

THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

REFLECTIONS OF A STATESMAN

Veteran Egyptian diplomat Amre Moussa discusses the way out of the Arab World's crises, a new regional order, and the need for a model of governance in tune with the spirit of the twenty-first century

Amre Moussa, 81, is a household name in Egyptian foreign policy, Arab regional politics, and international diplomacy. He is best known for his tough stances against Israel, which have earned him a rare kind of fame and distinction in Egypt and the Arab World. An interview of him debating then-Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami about the status of Jerusalem and the Palestinian state from 2000 continues to resonate on social media even today. He called Israel's assault on Gaza in 2009 an "act of aggression."

His distinguished career as a diplomat began at the Egyptian foreign ministry in 1958 where he worked his way up to become Egypt's ambassador to India and subsequently Egypt's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. He served as Egypt's Minister for Foreign Affairs during the Hosni Mubarak regime—a post he filled starting in 1991 for ten years during which Egypt led a strong, active role in regional and international politics. Moussa then became the sixth secretary-general of the League of Arab States between 2001 and 2011. With his signature tenacity and clear-headedness, he breathed new life into the regional organization, attempting to restructure it, and took important stances in the Arab–Israeli conflict such as endorsing the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (to end Israeli occupation in exchange for Arab normalization with Israel) and visiting a besieged Gaza in 2010 to pressure Israel to lift its blockade.

When the uprising broke out in Egypt in 2011, Moussa joined the masses on the streets, expressing his support for calls for change. That year also marked Moussa's transition from diplomacy to politics, prompting his presidential candidacy in the 2012 elections which eventually ended with the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammed Morsi. "I did well that I lost the elections," he later said. After the June 30 uprising, which resulted in the

overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime, Moussa was elected to head a fifty-member constitutional committee that was responsible for drafting Egypt's 2014 constitution, recognized to be one of the most progressive and liberal constitutional documents in Egypt's history.

▷ Amre Moussa,
Cairo, April 29, 2013.
*Mohammed Abd El-
Ghany/Reuters*



In late 2017, Moussa published his memoirs, the first part of a trilogy: a 700-page book entitled *Ketabiya* (My Testimony) covering his early life up until his last day as Egypt's foreign minister in 2001. The upcoming two parts are expected to cover his tenure as the secretary-general of the Arab League and developments in Egypt after the 2011 uprising.

Cairo Review Associate Editor **Asmaa Abdallah** spoke with Moussa in Cairo on January 16, 2018.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why is the Arab World in crisis?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I would say that the main reason was the bad governance in the countries that have witnessed the upheavals—revolutions at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 and thereafter. Bad governance has led to a lot of mistakes in dealing with the economic, social, and educational issues that have to do with the lives of people. Young people felt let down, that they don't really count. They have a lot of hopes and they look to the future, to what kind of life they're going to get. Governments did not cater to this issue. They were very busy with maintaining the status quo at the time and with catering to the interests of the ruling circles rather than the interests of the people.

Therefore, the cumulative effects of bad governance since the end of the monarchy in Egypt and through all the governments since, without exception, have led to this case of frustration that has led to outbursts of anger. You could argue that before the revolution of 1952, the dossiers of education, agriculture, and industry were very well developed. Some can also claim that under [Gamal Abdel] Nasser the poor people were better served. You can say so but the net result of all this is what we have seen: that the poor people were not in good shape. Had there been real success in any of these eras, under any of those governments, we wouldn't have been in such a situation. In fact, had they succeeded—just one of them, not all of them—the wave of protests of 2011 wouldn't have happened.

CAIRO REVIEW: *To what extent do you feel the Arab World has learned from these failures?*

AMRE MOUSSA: If you want it in one or two words: not much. But if you want to go deeper—in Egypt, 60 percent of the population is under the age of 35 and if you look at people aged 40 or 45, you will find that this number goes up to 70 percent. In Saudi Arabia alone, young people account for 70 percent. You have to bet on those people. [They] are going to effect the change. I also have to bet on these things: the spirit of the twenty-first century and the new things that this spirit introduces into the lives of people such as social media and what's coming after that. With this you can safely bet that, yes, change will have its effect. The negative cumulative effect of bad governance will have to be reversed. And so, you bet on young people.

CAIRO REVIEW: *There is much speculation especially in policy circles abroad about the emergence of a new “regional order.” At the heart of much of this speculation is the demise of the core Arab systems and states. How can the Arabs address this issue?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I strongly believe [in that], and I was one of the early politicians who talked about a new regional order. After everything that happened, the big headline, if you want to describe the situation in the region, is change. There was the idea that the Middle East and the Arab World needed different governments under the so-called “moderate Islam” or the so-called “creative anarchy” and all of them come together. Creative anarchy—the theory has come from abroad, and you can find a lot of literature about that coming from, in particular, the neoconservatives in America. It was Mr. [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan who started talking within international circles about the moderate Islamic regime as if this is the only regime, the only government, the only system that could defeat the radicals. And he wanted Egypt to partner with Turkey to advance this theory, which was bought by many Western circles.

The idea that moderate Islam rules and bears the responsibility to defeat the radicals is a flawed theory all the way. I consider it flawed because the issue isn’t who is moderate and who is not? What do we mean by moderate Islam? What do we mean by radical Islam? What do we mean by a new era? I thought and said that publicly at that time, that what we need is a new order that would take into consideration the rule of law, constitutional life, and to connect with the twenty-first century. And this cannot be achieved when we still have the mentality of the twentieth century, in fact even the mentality of the fourth and fifth centuries, so it was a flawed theory from the beginning.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How can the new order be achieved?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I started in 2010 to talk about the Arab Neighborhood Policy, and put that in the form of a plan that I introduced to the [Arab] summit of 2010 in Sirt, Libya: that we must change, we must engage all our neighbors in Africa, in Asia, and in the Mediterranean. My point was that in Africa for example, the southern belt under the North-African Arab countries, like Chad, Niger, Mali have a lot of common relations with us—religious, cultural, and so on—and our interests would do better if we worked together. This area is called Sahel and Sahara, the southern rim of the Arab World. Then we talked about the Horn of Africa, bringing in Ethiopia and Eritrea, because the rest are members of the Arab League (Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti) and opening the door for other African countries to have associate membership or observer membership.

From Asia, that would be Turkey, Iran, and Israel, but Israel under clear conditions, first to accept the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 and start meaningful negotiations to settle the conflict with the Palestinians. We have no other quarrel with the

Israelis except on the issue of Palestine and the occupation. Otherwise, we don't have any old enmities with Israel as we do with empires that we have entered into several wars with like Persia or the Ottoman Empire and its bleak history with us. It is a very clear-cut conflict. So, I put forth those conditions so that Israel can accept or tell us its view. As for Iran, we call on Iran to enter a dialogue with us—a dialogue where we get its position on the Arab initiative and on Palestine, its policies in the Gulf, its policies vis-à-vis the Emirati islands, and we sit and see what it wants to say.

It was not accepted by the Arabs, and Egypt was the first country to oppose what the Secretary General, who happened to be Egyptian, had proposed.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why did they oppose it?*

AMRE MOUSSA: For several reasons, it is something new, and we were the rulers at that time. We were happy with the situation as is: "Please don't shake it. Because if you shake it, it might crumble." They were happy as they were. They felt if we just open one or two windows, the wind will blow in.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Do you think Arab countries would be more open to the idea today?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I think that now there is no other way but to think of a new regional order. There's another suggestion or idea: we should think of an organization for security and development, like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe whereby we can get all of them or start with a few members, Arabs, Africans, Asians, not necessarily all of them. The first initiative, the Neighborhood Policy, was that we would be over forty countries, but with this one perhaps six or seven or eight.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is there a political will to do this?*

AMRE MOUSSA: Perhaps if we talk about six or seven countries, that would be acceptable.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Throughout your diplomatic career, you've been an outspoken critic of Israel and its policies. How do you view alleged rapprochements between Israel and several Arab states including Saudi Arabia at the expense of the Palestinians?*

AMRE MOUSSA: That's not new. For so long there have been these talks under the table, this time from this Arab country, that time from another. The point is, do you dare come to the table and talk? I don't think any Arab government would do that. Therefore, it will continue that way: you go and say a few nice words, but you cannot promise that the Arabs will accept that Jerusalem will be the capital of Israel. Not a single state can because we are all bound by the Arab initiative. It is the bible, the only document that all the Arabs unanimously have voted for. Even Saddam Hussein.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Do you believe Trump's Jerusalem decision could have been averted?*

AMRE MOUSSA: No, I think that President [Donald] Trump and his closest associates were under the wrong impression when they came to the region. They said what they wanted to say, and they got the impression that they can do it. Trump, when he first came to the region, was not really known as he is today, after in particular his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This move has burned up all the credentials of the American diplomacy so I believe that we have to be firm because we are losing anyway.

So now, we have to lose and believe that we are losing but the Palestinian question is not going to go away and we have to insist. Why should we give something to Israel without a *quid pro quo*? Israel never accepted the Arab initiative, never accepted any resolution by the Security Council or any international institution, so what do they want? They want the status quo to remain the same. They don't care about two states, one state. No, just the status quo. To rule over the West Bank, to exclude Gaza, and to build settlements and let the *fait accompli* do the work. We have to be very aware of this and our policies should try to prevent this and come up with ideas, such as negotiations.

If I were the one to decide, I would say that the timeframe for negotiations is six months, but there has to be a resolution by the Security Council calling on us to negotiate and approving an agenda within a timeframe. And then after that period, the results should be put before the Security Council. But I agree with Abu Mazen that America cannot play a go-between [role] anymore or be the honest broker after what happened with Jerusalem. I don't think American brokering has any chance.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You've mentioned in a recent article that it's time to put the one-state solution on the table. Could you tell us more about how you see this as a viable solution?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I believe that the offer for the Palestinians to have a state of their own is a good idea but a dishonest proposal. The United States and Israel want the Palestinians and Arabs to chase after something. Exactly like a carrot moving at a certain speed and a rabbit running after it at the same speed, so the rabbit will never catch the carrot, but the carrot will never disappear from the sight of this rabbit. That's where we are, in vicious circle after vicious circle. That's where the idea of a Palestinian state has really defeated the Palestinians because the Israelis were free to do whatever they wanted—settlements, Jerusalem, et cetera—but the Palestinians were not free. They were bound by the shackles of Oslo and the Israelis violated all the provisions of Oslo.

The idea of the Palestinian state has become a hoax. Although the idea is good, and the Palestinians have that right definitely, but as you see it has been used against them. So, what do the Israelis want? A Jewish state. What do the Palestinians want? A Palestinian state. If the Palestinians can't have a Palestinian state, then the Israelis shouldn't get a Jewish state. Only one state for all of them, so I suggested that in light of what I see as a campaign of deceit. The agenda of whatever negotiations coming up will be two points: the first is a Palestinian and a Jewish state, or one state for all. But we should not continue to play the same losing game. They were laughing at us.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you see the different parties responding to this?*

AMRE MOUSSA: This idea is gaining ground within the Palestinian rank and file. This idea is being mentioned now repeatedly in many foreign ministries in Europe and in America, and in Russia. The big capitals. When and how to do it? You can tell me the Israelis will not accept, but they didn't accept the Palestinian state. And those who say that [Benjamin] Netanyahu accepted the Palestinian state, they are again deceiving us. They never accepted the independent state for the Palestinians. If this is the case, don't waste my time. Let us go into negotiations for six months. Accept the state, what are the conditions for that? If they are not serious, then let us negotiate the one-state [solution]. They will run out the room. Let them run.

CAIRO REVIEW: *It seems that the impetus driving certain Arab countries toward rapprochement with Israel is the fear of a rising Iran. Do you feel that is justified? Why is it that they look to Israel as the protector?*

AMRE MOUSSA: They look to Israel as the key to American policy and support. That Israel would be more powerful, more convincing to America than anybody else in pushing the United States against Iran. But I believe that it is exactly the opposite. If some of us think that we will use Israel against Iran, in fact, Israel is the one that will be using us and then at the first chance, once they agree with Iran again, they will drop us. Because with Iran there are two or three specific points that bring both of them against each other: the issue of missiles, the issue of having Iranian forces maintain a presence around Israeli-controlled territories, and the issue of terrorism. We cannot deny that Iran is part of the region and a very important country, but they have gone too far; they started to exaggerate, and to feel a kind of haughtiness to the extent that one of their leaders declared less than a year ago that Iran is the country that calls the shots in four Arab capitals and he named them. I believe it was an insult to all of us and to the people of those countries to say so. Also, one of their officials said our business is to revive the Iranian empire whose capital is Baghdad. This is an insult. This should be an eye-opener. But this needs an Arab brainstorming first. What are we going to do? Would Israel be interested in such a situation?

CAIRO REVIEW: *Yes, the Arabs should be brainstorming. How do you see the role of the Arab League in all this?*

AMRE MOUSSA: The Arab League is the mirror of the Arab World, and the Arab World is in total disarray, that's why the Arab League cannot do much now. But we should not get rid of it. We should try to keep it and support it as much as possible, until we agree on a new order. This is what we need: a new regional order and within it a new Arab order. Not one without the other. A regional order is coming. It is being discussed in many foreign ministries and in many think tanks all over the world. What kind of regional order? And what is the role of Iran? And the role of Turkey? The role of Saudi Arabia?

And here I wish to put on record that the absence of Egypt has created a void in Arab leadership. The return of Egypt is the sole guarantee that Iran or Turkey are not going to go very far in their plans. We have seen Turkey encircling Egypt, encircling the Arab World, with bases in the Gulf and bases in the Red Sea. Iran, you've seen its influence in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, and the [Shia] crescent that many talked about. So, with Iran very active, with Turkey very active—and I consider Turkey more serious, more dangerous than Iran—where is our plan? What is our point of view? Should we continue to be on the defensive or should we be aggressive and come with up ideas? This is what I hoped and I am sure Egypt can do, but because of the circumstances we all know, I think for the time being Egypt and Saudi Arabia should synchronize their policies to the best of their abilities and try to fill the void. If there is Iran, Turkey, or Israel, there is Saudi Arabia and Egypt together in this equation.

CAIRO REVIEW: *And what do you think Egypt's role in the region should be?*

AMRE MOUSSA: In all that is happening, Egypt should be invited to all conferences or brainstorming sessions or closed-room discussions about the future of the region. The security in the Gulf. Security in the Red Sea. Security in the Mediterranean. Security in Sahel and Sahara. The situation in the Horn of Africa. Egypt is a country to reckon with. Yes, we got into trouble after the hijacking of the revolution. Many things would have changed. But the Muslim Brotherhood didn't give us any chance, as we all know.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What lessons did Egypt learn from all that?*

AMRE MOUSSA: The cumulative effect of bad governance has to come to a halt. I believe that the campaigns against corruption that we see are a good sign. Reform is so important but I can't put the answer in a very brief sentence. Respect the constitution and the rule of law. This is the key for stability and the key for progress and respecting the spirit of the twenty-first century. Here in Egypt we really need it. We have been terribly affected by what happened in 2011 and paid a heavy price for that.

CAIRO REVIEW: *And do you think we are on the right track today?*

AMRE MOUSSA: We are in a much better position now. Just imagine if the Muslim Brotherhood continued ruling. And it was a stupid rule. I said several times. I didn't oppose them because they were the Muslim Brotherhood but because they were terrible at governing. They governed Egypt as if they were a group sitting in the street and whatever comes to their mind they say it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In your memoirs, you make a clear distinction between Mubarak the man and Mubarak the president. Given the criticism you've received before for defending the deposed president and suggesting he should not go on trial, how complicated was it to write about him?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I also made a distinction between Mubarak the president in the early years, Mubarak in his mid-term, and Mubarak in the last years. I wrote things as I saw them. I didn't discuss that with him or anyone else. I was honest in praising him as a person and as a president. My criticism centered on the last few years and on certain incidents; you can call that disagreement. But generally speaking, I believe that President Mubarak did well. Many of us differ over certain aspects like succession, like Egypt's role in the Middle East, like the trickledown theory. There can be an honest difference of opinion.

CAIRO REVIEW: *On the regional front, what options does Egypt have to secure its Nile River water share?*

AMRE MOUSSA: This is a complicated issue. I called upon the media not to delve deeply into this question. They don't know details, they don't read well, they don't have the legal background or the legal arguments. But what President [Abdel Fattah] El-Sisi said that it's not a question of war, I support that. It's a question of rights. This is a good beginning. Short of going to war, are these countries prepared to be fair with us? Because if they're not going to be fair with us, we will not be fair with them. We're not necessarily talking about a bloody confrontation, but we'll certainly be uncomfortable and we'll certainly find any way to guarantee our rights, and there are a lot of issues involved.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Moving to the elections, in 2011, you left the top post at the League of Arab States to run for elections. What made you decide to move from diplomacy to politics?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I used to say I had served as ambassador of Egypt for ten years, and as foreign minister for ten years, and as secretary-general of the Arab League for ten years, and therefore, I wanted to leave the world of diplomacy and get back to Egypt at that moment. Egypt was in turmoil so I thought I should go in and try to

help as much as I can through my candidacy for the presidency. Now in hindsight, I believe that I did well that I lost the elections.

There was a lot of opposition—institutional opposition against the type of candidate that I was. I was not what was needed in the minds of some at that time, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood who decided to have it for themselves and they moved their support quickly from a president that they knew to a president that sympathized with them to their own candidate. All in a matter of few months. And they wanted to change the constitution through constitutional declarations, committees, statements, to a full constitution in 2012 that was totally a constitution based on the same kind of thinking as Iran. They wouldn't accept. They pressed and pressured to avoid me as much as they can. And I was clear that I don't believe in what they believe in.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why do you believe you did well not to win?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I believe that no one would have afforded a president that believes in liberal ideas and wants to connect with the twenty-first century. What was in their minds is to go back centuries, not to go forward even one day.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Does that mean there's no constituency for that liberal approach?*

AMRE MOUSSA: What I believe in is the spirit of the twenty-first century and the young people. When we see that all other societies are advancing and moving forward steadily the situation will change. We cannot afford, and we cannot accept, especially the young people, to stay put while all societies move forward. I believe that the regime today is aware of that.

CAIRO REVIEW: *And how do you view the election scene now?*

AMRE MOUSSA: I've already announced that I am not running. Ruling Egypt is not easy. [Former Head of Egyptian Intelligence] Omar Suleiman used to tell me, not anyone can rule [the country]; ruling Egypt is very difficult. For that reason, the arrangement today is better because there is chaos in the region and terrorism threatening Egypt.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the arrangement?*

AMRE MOUSSA: The constitution, the parliament, and a big chance for President El-Sisi to be re-elected. You cannot say anything else. That's how it is. We can accept this for the time being. But to have another candidate without any institutional or partisan background or anything, how will he rule? He must have an international network to protect the country. Many of the candidates lack many things, which is why it is better for the status quo to continue.