And you would want a Middle East that looks forward, that respects its past, and is interested in this present but also helps resolve many of these conflicts in the region that have consequences on American security or security of your allies beyond the region. That's our road. That's where we come in. That's where active Arab states should come in. We need to engage on these issues. We need to put out ideas for the future agenda of the Middle East. We need to find ways to argue with the Turks. We need to find ways to argue with the Iranians. Find ways to argue with the Israelis with the view of trying to reach solutions to a problem. Not listening to simply ideas coming in from rule.(?)

KH: We want to move to discussing a little bit about the US-Egyptian relationship because I think using the advantage of having you here in this first talk of the series, I think we could get some real insight. But before we do that, I think one last question while we're still on the Arab

world. I think what you're saying is quite interesting because it speaks to where America is vis-a-vis the world and vis-à-vis the region. But I think equally interesting, it speaks to where the Arab world is. The fact that, as you mentioned, the Arab world prioritizes security and hence is preoccupied with the US security role in the region. And that seems to be at the expense of conflict resolution, resolving the region's conflicts. And of course, the key conflict here is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Is that an accurate reading of where the Arab world is and hence the issues it prioritizes in its relationship with the United States?

NF: That's a great question. Let me try to be precise in answering that. I think some countries in the Middle East and some good percentage of the population in the Middle East, Arabs, will believe that yes, some countries are prioritizing their interest at the expense of the conflict resolution issues. Others in the Middle East believe that what happened in the past has not succeeded. Therefore, let's try a different angle to achieve the same objective. I'm more of a traditionalist on that, but I would argue actually why can't we do both. The idea that a new approach is better than the old approach; that's a very dangerous gamble. But the idea that what happened in the past was the best approach is also wrong because it didn't solve anything. But this didn't solve the problem itself, so again, my proposal is I'm not going to accept that we weaken the tenets of the peace process because they're based on right and wrong, and they're based on international order, and we can't solve it if we throw those away.

And again, without taking too much time, they defend and preserve our rights and also Israeli security and recognition and so on. But I argue look guys it's not normalization before or normalization after. We actually want peace and normalization, so why can't we take the Arab Peace Initiative with the clear understanding it's not going to be normal until the problem is resolved. And if all parties accept it, let's add some meat to it. Again, I'm not going to accept that okay, there's a new approach that is proven that has any evidence of being better, especially when the tenets of the peace process are being threatened frankly by a number of things, including recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the Israeli policy organization.

TM: So Nabil the one thing we are going to want to do is make sure that we get to questions from some of our audience. But before we do that, I just did want to follow up on this discussion. I mean and to kind of elaborate, you know, before we get back to the US, just to talk about not just America's relationship with the Arab world but now America's relationship with Egypt. And one thing I have to say that was very striking to me, although it shouldn't have been surprising was just how marginal Egypt has been in the last couple of years of this presidency as this president has made what you cannot deny are major moves. So, the fact, it seems to me to be that when we look at the Israeli-Palestinian issue or the Israeli-Arab issue, frankly, Egypt is nowhere. And yet, America is moving full steam ahead with new partners, primarily in the United Arab Emirates but also in Saudi Arabia etc. So, I wonder— I mean we've been talking a lot about America and America's relevance. And what kind of an ally is America? And, you know, should Middle Eastern countries count on it in the future? What about Egypt? Do you think that America has basically written off Egypt?

NF: Look I served not only as an ambassador in Washington, but I've been in and out of the system for a number of years. But when I was in Washington, and my counterpart— I see him on the screen. Dan's on the screen. Also I very honestly tell you, I think we took each other for granted for too long. We moved the relationship very quickly, very strongly post October 73 war, especially after the peace agreements between Egypt and Israel. And then everywhere we went in America— this is when I was going around—there was always this focus on what is your role in the Arab peace process? Or even we were making that point of always talking about the past rather than highlighting important laws Egypt had, like supporting the American liberation of Kuwait. And I argue that Egypt made a mistake of not expanding its contribution to American interest in the eyes of Americans when it predicted itself in America. It was too focused for too long only on the peace process. As the peace process progressed, we were not the only game in town. So even though those steps were not going to succeed, would never have happened, had we not taken the step first, the more it succeeded the more the impression was in America that well why is Egypt important any longer?

And I'll give you a quick anecdote, and I may have told you this before. I took a delegation to the Congress meeting a new congressman, and my colleague coming from Cairo went into a typical Egyptian historical synopsis of what we had done in the past, and this country was 38 years old. So he said what are you talking about? You weren't even at Camp David. And our side flipped over in his chair. But they were both right. He was talking about the Palestinian-Israeli campaign, and our guy was talking about what the Egyptians can do. So even then, Americans was thinking well what actually is America-Egypt's role. And at that time, the congressman, who by the way became a supporter of the Egypt, then asked us you mean we've been paying you all this money for this long?

So, your question is valid, but it's not simply the last three years. The last three years has increased—the last six or seven years because, frankly, we've been distracted on what we have as a priority. But I would argue a quarter of the Middle East lives here. As we succeed, you will see the modifications of this expanding much more strongly than anywhere else. If we have problems, you will see the consequences of that expanding also much more than anywhere else. So if you're looking for a moderate-centrist forward-looking Middle East, you'd be making a major mistake if you disregard Egypt, even if we made the mistake of not boasting about our influence in a multitude of issues in the past and even if we allow you tickets for granted in that we're only a function of the peace process. So, our strongest asset, and this in a way responds to your point. Historically our strongest asset in our own region has not been hard assets, hasn't been money. It's basically been the generation of new ideas, good and bad by the way. They weren't all good, but majority good. But anyway, we need to start talking about the future of the Middle East. We need to lead that agenda, and I think that will once again re-pivot Egypt into the forefront of the debate about the Middle East, and why you need to talk to Egypt and deal with it. But we need to deal with each other differently.

TM: Karim is going to get us into a discussion in the last few minutes before we open it up about the election, but I could not resist observing a parallel that you know, when I'm in Egypt, and I talk to people in Egypt like yourself, we often hear some variant of the of the sentence

you just uttered. That one of the reasons Egypt lost its primary position in the region is that there was a period where Egypt became distracted by internal affairs. And you know, you're thinking about what happened with Mubarak in 2011 and afterwards. And there's an interesting parallel there with what's happening in the United States now. Would you say that the United States is also at risk of losing its global leadership position because of its similar distraction with internal affairs?

NF: I think you are losing that position. You will not have the same singular position as you had in the past. The issue will be how much you lose, and how much you preserve. And that will depend on what you do, not what other countries do. And I would argue the same thing, by the way, back home in the Middle East. Egypt's fall in the Middle East in the future, which I think can continue to be very significant will be a function, not of insulation with America or what others in the region do but what it itself does if we once again become the core of new thinking in the region. Then that's the traditional Egyptian position. Let me even make a bombastic statement. I actually believe that Arab-American relations in the future will be determined more by Arabs than by Americans.

TM: Explain.

NF: Well you're busy all over the world or not busy all over the world, depending on what you would do. The Middle East is just one region. You're not going to move out of the Middle East, but you're not going to fight as many battles in the Middle East. And I hope you don't because you've created some. But you have no reason to have a number of them—just not a few I may say. But it is really what we do if we take charge of our own region and deal with America as a good partner or the Russians or the Chinese. That will affect how you look at us because you will then come and say, you know, these guys are influencing what's happening in the region. Let's be realistic here all the stuff about the American dream, and a lot of it is frankly quite romantic. You're in this for your national interest. So, you will deal with anybody anytime if it serves you. If the region is full of fires, some of which you started. But if it's full of fires, you're going to try to stay away. If it's not, if you find leadership in the region, you're going to try to benefit from it, and that's fine with me.

TM: But when you read the domestic American political situation, I mean it seems from your comments, that there's a kind of goldilocks level of American involvement. You don't want, you know, Iraq 2003 level of American involvement, but you also don't want complete American neglect of the region. You want to be somewhere in the middle where the US is imposing some kind of order, restraining its allies from adventurism, etc.

NF: No.

TM: Well I mean that's exactly what I heard you say. What did I get wrong?

NF: I'll tell you I don't actually want that. I don't believe— even if I wanted it that America will leave the region. So, America will be a player in the region, whether I like it or not.

TM: Right.

NF: All I'm arguing is that you're going to be in the region. So, in your international relations generally, not only in the region but generally, highlight rule of law; highlight international order. That allows us to adopt, to confirm that real politics will be part of the occasion. But the end of the day, one cannot violate law. If that's the case—even if you don't have a strong military operative policy that will help us argue in resolving our own regional issues, that you know what, the international order supported by everybody else around the world insists on the UN charter, insists on international law. That's what I need. I don't need you to be the military arbiter in the region. And by the way, you're not. You've caused more harm in that respect. Otherwise you've been very helpful when you've supported people in the region. Security works not when you decide what serves your security and what does not.

TM: Fair enough. I mean the last thing I'll ask before Karim gets us to our last segment is simply you reading the American domestic political situation now and the configuration of forces in the United States. Now who would you say in the United States makes the kind of argument for the kind of foreign policy that you want to see?

NF: I don't think anybody really does because it's a variation on a theme that we need to move away from our previous role. And again, the idea of engagement was more assertive during George W. Bush than Obama, and he was a Republican versus a Democrat. Trump came in and took the exact opposite post. If I look at the two presidents, one basically argues rule of law and so on and so forth, but he represents a Democratic party that frankly in the past has not really been consistent on those things, when it costs, and what will cost. Again, I'm not fixated on America solving our problems. We need to solve them. I'm just fixated on America asserting that the rule of law has to be the international principle.

TM: Brother Karim.

KH: I know we want to get quickly to the questions from the audience, so let me try and squeeze in sort of a broad general question about the elections. There seems to be an interesting irony here, whereas I think we all agree that the region seems to matter less to the United States. Although as you mentioned, it will still be important. America will be involved in the Middle East in some capacity. But as the region is diminishing in importance to America, it seems that this particular election is front and center of Arab concerns. And the reason I say that is that there is a let's say conventional wisdom—and feel free to challenge that—that in terms of the Arab stakes in this election, there seems to be a lean towards president Trump and a desire for him to continue in office. More along the lines of the devil we know. There seems to be an apprehension that a Biden administration will revert back to the very problematic policies undertaken by the Obama administration, especially vis-a-vis Iran. If the Arab world were to have a voice or a vote in this election, who would they vote for it?

NF: I think if the Arab world had a vote, it should vote for itself.

TM: No but which of the two candidates represents the interests or would be more likely to pursue policies that are in the broad Arab interest?

NF: Neither of them will pursue policies that are in the broader Arab interest. And unless we in our world change the way we operate both domestically and in our relations with the United States, we have to make the Arab world an area of interest for America to get it to take policy positions that are supportive or at least more supportive of the Arab world. The idea—again the reason I'm not trying to give you a dramatic answer, shying away from the question. I'm not going to answer the question, which I prefer. That's a point. It's a clear response to you. But I want to emphasize. Arabs who think this is going to be solved in America are wrong. It won't be solved in America.

I can see that a re-election of Trump would be more comfortable for some Arab states. Not all at the beginning but more problematic for them in the long medium and long term because he's very transactional, and he will keep saying, "Well okay what do I get in exchange for this?" rather than in terms of a relationship. On the other hand, Biden coming in will immediately take positions that are different from Trump, so that will create some friction in the short term with some of these countries. But in the long term, if the same countries take charge of their interests more and more, Biden is a real politic operator. I mean he's not somebody who's going to go off on the tangent and simply argue right and wrong irrespective of everything else. So, we need to change the way we handle things. Biden will be more problematic for most of us at the beginning. But in the long term, it may be different. While Trump would be probably easier for some at the beginning, I would argue in the medium and long term could be much problematic.

TM: Go ahead.

KH: You've engaged with vice president Biden, I know, throughout your career. And of course, he's been around for decades as a leading figure in Washington. So, he has a track record on these issues. Very briefly, how would you assess a potential Biden administration with respect to its posture towards the region?

NF: Sure. First let me say I met president Trump as a businessman, not as president, and he is very transactional. I've met said vice president Biden many times as senator for over 15 years. He is extremely talkative. That being said, he has foreign policy experience, and he's a pragmatist. If you look at his policies on everything from Iraq to Iran to the Arab-Israeli peace process, even to Arab reform and if you want the Arab spring, he will argue the case but then always fall on the side of let's be practical and realistic. But again, I have a problem with the idea that America has the right answer for everything, and American exceptionalism is the way we should go. Now given America's size and power economically, militarily, that's not going to go away unless we take greater charge of our own nations.

TM: You know I'll note that vice president Biden came under a lot of a heat in the early days of the Arab spring because in one of his early television interviews, he was asked to call Hosni Mubarak a dictator, and he said no I wouldn't call him a dictator. And so, given that he has that history of very cozy relations, I think with sort of the establishment in the region, he must not be as frightening as say president Obama was. That in other words, he must be— in fact some leaders might look at him as kind of harkening back to an earlier era of American foreign policy making.

NF: Sure, an earlier era after a couple of months of anti-Trumpism.

TM: Right.

NF: And the earlier era had its good and bad elements. So again, if you look at a time frame, you will see ups and downs in the relationship, depending on who's the president on the American side. They are both pragmatists. The most influential factor would be what we do, not who you elect.

TM: Okay so we couldn't get you to endorse an American presidential candidate here, so that's our failure. But alright, I think we should take some questions because we have really tremendous group of people in the audience. And so, the way we will do this is if you would like to ask a question, and you're comfortable with being recorded and having that recording live forever on the internet then please use zoom's raise hand function. I already have one question from our colleague at the Middle East Initiative, senior fellow Sultan al-Qassemi who you may of course know as one of the most fascinating observers of the Arab political and cultural scenes. He comes to us from Sharjah. I'm going to unmute him. I think he's already unmuted. Please Sultan. Go ahead and ask your question of Nabil Fahmy.

SQ: Thank you ambassador Nabil Fahmy. My question is it right to say that a number of Arab states and not only those in the Gulf have lost the Democratic party by putting all their eggs in the GOP basket? Their relations revolve around the Republican party, and what can these states do to correct this impression?

NF: It's a great question because that is the perception among many. Now having lived in America, having worked in America, the first couple of months will be rough. I think, by the way, it's always a mistake to put all your all your cards on one candidate or the other, one party or the other, even if the dialogue with the other is problematic in the meantime. I made the point that the future of relations in the Middle East will be determined more by Arabs than by America because we're the ones on the ground. Having said that, I actually believe those Arab countries that are perceived to be very close to Republicans and Trump will face a little bit of a— if you want, rocky is the wrong term— well a little bit of a transition in the relationship. But America cannot ignore these states if it is interested in the Middle East, so the American president, whoever it is, will come around and think okay how do we get over this? And how do we develop a “new relationship” with these countries? What are our demands? Or how can we move on? So again, my example of a bit of a roller coaster. There will be ups and

downs with either of the victors in this election. Arab states will be best served by what they do, but I wouldn't worry about them being left out, especially if you're active. Okay good to see you.

TM: Excellent question. Thank you so much Sultan for that question. I will now come to the next person on my list who is Rami Khouri of the American University in Beirut. He's not a stranger to anybody. Again, one of the most prolific and insightful scholars and writers on the contemporary Arab situation, and he joins us, I believe, from New York. Although, I could have lost track of his whereabouts. Please go ahead Rami. Sorry you're on mute. I think you can unmute yourself. Yep. Okay great.

RK: Thank you so much. Ahlan Nabil. Nice to see you again and thank you for your discussion. I had to leave for just about 15 minutes for another commitment, so I hope you didn't answer this point. But I'd like to ask you a question about your analysis of the evolving situation of medium powers in the in the Middle East. So historically Egypt was the biggest Arab power with Saudi Arabia in different ways. But certainly, Egypt was the most dominant politically in many ways for decades and decades. And then it kind of pulled back somehow in the last 30 years. And now we have Iran. We have Turkey. We have the Emirates. The Saudis are involved. Qatar is trying to do some stuff, and Egypt seems to be reviving some of its regional, let's call it, engagement, activism to use a neutral term. What is your analysis of the regional powers, Arab and non-Arab? And of course, the Israelis always have been and are more involved now. What is your analysis of the regional powers in the Middle East in the light of the evolving role of the big powers? The Russian, the Saudis, the French are getting more active in different ways, and the Chinese are knocking at the door.

NF: Great question. Let me start by saying I think regional powers will have more influence than they had in the past in our own region, in comparison to the role played by non-regional. That being my point of departure. The issue will become more regional than in the past. Regrettably, I also believe that the region now is more influenced by Turkish, Israeli, and Iranian positions than it is by Arab positions. Or at least, that's where the political trend seems to be for the time being. I don't think any of these countries, by the way, Turkey, Israel, or Iran can lead the Arab world. So, I expect to see a rebound, but the rebound in the Arab world will take time because the traditional power states— let me rephrase that— the older Arab states have gone through and are going societal transitions of different forms. Not all of them revolutions, but some of them simply societal change, and that has a priority. It's also a fact that some states like my own country have problems all over its borders, and that will distract it from playing a role beyond its borders too much. Although, it has over the last few months increased its positioning, especially on Libya.

But we need to talk more about the region itself. Ignoring superpowers would again be stupid but depending on them in this geopolitical environment would be stupid. Therefore, we need to regain more and more of our role. Our role will not be immediate hard assets. Although, there's no question that our military is quite strong in comparison to others in the region. But our real beneficial element has been in generating new ideas, and that's why if we cannot solve

all of our immediate problems today then nobody can. I want to see an increased Egyptian role in trying to talk about what should the Middle East look like in the future? How do we get there? What are the processes regionally, as well as domestically and sub-regionally? That's how you regain your role until you regain your hard assets at the same time.

TM: Thank you Rami for the question, and we're quickly running out of time. And so unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to get to everybody. However, we do have a someone from an earnest up and coming little institution in Princeton, New Jersey. That's Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer. He will be well-known to all of you as the US ambassador to Egypt in the late 90s and then ambassador to Israel in the Bush administration. Welcome Ambassador Kurtzer. Please ask your question. One second. Yep you're unmuted now.

DK: Okay thank you. And it's good to see you Nabil and Karim. Hopefully next time in Cairo. Could you be very specific about Iran in either a Trump second term or a Biden first term? Egypt seemed very uncomfortable with Obama's policies towards Iran and seems more comfortable with Trump's policies, although they may be raising tensions in the region. What do you think is going to happen in February in either of those two possibilities? A Trump administration that is not really interested in resuming the JCPOA, even though it talks about it and a Biden administration that almost clearly would like to get back into the JCPOA, which Egypt and some other Arabs and Israel were not comfortable with.

NF: Thank you Dan. Great to see you. I actually believe that you're right in terms of JCPOA. Biden and Trump have different positions on that, but I don't really believe that either of them would want to use force against Iran very quickly or without very serious calculations. Egypt at least didn't have a problem with the JCPOA as a nuclear agreement technically. We had a problem with it being a standalone agreement which did not have a regional context to it containing Iranian hegemonic policies in the region. Although Secretary Kerry, who was my colleague at the time, later on told me that this was supposed to be a first step into a larger discussion. But we did not see that.

If I think Iran is being driven to be more aggressive by its sense that America would be less operative in the region, and if that's the case, those paying a price for that are the Arab states in the Gulf in particular, and they are very friendly to Egypt per se. That is what creates the problem with Egypt.

If on the other hand, there is a more robust more balanced security arrangement for these Arab states— and that will take time— that should lead to a less aggressive Iranian policy. I would argue that if Biden wants to go back to JCPOA, he should add to it, not the technical elements but the regional political elements that contain Iranian policies throughout the region. And I would argue there's no way you can have a serious JCPOA, technically in terms of the nuclear component, without having his own nuclear weapons in the Middle East for all countries. Iran, of course included. But also included all the Arab countries in my own, and Israel at the same time. The JCPOA was a 15-year plus event. It was not a permanent agreement, technical components. But as a step, it wasn't a bad idea. But there was no ladder

which showed you where you were going. I don't think either Biden or Trump would immediately confront Iran, but definitely Trump will be less receptive to ideas to join the agreement.

TM: Great okay. I think I can take a couple of more questions if they are succinctly stated, and so I have three people on my list. And I'll just go to them in the order in which they wrote to me. So the first person I have is—I'm trying to. Yep go ahead.

HH: Well hello from Silicon Valley and thank you very much for this amazing conference. Two very quick questions. The first one is the Arab Reform and Democracy Initiative on campus at Stanford. Researchers were sent to the Arab world to the 22 countries for about a year and came back to let us know in a day and a half about democracy in the Arab world. And their conclusion is that there is only one country that actually has a democratic, election and that's Tunisia. I would love to get your perspective. Second for people like us who are in the United States and are not members of the Democratic or the Republican party, we consider Donald Trump to be a piece of [__]. What do you think?

TM: Okay I didn't know we were going to have to apply a parental warning, but the spirit of the question is clear. Go ahead Nabil.

NF: I thought the first point was difficult, but that's— look I'm a full supporter of more democracy in the Arab world. So, there's nothing that is going to make me shy away from saying that because it's not going to be the American system of democracy, which by the way suffers from severe consequences of excessive power, excessive money in the process. It would probably be, if we get there, what I would like to see more a relation to what you see in Europe or what you see in Asia. That's what I'd like to see. We have to do that ourselves. We have to get there. We have to get there, not at a slow pace. You have to get there at a pace that is as fast as we can do that, as we build our country at the same time. And I don't see them as being mutually exclusive. So, if you want relaxation in that process, any slowness is an issue of concern, but it's not an either or issue. And again, it's not the idea that— I hear this in different parts of the world— but what you see in America now is justification not to pursue democracy. I just find that I have to tell you the debate last night was pathetic, but that is not this reason to drop the whole concept of democracy. We need democracy that is homegrown, and we need to pursue more of that. The other point about American opinions on Trump. Again, I'm not American, so I'll stay out of there.

TM: Okay. As always, the consummate diplomat offers the most diplomatic possible answer. So, I'm keenly aware of the fact that it is closing in on 10 pm where Minister Nabil and Karim are. And so, I think we should bring these proceedings reluctantly to a close and reluctantly and regretfully hand Nabil Fahmy back over to his family. I want to thank you Nabil for this really wide-ranging and candid conversation. I truly believe that anybody who listened to this call learned something, not just about Egypt and the concerns of leaders in the Middle East, but also learned something about the United States and its internal dynamics. Any last words before we sign off?

Commented [CLI]: I can't make out this name— it sounds like "Hossam al-Hasani" but I can't find anyone online with a similar name/area of interest!

KH: No just to add my word of thanks to Minister Fahmy for taking the time to join us on this first of a series, and I think this was a great start to the conversation we intend to have about looking at America through Arab eyes. And really just a word of thanks, Tarek, to you and the entire Harvard Kennedy School team for putting this together. I think this was as close as we can get to flawless.

NF: Let me add my word to thanks, also Tarek and Karim, and thank you to everybody in the audience. I really enjoyed the questions and, I hope I gave you useful answers to think about, whether you agree or disagree on the details inside. I was honored to be invited back to Harvard, even virtually, and thank you for this though.

TM: Well we're definitely going to do it in person as soon as the Coronavirus allows. I hope people— Karim mentioned that this is the first in a series, and we'll be convening next week at 2PM eastern to meet with Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a distinguished Emirati public intellectual, where we'll pick up many of the same themes that Nabil opened for us today. Thank you everybody, and we'll see you again soon. Thank you. Bye-bye.