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Mubarak: the Embodiment of 'Moderate Arab Leadership'?

Rosemary Hollis

Throughout his nearly thirty years in power, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was depicted as a 'cautious' man, a 'moderate' Arab leader, and a dependable ally, by American and British diplomats, politicians and commentators. What singled him out for such endorsements and to what extent he earned them, either by default or design, is discussed below. Be that as it may, however, Mubarak did not enjoy consistently high approval ratings in Washington. As of the late 1990s he was increasingly subject to criticism, particularly among US policy analysts and Congressmen, for the way he exercised his power, both at home and in regional affairs. Yet it was only when the Egyptian people rose up and demanded he step down that the United States (and Britain) finally abandoned him.

In keeping with the central theme of this volume, the main purpose here is to ascertain how US-UK perceptions of Hosni Mubarak changed from positive to lukewarm to negative. On the face of it, it would be quite easy to argue that what changed was the circumstances, such that, whereas initially Mubarak was judged simply on the basis of his capacity to survive in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of President Anwar el-Sadat, subsequently he was found to be incapable of managing a transition to democracy in Egypt, held on to power for too long and turned a blind eye to corruption in high places. Alternatively, the case can be made that Mubarak did not change but US (and British) expectations of him did, from feasible to impractical, in terms of what any Egyptian president could hope to deliver. Neither theory presumably holds to the exclusion of the other, of course, and others factors warrant consideration.

The task here therefore is to present and weigh the evidence and thence identify the factors which emerge as the most decisive. To do so, various sources have been consulted, including the commentaries of journalists based in Cairo, diplomatic cables, policy analysis and academic works. The account below also offers insights gleaned from interviews with a number of former US and UK

officials whose responsibility it was to lead on US or UK bilateral relations with Egypt, among them ambassadors who had direct access to Mubarak.¹

In structuring this chapter a deliberate attempt has been made to try to avoid reaching conclusions too early or arranging the material to fit with any one explanation for changes in perceptions of Mubarak. Thus, a summary of what some of the interviewees believe the explanation to be is left to the end and the bulk of the paper is devoted to a step by step account of how Mubarak the man was described and understood in Washington and London during the three decades of his presidency. This account also covers US and UK references to the government presided over by Mubarak and their assessments of elite and public opinion in Egypt. As confirmed by Dan Kurtzer, US Ambassador to Egypt from November 1997 to June 2001, it is fair to assume that when policy analysts in Washington referred to the Egyptian leadership as a collective, they meant Mubarak and his immediate circle, including the top military and security officials.

Having traced the evolution of UK-US depictions of Mubarak, the analysis then shifts to a review of successive US strategic plans or doctrines for the Middle East writ-large, between 1980 and 2010—to give a sense of the broader canvas or context within which both Washington and London viewed the place of Egypt and role of Mubarak. By reading across from what the United States and Britain wanted of the Egyptian leadership, their ‘strategic scripts’ if you will, to what they saw in Mubarak personally, it is possible to reach some tentative conclusions on the process by which Mubarak transited from favoured ally to dispensable liability.

Two points do warrant mention from the outset. One is that, in comparison to the Americans, on the whole the British appear to have been more sanguine about Mubarak’s qualities and leadership style, i.e. they basically took him as they found him. The probable explanations for this difference are posited later, but as will become clear, this variance in views has proved instructive to this inquiry. The second point is that among both the Americans and the British, differences are apparent between professional diplomats and intelligence operatives on the one hand and politicians and political analysts on the other. While the former are, no doubt necessarily, ‘on message’ in terms of the national narrative as set by their political masters, they show pragmatism in their acceptance of and adaptation to what they find ‘on the ground’. By contrast, politicians, and in particular the more ideological among them, such as the neo-Conservatives, are more wedded to a particular view of the world rather than reflective about the situation and personalities as they find them.

Early Assessments of Mubarak

¹ I am indebted to several such sources for providing me with insights, which they did mostly on the basis of non-attribution. In certain specific instances, however, key individuals have agreed to be quoted directly, for which I am most grateful.

US and UK portrayals of Hosni Mubarak when he was still Vice President of Egypt (1975-81) compared him favourably with the flamboyant President Anwar el-Sadat, essentially on the grounds that he was 'modest', dull even, by comparison. In a short profile of Mubarak published in 1980, the *Financial Times* noted that he had been the butt of popular jokes when he was first selected as Vice President,² but had increasingly won respect.³ He had distinguished himself as an air-force pilot and officer, particularly in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and was credited with having worked his way up to high office from humble beginnings by hard work, a 'penchant for discipline' and without resort to corruption or self-aggrandisement. Furthermore, he was described by those who knew him as 'a serious man, cautiously ambitious and with a hard cutting edge when the occasion requires', though some apparently suggested he was 'too dour, too much the "good soldier" and too little the charismatic actor-manque that to some extent has characterised both Nasser and Sadat' to be suitable for the presidency.⁴

As described by Thomas Lippman, who was *Washington Post* bureau chief in Cairo from 1975 to 1979:

As Vice President, Mubarak was widely understood to be strong where Sadat was weak. He is unpretentious, he works hard, he is apparently incorruptible, he keeps his family out of public view and he has a very thick skin.⁵

Also according to Lippman:

If there were doubts about Mubarak's qualifications for the presidency, they centred on his intellectual capacity, not his integrity or dedication. Students called him 'La Vache Qui Rit' the laughing cow, because of his supposed resemblance to the trade mark animal on French cheese.⁶

A former British official who was serving in Jordan in the 1970s said that he heard a senior Jordanian politician joke that the Egyptians had chosen 'a donkey' as Vice President. Yet this and other former officials interviewed did point out that if they had to choose they would prefer a practical man to an intellectual one.⁷ As for his image as 'Mr Clean', apparently there were rumours from the start that his wife's cousin might not be so scrupulous.

Whatever the theories about Mubarak's stolid soldierly qualities and lack of intellect, observers noted that he had been masterful in manoeuvring himself into the Vice Presidency and making Sadat believe he was both dependable – a 'fall-guy' even – and that he posed no threat to his boss. As Vice President he was not only deputy to Sadat, but also secretary general of the National Democratic

² As also attested to by former US and British diplomats.

³ 'Men who have made their mark', *Financial Times* feature, 23 July 1980.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Thomas W. Lippman, *Egypt after Nasser* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p.220.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Former Egyptian Ambassador to Washington Nabil Fahmi also reminded me that Sadat had tasked Mubarak with presiding over a clean-up of corruption at the top of the Egyptian government, in part because Mubarak himself was deemed uncorrupt.

Party, with effective control of Egypt's military procurement programme. He also coordinated the intelligence services, ran the presidential office and was party to most of Sadat's discussions with US officials and other foreign visitors on Middle East issues. Additionally, he made official visits to the United States and Britain, among other countries, as Vice President, and represented Egypt in discussions with the US about military aid and joint military ventures for the production of arms.

In effect, Mubarak was not an unknown quantity to either the US or Britain in the period immediately preceding his assumption of the presidency. Yet the American press were reporting in March 1980 that Washington was becoming increasingly invested in the survival of the regime of Anwar el-Sadat, as protector of US interests in the region.⁸ This was only a year after the Iranian revolution had toppled the Shah of Iran, Washington's proxy policeman in the Persian Gulf region, and the media (as too the State Department⁹) were particularly conscious of the dangers of relying too heavily on the fate of one key ally. When Sadat was assassinated on 6 October 1981 there was thus no shortage of speculation that Washington might have repeated the same mistake with Egypt that it had made with Iran. Eight months on, however, the *Financial Times* considered it not entirely fair to judge Mubarak harshly for the 'cautious and conservative' approach he had adopted upon assuming the presidency since:

He kept cool and kept the country together during the extremely tense period after the assassination...when Moslem extremists, in spite of the round-up of more than 1,000 of them last September, were still on the loose and notably, caused an uprising in the city of Asyut in Upper Egypt in which 87 people died.¹⁰

For much of the 1980s US and British press coverage of Egypt frequently made reference to Mubarak's maintenance of the peace treaty with Israel brokered by his predecessor while also noting his cautious resistance to building closer ties with the Jewish state. The press implied that such caution made sense in the context of general Arab hostility to Israel (and Sadat's decision to end the state of war with Israel). US Congressmen apparently tried to urge Mubarak to develop a warmer relationship with Israel, but the sense prevailed that the Egyptian president was right to move slowly while still consolidating his power and managing security threats at home.¹¹

⁸ Youssef Ibrahim, 'U.S. Stake in Egypt Rests On One Man – Anwar el-Sadat', *New York Times*, 30 March 1980 and Eddy Cody, 'U.S. is seen increasing its stake in stability of Sadat Regime', *International Herald Tribune*, 31 March 1980.

⁹ For discussion of the fallout within the State Department following the 'loss' of the Shah, see Robert D. Kaplan, *The Arabists: The Romance of the American Elite* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

¹⁰ Anthony McDermott, 'Waiting for some firm policies', *Financial Times Feature on Egypt*, 28 May 1982.

¹¹ Alan Mackie, 'A Cautious Approach begins To Work for Mubarak as Vote Consolidates Party's Power', *International Herald Tribune*, 14 June 1984.

Economic Issues

Where there was criticism of Mubarak in the 1980s it was for his economic policies, or lack of them. Throughout the 1980s reportage on Egypt repeatedly drew attention to the high unemployment levels, the overweening size of the public sector, the growing gap between the rich few and the poor masses, corruption and the urgent need for bold structural changes. Yet blame for inertia at the top was frequently directed more at the senior figures in the cabinet and around the president than at Mubarak himself and he was urged to make better appointments.¹²

What is striking in reviewing descriptions of Egypt in the 1980s is the prevalence of the very same problems that were still being identified not only in the 1990s but right up until the revolution of 2011, including in US diplomatic cables.¹³ However, in Kurtzer's view, the condition of the Egyptian economy improved exponentially during Mubarak's three decades. When Kurtzer was posted in Cairo as a political officer in 1979: 'Egypt was broke and its infrastructure was in a parlous state. You couldn't make a telephone call; there was sewerage in the streets; and electricity was in short supply'.¹⁴ With US assistance, in the 1980s the Egyptian infrastructure was rebuilt and by the late 1990s Egypt was exporting electricity, had a new sewerage system and could boast an advanced telecoms industry—but, according to Kurtzer, such gains did not feature in the perceptions of the populace.

As also reported by Kurtzer, by the 1990s Egypt 'was ready' for an International Monetary Fund programme that was deemed a singular success by the IMF. Some other American and British diplomats also considered that Egypt entered a new and promising phase from 2004, when Mubarak appointed ministers capable of leading an economic and fiscal reform programme that produced unprecedented growth. According to several sources, however, those same ministers presided over changes which the Egyptian populace perceived as benefiting the corrupt few rather than the whole population.¹⁵ Also, whereas the State Department tended to the view that over time the progress made in reforming the Egyptian economy was broadly positive, British commentators

¹² Tony Walker, 'Country at the crossroads', *Financial Times Survey on Egypt*, 5 June 1985; Julian Nundy, 'Mubarak scores points for foreign policy, but economic woes remain', *International Herald Tribune*, 15 June 1985.

¹³ Secret Cairo 000874, 19 May 2009, 'Scenesetter: President Mubarak's visit to Washington', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/207723> accessed 31 Dec. 2011.

¹⁴ Author interview with Dan Kurtzer, 28 December 2011.

¹⁵ See for example: Galal Amin, *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak 1981-2011* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011), chapter 13; John Bradley, *Inside Egypt: the Road to Revolution in the Land of the Pharaohs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), chapter 6. In an interview with Egyptian economist Samir Radwan by the author in January 2006, Radwan attributed some of the problems to the fact that the reformist ministers did not have a free hand and were constrained by others fearful of losing their privileges.

were not convinced that increased prosperity for the few would eventually 'trickle down' to the poor masses.

Military Relations

By making peace with Israel, Egypt secured the return of the Sinai Peninsula occupied by Israel in the 1967 war and only partially retrieved by Egypt in the 1973 war. As president after Sadat's assassination, it was Mubarak who managed the arrangements for the transfer of territory and thereafter adhered to the agreed terms for limited Egyptian force levels near the border with Israel. From shortly after the treaty was signed, the United States made Egypt the second largest recipient (after Israel) of US overseas aid, largely in the form of military assistance.¹⁶ Thus began a US programme to re-equip the Egyptian armed forces (previously supplied by the Soviet Union), which included the transfer of relatively sophisticated armaments, joint production agreements and military training.

By the mid-1980s the US was providing military grants averaging \$1.2bn a year and a further \$1.7bn per year in support for military training. From 1983, the US and Egyptian armed forces began a regular programme of joint military exercises entitled Bright Star. As noted by a former British official, military cooperation featured only minimally in UK-Egyptian relations, not least because the British could not afford to supply the Egyptian forces without charging for the equipment transferred.

In the opinion of Chas Freeman, former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs, 'the motivations for this [US] assistance effort were political rather than military' and Israel and 'its American partisans', rather than the defence establishment, were its chief advocates in Washington.¹⁷ The centrality of military cooperation and aid in the bilateral relationship is nonetheless an important factor for understanding the value placed on Mubarak's leadership by the Americans, including the US military establishment. A military man with near dictatorial powers and himself eager to extract maximum benefit from military cooperation and support was clearly ideal for development of this aspect of the relationship. As Phebe Marr reflected in the early 1990s, good relations with Egypt (among other strategically placed regional powers, including Israel, Turkey and the Arab Gulf states) were beneficial to the United States in part because 'they are governed by a pragmatic

¹⁶ Clyde R. Mark, 'Egypt-United States Relations', *Congressional Research Service* (IB93087), 2 Apr 2003, pp.10-13. <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/19440.pdf> accessed 28 Dec 2011.

¹⁷ Chas. W. Freeman, 'US-Egyptian Defense relations', in Phebe Marr, ed., *Egypt at the Crossroads: Domestic Stability and Regional Role* (Washington D.C.: National Defence University Press, 1999), p.204.

leadership that helps set the tone of discourse and cooperation with the West in the region'.¹⁸

Mubarak became identified with a broader 'moderate' Arab camp in the region as of the mid-1980s, linking Egypt not only with Jordan (whose King Hussein was the first Arab leader to break the isolation of Egypt—in place since the signing of the Egypt-Israel Treaty) but also the rulers of Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ The high point in Mubarak's reputation in Washington came in 1990-91 in the context of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the US-led campaign that drove Iraq out. Mubarak opted not only to support the US-led coalition but was instrumental in garnering support from other Arab states, committed over 30,000 Egyptian troops to the campaign and facilitated the US operations out of Egypt.²⁰ According to hearsay at the time, especially around the Arab world, the US President personally had to pressure Mubarak to cooperate, but General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM) at the time, as well as the Saudi commander General Khaled Bin Sultan, claimed the Egyptian President took little persuading.²¹

In any case, US recognition of Egypt's contribution to the war effort was manifested in Washington's cancellation of Egypt's \$6.7bn military debt. Beginning in 1992 Egypt started assembling M1A1 tank components imported from the United States and manufactured about forty per cent of the components of 555 tanks subsequently produced.²² The Bright Star exercises continued and by the late 1990s were expanded to include troops from some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. US military assistance to Egypt continued at an average of just over \$2bn a year for the remainder of the decade, even though, with the end of the Cold War US military aid to all countries other than Egypt and Israel was phased out.²³

The Security Agenda

Following the 1990-91 Gulf war, Egypt was accorded a central role in the new US-led quest for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, launched in Madrid in November 1991, and became a leading voice in the multilateral talks on arms control and disarmament. In this context, however, the

¹⁸ Phebe Marr, 'Strategies for an Era of Uncertainty: The U.S. Policy Agenda', in Phebe Marr and William Lewis, eds., *Riding the Tiger: The Middle East Challenge After the Cold War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), p.230.

¹⁹ Julian Nundy, 'Mubarak, Hussein Take Lead in New Bloc of Moderates', *International Herald Tribune*, 15 June 1985.

²⁰ General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero: The Autobiography*, written by Peter Petre (London: Bantam Press, 1992), p. 381; and Clyde R. Mark, 'Egypt-United States Relations' p.11.

²¹ Ibid., and HRH General Khaled Bin Sultan, with Patrick Seale, *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp.178-9.

²² Clyde R. Mark, 'Egypt-United States Relations', p.10.

²³ Chas. W. Freeman, 'US-Egyptian Defense relations', p.204.

Egyptians clashed with Israel over the nuclear issue and whether or not to include the Gulf in calculations about the regional military balance. Also, all was not well on the Egyptian home front and the Mubarak regime was challenged by a series of violent attacks perpetrated by Islamist militants. Mubarak's response was to deploy the state's emergency powers to round up and incarcerate would-be and potential opponents. Neither the Americans nor the British offered much complaint about the methods used, though the reflections of former diplomats suggests they drew certain conclusions on the nature of power and risks of political reform in Egypt.

The perpetrators of the violent attacks on representatives of authority, Copts and tourists in Egypt in the 1990s included breakaway elements of the Muslim Brotherhood who had become radicalised in Afghanistan or jail or both. The violent campaign of Gamaa Islamiya and others killed over a thousand people, before the group's leaders called off the armed struggle (following the slaughter of fifty-eight tourists in Luxor in 1997).²⁴ The attacks of Islamist extremists were not limited to Egypt and the Arab world of course—witness the bombings of the World Trade Centre in 1993, the Paris underground and the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. At the same time the practice of intelligence sharing between US, British and other Western agencies and their Arab counterparts was an established practice. In the circumstance, Mubarak and the Egyptian security forces were allies in counter-terrorism long before 9/11 triggered the US declaration of a 'war on terror'.

According to one British source familiar with intelligence (and confirmed by Kurtzer), the Egyptian strategy under Mubarak's leadership included rounding up and jailing or killing the main suspects; using the Islamic establishment to portray the *jihadists* as deviants; and investing heavily in trying to persuade militants to reform – a tactic also adopted in Saudi Arabia. In any case, when either the British or the Americans attempted to advise the Egyptians on what to do they were told to mind their own business and deal with their own terrorist threats. A US source intimated that among the senior US figures in the first and second Bush administrations, both Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were of the opinion that, in terms of counter-terrorism, Mubarak was 'our man' and would torture whomever the US 'rendered' to him. They reportedly thought more highly of the Egyptian techniques than those of the Saudis who allegedly thought they could 'make friends of the extremists'.²⁵

Signs of Fracture

²⁴ Gilles Keppel, *The War for Muslim Minds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p.82.

²⁵ This somewhat sarcastic depiction was offered by a US official who did not wish to be named. His remarks reflected US scepticism about Saudi faith in their ability to change the attitude of anti-Western radicals in the Kingdom, which contrasted with the lower expectations of Egyptian intelligence about the long term effects of incarceration and pressure, not to say torture, of such radicals in Egypt.

In contrast to his amenability in the 1990-91 US-led war with Iraq, when Washington proposed invading Iraq in 2003 Mubarak was not enthusiastic. Apparently his main concern was the US approach—inclusive of disbanding the Iraqi armed forces and Baath Party and thought a much better strategy would have been decapitation of the regime in a military putsch. In public Mubarak warned the invasion would ‘open a Pandora’s box’ of instability and antagonisms in the region and on one occasion said it would produce ‘a hundred bin Ladens’.²⁶

However, the Bush administration was not inclined to heed Mubarak on this issue. In fact, signs of frustration with Mubarak and his closest aides and advisors had already surfaced in Washington in the late 1990s. One cause of irritation was the way in which Egypt continued to enjoy almost unparalleled US military assistance, yet still maintained an oversized, lumbering military machine incapable of conducting the sort of rapid reaction or intervention operations that the United States believed most useful in the context of the late twentieth century.²⁷ In the late 1990s the US Congress was looking for ways to reduce the federal budget and members were beginning to question the value of so much aid to Egypt.

A Congressional Research Service (CRS) briefing paper on Egypt-United States relations updated in April 2003 noted several problems in the relationship along with the benefits over the years.²⁸ Among the points of contention were: Egyptian resistance to US involvement in the inquiry into the crash of Egypt Air Flight 990 off New York in 1999; failure to persuade the Palestinians to accept Israeli terms for their redeployment in Hebron; withdrawal of the Egyptian ambassador to Israel and curtailment of cooperation with Israel on all issues except the Palestinian issue, in protest at Israeli measures to counter the second Intifada; human rights abuses by the security forces, including torture and detention without trial; the imprisonment of human rights activist Saad al-Din Ibrahim; discrimination against the Copts; and the slow pace of democratisation and economic restructuring.

In an article published in *The Middle East Quarterly* in Summer 2005 Samuel Spector identified a list of concerns with the Egyptian leadership similar to those documented in the CRS report and added various other grievances.²⁹ Spector accused the Egyptian government of having actively sought to isolate Israel in the context of the Middle East Peace Process in the 1990s; undermining the

²⁶ See: Samuel J. Spector, ‘Washington and Cairo—Near the Breaking Point?’ *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2005, p.49.

²⁷ Chas. W. Freeman, ‘US-Egyptian Defense relations’, pp.204-10.

²⁸ Clyde R. Mark, ‘Egypt-United States Relations’.

³¹ Consultations with former British diplomats including former ambassadors, who chose to be ‘off the record’.

sanctions regime on Iraq; opposing the invasion of Iraq and developing relations with Sudan and Libya despite US objections. In his conclusion Spector stated:

Egypt has consistently sought to quash any challenge to its role as the Arab world's paramount broker of moderation and stability. To Cairo's decision-makers, such goals take a back seat to preventing the emergence of any new order—including democratisation—that Egypt cannot dominate.³⁰

In marked contrast to this stinging assessment, former British diplomats interviewed for this study offered a much more nuanced appraisal of the Egyptian leadership and its policies.³¹ The British had lower expectations of the Mubarak regime's capacity to democratise and were themselves much more invested in the maintenance of stability. They thought Egypt's strategy of winning over the Islamists was delivering gains, though they thought the Egyptian security services in need of modernisation. Some British diplomats shared US frustration with the group of advisors close to the president, deeming them too complacent and out of touch with the new generation. Several regretted that Mubarak did not attempt to 'win hearts and minds' among the population, but kept aloof—even though, according to one source, he could be engaging and entertaining.³²

All those consulted for this study thought that Mubarak 'dropped the ball' when it came to his son Gamal's quest to succeed his father. Allegedly it was Gamal's mother Suzanne who most encouraged her son in his ambitions and Mubarak simply paid little attention. Since his resignation, claims have come to light that the senior military warned Mubarak that they would not tolerate Gamal as his successor, but the president ignored that warning and allowed popular disillusionment as well as military antipathy to fester.³³

In any case, the assessment in Washington was that another military man would most likely succeed Mubarak and did not push for any particular candidate. Of all the facets of US-Egyptian relations, political reform was not high on the list until George W. Bush became US president. Even then, it was the Neo-Conservatives in the Bush administration who were most wedded to the idea of democratisation in the Arab world and as of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 this goal rose up the US agenda for Egypt. By then, as described by one US source, Mubarak had grown bored with his job, had seen it all, several times over, and was simply hanging on at the head of a sclerotic regime. He resisted US demands for democratisation as far as he could and when the Muslim Brotherhood made a strong showing in the 2005 elections, Mubarak claimed vindication—warning that it was either him (and the ruling National Democratic Party) or the Islamists. In light of this and US

³¹ Consultations with former British diplomats including former ambassadors, who chose to be 'off the record'.

³¹ Consultations with former British diplomats including former ambassadors, who chose to be 'off the record'.

³² Former diplomat consulted for this study on a non-attributable basis.

³³ Author interview with Dan Kurtzer, 28 December 2011.

experience of resistance and sectarian violence in Iraq, when Mubarak told the Bush administration to 'back off', as of 2006 it did.³⁴

In 2008 Mubarak was invited to become co-president of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), alongside President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who had initiated this new scheme for relations between Europe and the Mediterranean littoral states outside the EU. Egypt having by then lost much of its influence in the Arab world, and Mubarak's role in the near moribund Middle East Peace Process having been reduced to managing the border with Gaza and mediating between the Palestinian factions—this invitation must have given the aging Egyptian leader a fillip. So too the choice of Cairo for US President Barack Obama's first visit to the Middle East and the platform for his speech about restoring more cooperative relations with the Arab world.

A diplomatic cable of May 2009 from the US embassy in Cairo to Washington, preparing the ground for a visit by Mubarak, stated:

President Mubarak last visited Washington in April 2004, breaking a twenty year tradition of annual visits to the White House. Egyptians view President Mubarak's upcoming meeting with the President as a new beginning to the U.S.-Egyptian relationship that will restore a sense of mutual respect that they believe diminished in recent years.³⁵

The cable also said of Mubarak:

He is a tried and true realist, innately cautious and conservative, and has little time for idealistic goals. Mubarak viewed President Bush as naive, controlled by subordinates, and totally unprepared for dealing with post-Saddam Iraq, especially the rise of Iran's regional influence.

And that:

Peace with Israel has cemented Egypt's moderate role in Middle East peace efforts and provided a political basis for continued U.S. military and economic assistance (\$1.3 billion and \$250 million, respectively). However, broader elements of peace with Israel, e.g. economic and cultural exchange, remain essentially undeveloped.

In sum, Mubarak and his regime retained a reputation for moderation and caution through three decades. The value of the US alliance with Mubarak's Egypt to the pursuit of US interests in the region was reiterated in language used repeatedly

³⁴ In an article she wrote in response to the uprising that overtook Egypt in early 2011, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice laid the blame on Mubarak himself for renegeing on the democracy agenda that she had been advocating: 'The future of a democratic Egypt' *Washington Post*, 16 February 2011,

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/15/AR2011021504306.html>.

However, as of 2008 the USAID budget for democracy promotion in Egypt was cut, see: Mark P. Lagon, 'Egypt's challenge for U.S. rights policy', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 February 2011. <http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-challenge-us-rights-policy/p24080> accessed 19 February 2012.

³⁵ Secret Cairo 000874, 19 May 2009, 'Scenesetter: President Mubarak's visit to Washington, paragraph 1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/207723> accessed 31 Dec. 2011.

from the beginning of the Mubarak presidency. As discussed below, it was the Egyptian uprising and the way the president reacted to it, rather than a fundamental reassessment in either Washington or London, that eventually convinced the United States and Britain to drop their reliance on Mubarak and call for him to go.

The US Policy Agenda over the Decades

Between 1981 and 2011 successive US administrations framed their aspirations for the Middle East in terms of strategic plans or doctrines, identifying US interests and how they were to be advanced. In the final decade of the Cold War the Reagan administration was preoccupied with countering any extension of Soviet influence in the region. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution in 1979 had clearly raised alarm in Washington that the Soviets were advancing towards the Persian Gulf and the fall of the Shah meant that Iran no longer served as a US ally that could be relied upon to block that advance. In this context Washington identified Israel as the only reliable ally in the region the defence of which should be a priority 'as a bulwark against Soviet penetration and domination of the Middle East and against radical Arab expansionism'.³⁶

The Reagan administration's formula for protecting the Middle East from Soviet expansion was to build a 'Strategic Consensus' among the regional states considered friendly to Washington, namely: Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Sadat having switched from the Soviet to the US camp in the late 1970s) together with Israel. However, Jordan and Saudi Arabia professed to be more worried about Zionism than Communism and proved unwilling, at least initially, to cooperate with Egypt because of its peace treaty with Israel.³⁷ The Strategic Consensus idea was therefore quietly dropped and the United States entered a phase of what one US academic termed 'episodic diplomacy'.³⁸ Two regional conflicts dominated the scene: the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the war in Lebanon (1975-90) which Israel invaded in 1982. As of 1983 apparently, the idea of a 'Cairo-Baghdad axis was seen as a counterweight to Syrian influence in the region'.³⁹

Reagan also hoped to use US intervention in Lebanon and an Israeli-Lebanese peace deal to engender a wider process, floating 'the idea of us continuing to help, as we did at Camp David, in furthering that process bringing more nations into the kind of peaceful arrangement that occurred between Egypt and Israel, producing more Egypts, if you will'.⁴⁰ However, such hopes did not bear fruit, though Egyptian, Saudi and Jordanian assistance to Iraq, encouraged by the

³⁶ Gershon Kieval and Bernard Reich, 'The United States' in Bernard Reich, ed., *The Powers in the Middle East: the Ultimate Strategic Arena* (New York: Praeger, 1987), p.63.

³⁷ Ibid., p.84.

³⁸ Reich, Ibid., p.85.

³⁹ Ibid., p.91.

⁴⁰ Reagan's comments to visiting journalists. Transcript in *Washington Post*, 25 October 1983, quoted in Reich, *The Powers in the Middle East*, p.95.

United States (and Britain) did help Iraq avoid defeat by Iran and Washington investigated developing closer relations with Iraq, only to have that possibility dashed when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

Egypt's role in the US-led campaign to oust the Iraqis from Kuwait in 1991 was noted above. In the aftermath of that war President George H. W. Bush launched the idea of 'a new world order'. In the Middle East this was to entail: a new push for resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict; the disarmament and rehabilitation of Iraq; a new defence arrangement for the defence of the GCC states with US support; and economic prosperity for people in the region. When Bill Clinton became US President in 1993 he inherited 'the most promising environment for Arab-Israeli peacemaking in the history of America's involvement in the issue'.⁴¹ Resolution of the conflict, through US mediation, became a central focus of US diplomacy for the next eight years. On the premise of 'making the region safe' for Israel to reach peace with its Arab neighbours and the Palestinians the Clinton administration also pursued a policy of 'Dual Containment' of Iraq and Iran.⁴²

By the end of the Clinton administration Jordan had signed a peace treaty with Israel (1994) and the Palestinians had attained autonomous control of their internal affairs in the Gaza Strip and their main population centres in the West Bank. However, the make-or-break summit at Camp David in July 2000 had failed to resolve the final status issues at stake in the Israeli-Palestinian dimension of the conflict and the second Palestinian Intifada erupted in September 2000. Israeli-Syrian talks collapsed earlier the same year. Meanwhile, containment of Iraq was not accompanied by a conclusive outcome to the UN-led disarmament programme there and the US and Britain stood almost alone in their rigorous enforcement of the sanctions regime on Iraq. The British did not join the US in imposing sanctions on Iran and for a while EU efforts to develop a rapport with Tehran, inclusive of the British, enabled trade between Iran and Europe to expand.

The arrival of George W. Bush in the White House in 2001 opened a fundamentally new era in US foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Middle East. The ascendance of the Neo-Conservatives in the administration presaged a new agenda even before 9/11 led to the declaration of the 'war on terror', the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq.⁴³ As indicated above, Mubarak's Egypt did not measure up to US expectations of its long standing ally during the Bush administration, especially as the view of those pushing the democratisation agenda gained momentum in 2004 and was set out in the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, launched at the G8 Sea Island summit that June.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), p.237.

⁴² Martin Indyk's address to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 May 1993, see partial transcript in *Middle East International*, no.452, 11 June 1993, pp.3-4.

⁴³ Michael Hudson, 'The United States in the Middle East', in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.308-329.

⁴⁴ <http://bmena.state.gov/>, accessed 16 Dec. 2011.

However, as also noted above, as of 2006 the US administration desisted from calls for more democracy in Egypt for fear of the Islamists. On the Israeli-Palestinian front President Bush broke new ground by calling specifically for a 'two-state' solution to the conflict, but no such agreement was forthcoming.

Many analysts and officials in the United States, as too in Britain, looked to President Obama to succeed in the Middle East Peace Process where his predecessor had failed. Yet, despite a concerted attempt to bring about a 'two state' solution, this ran up against Israel's opposition to halting the expansion of Jewish settlements. Mediation between the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas—which had seized control of the Gaza Strip from its Fatah rivals in 2007—was effectively delegated to Egypt. Yet Washington remained opposed to the idea of a Palestinian unity government inclusive of Hamas and Egypt gave precedence to containing the movement in Gaza while trying to avoid ending up Israel's proxy policeman there.

British Views

British policy in the Middle East in the 1980s and '90s was less the product of strategic doctrines akin to those of the Americans than of a more modest understanding of the limits of British power and reach. The British Empire was no more and the last vestiges of Britain's imperial presence in the region had been wound up by the beginning of the 1970s.⁴⁵ During the last decade of the Cold War the British were clearly supportive of the US worldview and agenda to contain Soviet expansionism. In addition they essentially looked to the United States to take on roles in the region that they could no longer assume. Retaining a close alliance with the United States was in itself a UK priority and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher established a close rapport with President Reagan. She is also credited with having galvanised George Bush senior to take a tough stance with Iraq over Kuwait in 1990, just as the Cold War was ending.

Within this broader context, the British were nonetheless rivals as well as partners to the Americans in the competition to sell arms to the GCC states. As noted above, however, since the British had no armaments to give away as opposed to sell, they did not even attempt to rival the Americans in terms of military assistance to Egypt. On the Arab-Israeli front, British Arabists in the Foreign Office did not always share the US perspective on how best to resolve the conflict, but they conceded that Washington had much more influence with Israel than Britain and British policy was effectively tailored to persuading successive American administrations to drive the peace process in ways that the British could not.

During the period that Tony Blair led the British government (1997-2007), aligning British policy with that of Washington became a central objective. Blair

⁴⁵ For a more detailed discussion see: Rosemary Hollis, *Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era* (London: Wiley-Blackwell and Chatham House, 2010).

himself tried to carve a niche for Britain in the Middle East Peace Process that was designed to make Britain America's partner and help US diplomacy in every way possible.⁴⁶ Yet according to former British diplomats who served in Egypt, Britain was not privileged with access to US dealings with Mubarak on the Arab-Israeli issue and sometimes relied more on the Egyptians than the Americans in Cairo to tell them what was going on.

Blair and his family enjoyed the hospitality of Mubarak on a number of occasions, yet according to one former British ambassador the friendship between Blair and Mubarak was not as close as Blair appeared, or wished, to believe.⁴⁷ Another British source was more dismissive, suggesting that Blair courted Mubarak in part in order to enjoy the benefits of holidays in Sharm el-Sheikh.⁴⁸ Be that as it may, among Egyptian intellectuals, Blair's reputation nose-dived following his decision to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁴⁹ In such circles there was no enthusiasm for the invasion of Iraq in any case, and Blair was criticised for acting like a junior lieutenant in Bush's war. The Egyptians thought that the British, with their decades of involvement in the region, ought to have known better.

In fact, British diplomats who served in Cairo said that they personally did not feel handicapped by association with Blair, because the Egyptian leadership did not hold against them the failings they attributed to the British Prime Minister. Blair himself, meanwhile, hung on to his reading of Mubarak and his presumed rapport with the man to the point of sounding out of touch with the import of events in 2011. Shortly before Mubarak was obliged to step down, Blair called him 'immensely courageous and a force for good'; said he did not think there was majority support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; and identified a need to 'manage' transition in Egypt.⁵⁰

With or without Blair, British access in Egypt was consistently good during the Mubarak presidency and British diplomats found their Egyptian counterparts highly professional and engaging. Meanwhile, as noted above, the British had a fairly close rapport with the Egyptians on intelligence matters, though cooperation in counter-terrorism did not extend to any involvement in or discussion about Egyptian internal security. British businessmen and officials who dealt with the Egyptians in connection with commercial projects, including the vast waste water project and telecoms, did have reservations though and described their frustrations with dealing with Egyptian bureaucracy.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibid., chapters 4 and 7.

⁴⁷ Author interview with former diplomat on a non-attributable basis.

⁴⁸ Again the former diplomat concerned only agreed to be interviewed on a non-attributable basis.

⁴⁹ Author interviews with Egyptian 'intellectuals' in Cairo, January 2006.

⁵⁰ Chris McGreal, 'Tony Blair: Mubarak is immensely courageous and a force for good', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/02/tony-blair-mubarak-courageous-force-for-good-egypt> accessed 19 Feb. 2012.

⁵¹ On-going conversations with British businessmen dealing with the Middle East in the 1980s, '90s and 2000s.

Abandoning Mubarak

Between late January and mid-February 2011 the US position on Mubarak progressed through three phases: from assuming he could hold the situation, to wishing to see him step down gracefully, to seeking his immediate departure. By all accounts Washington was taken by surprise by the size and import of the Egyptian uprising and initially the Obama administration downplayed the crisis. As noted in the *New York Times*:

When the first protesters appeared in Tahrir Square, [Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton, working off the traditional American script that portrays Mr. Mubarak as a reliable ally in need of quiet, sustained pressure on human rights and political reform, said, 'Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people'.⁵²

However, by the end of January 2011 President Obama (and British Prime Minister David Cameron) were calling for 'an orderly transition of power',⁵³ and in the words of Clinton, it was time for Mubarak to 'move out of the way'.

Yet, according to several commentators, including Nathan Brown, an authority on Egyptian constitutional law, Washington was not the sole or even the lead arbiter of events.⁵⁴ Mubarak's departure required a consensus in the senior Egyptian military establishment and in the event their resolve proved more forthcoming than some in Washington and London initially dared hope, especially since Mubarak himself was resistant. Seemingly intending to smooth the path and find a way to protect Mubarak's dignity, Washington called on former Ambassador to Egypt Frank Wisner to intercede. Wisner was known to have a close rapport with the Egyptian president, yet his handling of the situation turned out to be more conciliatory than the Obama administration apparently intended. After visiting Cairo on 30 January 2011, Wisner subsequently told the media that: 'President Mubarak's continued leadership is critical—it's his opportunity to write his own legacy'.⁵⁵

⁵² David E. Sanger, 'As Mubarak digs in, U.S. policy in Egypt is complicated', *New York Times*, 5 February 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06policy.html?pagewanted=all> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁵³ John R Bradley, 'The tyrant must go, but beware what comes next', *MailOnline*, 31 January 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1352090/EGYPT-RIOTS-Hosni-Mubarak-beware-comes-next.html> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁵⁴ Author interview with Nathan Brown on 19 January 2012 and with a British Foreign Office official, who declined to be named, on 16 February 2012.

⁵⁵ Quoted in David E. Sanger, 'As Mubarak digs in, U.S. policy in Egypt is complicated', *New York Times*, 5 February 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06policy.html?pagewanted=all> accessed 29 Feb. 2012.

Clinton distanced the administration from Wisner's remarks.⁵⁶ Crucially, meanwhile, Mubarak himself sacrificed what remaining sympathy he retained in Washington when, on 1 February 2011, he made a defiant speech asserting that he would remain in place until the next presidential elections—scheduled for September 2011—and claimed that he had never intended to stand again then anyway.⁵⁷ No sooner had he finished the speech than Obama telephoned him and had what was reportedly a testy thirty-minute conversation. Thus began the third and decisive phase in Washington's position on Mubarak, wherein his swift departure became the imperative. Yet there were complications. Washington apparently assumed that Omar Suleiman, Mubarak's newly appointed deputy, could take over, but according to the Egyptian constitution it was the speaker of the parliament, not the vice president who was bound to replace him.⁵⁸

Thus it was that the Egyptian military, rather than the United States, proved the decisive player in the drama, even though Washington accommodated without apparent difficulty to the assumption of the president's powers by the Supreme Council of the Armed Force (SCAF).⁵⁹ The long-established channel of communication between the US military and their Egyptian counterparts was used to convey messages and keep in touch during this critical period, but not to call the shots. Washington's priority was for order and stability to be maintained while preparations for parliamentary and presidential elections were managed by SCAF. Where Washington did draw the line, however, was with respect to the use of force against unarmed civilian demonstrators, as was made clear to Cairo when violence was unleashed against the crowds on 4 February 2011.⁶⁰

In comparison with the Americans, the British were less involved in the detail of Mubarak's exit, but also seemingly more enthusiastic about his departure. Their

⁵⁶ 'Obama administration distances self from own envoy to Mubarak', ABC News, 5 February 2011

<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/02/obama-administration-distances-self-from-own-envoy-to-mubarak/> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁵⁷ David E. Sanger, 'As Mubarak digs in, U.S. policy in Egypt is complicated', *New York Times*, 5 February 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06policy.html?pagewanted=all> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁵⁸ Author interview with Nathan Brown, 19 January 2012 and 'Obama administration distances self from own envoy to Mubarak', ABC News, 5 February 2011

<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/02/obama-administration-distances-self-from-own-envoy-to-mubarak/> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the constitutional parameters and enduring confusion about the powers adopted by SCAF see Nathan J. Brown and Mara Revkin, 'Court Decision on Presidential Election Law: Road Block or Minor Speed Bump for the Military', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 January 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/01/19/court-decision-on-presidential-election-law-road-block-or-minor-speed-bump-for-military/950f>.

⁶⁰ Interview with Nathan Brown, 19 January 2012; Richard Spencer, 'Egypt protests: camel and horse riders who invaded Tahrir Square say they are "good men"', *The Telegraph*, 5 February 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8306223/Egypt-protests-camel-and-horse-riders-who-invaded-Tahrir-Square-say-they-are-good-men.html> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

attitude can be attributed to what one Foreign Office source⁶¹ described as a policy shift that predated the Arab revolutions. Whereas the Americans had backed away from pressing for democratisation after 2006 (as discussed above) the Foreign Office had come to regard dictatorships as a threat to stability. The Conservative-led coalition also inclined to this view, in accordance with its preference for pragmatism over Blair's more missionary vision. Their priority, they said, was trade promotion. Thus, when the Egyptian revolution erupted, Hague revealed that he had previously warned the Egyptian government over the need for openness and reform.⁶² Cameron not only called for Mubarak to go sooner rather than later, but also criticized the EU for failing to condemn 'state-sponsored' violence.⁶³

David Cameron took the opportunity, afforded by a previously scheduled trip to the region, to visit Cairo ten days after Mubarak left office. He was the first Western leader to do so. The fact that his trip was over-shadowed by his intention to promote British military sales in the region, and the inclusion in his entourage of British businessmen including arms manufacturers, did not present a problem as far as Cameron was concerned. He asserted that British policy went beyond simply promoting trade and said: 'Our message, as it has been throughout this [government], [is] that the response to the aspirations that people are showing on the streets of these countries must be one of reform and not repression'.⁶⁴ Cameron's stance was no doubt made easier by virtue of the fact that he had not had time to establish a personal relationship with Mubarak before the Egyptian president suffered his political demise.

Conclusions

What emerges from the foregoing review of US and British attitudes toward Mubarak and how these may or may not have been dictated by their broader objectives suggests that the Americans had more cause for frustration and disappointment than the British. One explanation for this appears to be that the British did not have the same expectations of the Egyptian president simply because their regional ambitions and capacities were more modest. Even if the British had wanted to, they were no longer in a position to try to make Egypt a model of modernity, democracy and stability. However, because the British had, for the most part, prioritised stability over democratisation, they took Mubarak as he presented himself, namely as a leader whose style was best suited to

⁶¹ Interviewed, off the record, on 16 February 2012.

⁶² 'William Hague: repression is not the answer', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8289331/William-Hague-repression-is-not-the-answer.html> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁶³ 'Britain's foreign policy needs to be made clear on Egypt', *Telegraph View*, 4 February 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/8304463/Britains-foreign-policy-needs-to-be-made-clear-on-Egypt.html> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Watt, 'David Cameron arrives in Egypt to meet military rulers', *Guardian*, 21 February 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/feb/21/david-cameron-visits-egypt> accessed 28 Feb. 2012.

delivering stability. Their professed change of heart in the recent past, wherein they now espouse democracy as the preferred route to stability, came rather too late to exonerate them from the charge that they remained largely blinkered by their 'strategic script' for three decades.

The Americans, by contrast, appear to have hoped for more than their British counterparts, in so far as they wanted Mubarak to be everything he was—solidly committed to containing the 'threats' posed to himself and the United States by both Islamists and terrorists—while also wanting him to gradually introduce a democratisation process that would surely have led to his own political demise. Those least able to see the logical contradiction in their own aspirations were the proponents of democratisation across the Arab world, and as of the administration of George W. Bush they became more vocal. Yet the US leadership did back off when they saw the mayhem that followed regime change in Iraq and the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 Egyptian elections. Those Americans who sensed there had to be a trade off between stability and democratisation, meanwhile, preferred the former all along.

In retrospect, with Mubarak gone and new elections in Egypt delivering strong results not only for the Muslim Brotherhood but also for Islamists of a much more radical character—it looks like both camps in Washington had unrealistic expectations. Suppression of democratic rights cannot endure indefinitely and when the masses get their choice, they opt for the very elements the Americans fear. In the face of the revolutions of 2011, in Egypt and elsewhere, the Americans are back in the dilemma they faced in Iraq (after 2003), Egypt (in the 2005 elections), Palestine (in the 2006 elections) and Lebanon (in the 2011 elections), namely, how serious are they when they say they stand for freedom, democracy and the pursuit of happiness as core American values?

Thus the conclusion to be drawn here would seem to be that the Americans (as too the British in their way) were operating with a strategic script that parted company with reality. For a period the British actually claimed that: 'values and interests merge' and Britain could be 'a force for good' in the world by 'projecting British values' through its foreign policy.⁶⁵ That thesis took Britain into the ill-fated Iraq adventure, though it seems not to have fundamentally affected British dealings with Egypt, especially since the Egyptians themselves, Mubarak included, never took the Blair rhetoric very seriously.

In the US case, Egypt had a special place in Washington's strategic script for the Middle East, and according to Kurtzer, the tenets were well known to every US diplomat from 1980 onwards.⁶⁶ There could be no question of making policy 'ad hoc'. The goals were to (1) anchor the Middle East Peace Process, and particularly the Israel-Egypt Treaty, by helping Mubarak to contain domestic and regional antipathy to the treaty; (2) turn the Egyptian armed forces into a US-

⁶⁵ An attitude discussed in detail in Rosemary Hollis, *Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era*.

⁶⁶ Author interview with Dan Kurtzer, 28 December 2011.

trained and equipped fighting forces that could contribute to a pro-US regional agenda; (3) turn around the failing Egyptian economy such that it could be viable and sustainable, in the face of a large and rapidly rising population; and, to a lesser extent (4) promote democratisation of the Egyptian polity.

From Kurtzer's perspective the first three of these goals were achieved, though having proved its worth in the 1991 Gulf war, the Egyptian military failed to modernize thereafter. The quest to save the Egyptian economy made great strides, but, he believes, Mubarak's ouster has derailed that progress. In sum, it could be said that the US strategic script for Egypt not only guided policy but delivered, for at least two decades. Certainly the record seems to show that US disenchantment with Mubarak increased in so far as he proved uncooperative in playing the role assigned to him. The charge that could therefore be levelled at the United States was its unwillingness to grant that no Arab leader could realistically be expected to fulfil the role assigned to the President of Egypt in the US policy agenda and remain a champion of his people.

Over time, not only was the president supposed to contain Islamist extremism and democratise the Egyptian political system, he was also expected to downsize the armed forces and curtail the role of the military in Egyptian commercial activities. At the regional level the role required of Egypt in the US script progressed from one of helping Iraq to deny victory to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s; to joining the US-led coalition that reversed the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91; then to uphold sanctions on both Iraq and Iran throughout the 1990s; support the US invasion of Iraq and ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003; and finally line up with the United States, Jordan and Saudi Arabia against an emboldened Iran. On the Arab-Israeli front, meanwhile, Egypt was expected to keep the peace with Israel and bring other Arab states, plus the Palestinians, into a broader peace deal, inclusive of regional economic normalisation with Israel, but, as it transpired, absent an Israeli government convinced of the need for a 'viable' Palestinian state.

To conclude, the task here was to establish whether US-UK perspectives on Mubarak were dictated by their adherence to a script rather than an understanding of the man. The verdict is yes, on three counts. First, what they valued in Mubarak as a leader on the Egyptian domestic front in the 1980s proved over time to be the very attributes that would turn his people against him in the long run. While Mubarak and his understanding of his leadership role stayed more or less static, the circumstances of ordinary people in Egypt worsened. Albeit reluctantly, Mubarak was persuaded to adopt economic reform measures that pleased the IMF, but failed to deliver a better standard of living to ordinary people, and corruption increased. Since they had no say in the composition of their government, the Egyptian people could not 'own' the policies that made their circumstances more difficult to endure. When they revolted in 2011, 'dignity' was one of their key demands, along with jobs and an end to corruption.

Second, the role played by Mubarak in countering Islamist-inspired terrorist groups and violence on the Egyptian home front in the 1990s was greeted by Washington and tolerated in London as a necessary evil. After 9/11 and the declaration of the 'war on terror' some of Mubarak's methods were even emulated by the United States and Britain. If not actually deploying such methods directly themselves, they sought the cooperation of Mubarak and other Arab dictators in dealing with the threat of Al Qaeda, its affiliates and emulators—including 'rendering' suspects for interrogation and torture by Arab security forces. Over time, the qualities attributed to Mubarak which inclined Washington (and London) to regard him as an ally in the war on terror—his toughness, intolerance and hold on power—proved over time to be the very same attributes that turned the United States (and Britain) against him. Whereas once he was 'our man', he became an embarrassment.

Third, the US strategic script for the region (to which the British broadly acquiesced), and thence the expectations of Mubarak, changed significantly between the 1980s, when the Cold War still endured, and the 2000s, when the Americans and British decided to invade Iraq and believed they could bring democracy to the Arab world by intervention. Whereas in the 1980s Egypt's strategic interests, as understood by Mubarak, were in harmony with those of the United States, by 2003 they were not, and thence he could not be expected to put US interests and requests ahead of his own. In Washington he was criticised, as detailed above, for being insufficiently supportive of the US agenda. Not least, Mubarak was faulted for his handling of Israeli-Palestinian issues. Yet, whereas in the 1990s the Middle East peace process looked as if it would deliver, by the following decade it was going nowhere. Mubarak needed it to work, not content himself with managing Palestinian factional politics and policing the Gaza Strip.

In sum, the context and the US-UK agendas changed fundamentally between 1981 and 2011, though Mubarak largely did not. And, to paraphrase one former US official consulted for this study: he lasted as long as he was useful.