

FIELD OFFICE EGYPT

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“Obama will fix it!”

EGYPT'S PERCEPTIONS ON AMERICA'S NEW PRESIDENT

For many in Egypt, the new American President gives America's image abroad a new lease on life — a new face, a new administration, and finally an opportunity to escape the unpopular presidency of George W. Bush. However, the enthusiastic optimism, implying Obama will be able to fix everything, is contrasted by the stark pessimism of “business as usual.” In the end, the tone in Egypt remains “wait and see.”

For Egyptians ‘on the street’, Obama has become exceptionally popular. Euphoric cries of “Obama, Obama!” greet this semester's crop of students at the American University in Cairo, reflecting a popular expectation that “Obama will fix it,” ‘it’ referring to anything from the global financial crisis to the recent Gaza conflict. His broad popularity, however, is also moderated by the pessimistic view that nothing will really change. A recent informal poll by the *Daily News Egypt* (22 Jan 09) revealed a “cautious optimism” among Egyptians interviewed in buses, streets and coffee shops. “I like the man. He's not a warmonger,” a parking attendant was quoted as saying. “I have a feeling that he won't be as pro-Israeli as other presidents are,” he added. Others interviewed expressed a more cautious view, such as an engineer, who, even despite recognizing the “political realities of America's rigid foreign policy,” still believes “he will do a lot of great things.” Some expect little to change. “There is really no difference between Obama and Bush because they are both following the same strategy,” he says. Although many seemed certain “the era to come will be much better than the past eight years of the Bush administration,” as another is quoted, “we still have

not seen anything yet.” As the *Daily News's* Abdel-Rahman Hussein noted, “Obama's actions, not words, are what will matter to Egypt.”

Desire for change

The optimism regarding Obama in Egypt dovetails with the favorable reception greeting the new president across the world. Egyptians hope for a new beginning of US-Egyptian relations: “Obama's inspiring inaugural speech with its uplifting message of hope for a better tomorrow has infused citizens all over the world with a renewed desire to be agents of change,” enthused Rania al Malky, Chief Editor of the *Daily News Egypt*, in a January 24th editorial. In a new 17-nation poll published January 20th, the BBC World Service finds widespread and growing optimism that Obama's presidency will lead to improved relations between the United States and the rest of the world, rising an average of 21% in all countries surveyed from six months previous. According to the survey, 58% (from 29%) of Egyptians predicted better relations between United States and the rest of the world, and when asked of their foreign policy priorities, 75% of Egyptians saw brokering peace in the Middle East as the top priority of the incoming administration, 82% believe that withdrawing US troops from Iraq should be a top priority, and 63% suggested improving America's relationships with Egypt should be a top priority.¹

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http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/jan09/BBC_Inaugural_Jan09_rpt.pdf

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Egypt's positive expectations of America's 44th president stem largely from three sources: who he is, his initial message and actions towards the Muslim world, and what he represents. First, as the first black President, Obama is proof for many Egyptians that long-standing racial barriers have been overcome, resulting in copious comparisons in the Egyptian press (*Al-Ahram weekly*, 22-29 Jan 09) with Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. Second, Obama's inaugural words signaled to many Egyptians that the new administration will be a break from the past, and Egyptians now await his actions. Last, Obama's election and inauguration represent for Egyptians an example of democratic regime change—lamented by critics in Egypt as not even being the exception to the rule, referring to President Mubarak's quarter century in power (*Daily News Egypt*, 23 Jan 09). Raina al Malky, the *Daily's* editor-in-chief, summarized what the American election represents for Egyptians: "Youth in Egypt long to experience the fulfillment of having their voices heard, of knowing that they have made a difference." Joseph Simons, a fellow at the American University in Cairo, noted, "With Egypt's political status quo, it is not surprising that most Egyptians have little faith that a better political future for their country is on the horizon. For now, they will have to live vicariously through the hope and the change that America's new president has promised to bring," (*Middle East Times*, 11 Nov 08).

A degree of skepticism

Obama's words, while appreciated as an effort to "make the Middle East an urgent priority," as Mubarak urged, have nevertheless been greeted with a degree of skepticism in Egypt and across the Middle East. As one commentator in the *Daily News Egypt* (22 Jan 09) noted, "His gesture to Muslims is welcome, but this has to be translated on the ground into action. I think most Muslims and Arabs are optimistic about Obama, but they are still cautious, waiting for deeds." The guarded pessimism among Egyptians reflects two things: recognition that the American president has significant domestic issues on his plate, and their expectation that Obama will continue Bush's policies in

the Middle East. A major bone of contention among Egyptians, also shared among neighboring Arabs, has been the United States' commitment to Israel, and a perceived unwillingness or inability to appreciate the Palestinian side of the conflict in what many Arabs have seen as biased negotiations in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Obama's "failure" to mention the crisis in his inaugural speech, his continued support of Israel's right to defend itself and characterization of the crisis as simply humanitarian in nature and not one of national self-determination were all perceived as confirmation of the continuation of previous US policies in the Middle East. "For those who think that American policy will now change comprehensively, they are wrong, because American interests haven't changed," cautioned Youssef Sidhom, the editor-in-chief of the Coptic Christian *Watani* newspaper.

However, several actions of the new Obama administration have been well received in Egypt and seen as positive steps. First, President Obama's first call was to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, followed by calls to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah II of Jordan, which were seen in Egypt as tangible signs that Obama is serious about resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Second, Egyptians have positively viewed the closure of the US facility at Guantanamo: "Obama's decision will go a long way to restoring faith in the United States," claimed an article in the *Daily News Egypt*. The closure is seen as a "step in the right direction," (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22-28 Jan 09). Third, the recent appointment of former Senator George Mitchell as the new Middle East Envoy has been favorably received by both Palestinians and Israelis, and viewed both as a diplomatic heavyweight and a sign of Obama's commitment to the peace process. Chief Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qurei described him as "someone with experience in the Israel-Palestinian question and the settlement of political conflicts," referring to the former senator's role in designing the 1998 Good Friday agreement resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland and as the author of the Mitchell Re-

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port which has become the basis for the Road Map initiatives.

Bridging the gap: actions speak louder than words

In the end, many Egyptians remain cautiously optimistic about Obama's administration, waiting to see his initial actions before making a judgment. "Those who think US policy will reverse 180 degrees are mistaken because they raise the ceiling of hope too much. Similarly, those who think US policy will not change at all are also mistaken. We have to be realistic," noted one political analyst (*Agence France Press*, 22 Jan 09). On one hand, Egyptians are wary of being disappointed, worried that the hope they hold for the new administration will result in "business as usual" and a continuation of the previous administration's policies. On the other hand, many Egyptians already see positive progress and are cautiously optimistic that Obama's administration will offer a chance to improve relations with the United States and will play a more constructive role in the Middle East. This wait-and-see-position is particularly popular with representatives from Egypt's opposition parties. "I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic about him, but I hope he undertakes serious efforts in regards to reaching out in the Muslim world, at least more than the Bush administration did," explained Hussein Ibrahim, Head of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary bloc (*Daily News Egypt*, 22 Jan 09), "He did say he wants to reach out to the Muslim world and I hope he is true to his word." This seems to be the crux of Egyptians' cautious optimism: despite a pragmatic realization that many things in US policy may be unlikely to change, many still express the heartfelt hope that this time, something will be different. The ambivalent perception of America's new president in Egypt, wavering between skepticism and optimism is best reflected by a popular joke circulating in Cairo: A Taxi driver looking with dismay at his car, once again broken down on the side of the road, is cheered up by a bystander with the words: "Obama will fix it."

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