

# Is the State Department considering its 'Abu Ghazala option' for Egypt?

by a Cairo insider

Several weeks afterward, there has still been no satisfactory answer to what really happened in Egypt on Feb. 25, when some 8,000 security policemen went on a rampage in Cairo and, simultaneously, in Upper Egypt and some other Egyptian cities. Many theories have circulated to explain the riots, which killed several hundred people caused millions of dollars worth of property damage.

The riots were not stopped until March 1, when, after several days of direct military intervention, the last rioters, besieged in a military base at Heliopolis near Cairo airport, surrendered. Were these part of an elaborate, orchestrated plot within or outside Egypt? Were they a spontaneous revolt brought about by the intolerable living conditions of these conscripts? Or were they a dry-run for a much larger operation yet to come?

Speaking before the national parliament on March 8, President Hosni Mubarak, who was supposed to give a final and comprehensive report on those behind the riots, diplomatically avoided these questions. There was no proof of an orchestrated plot by either foreign-based or Egyptian-based fundamentalist organizations, much less communists, he stressed. He then dismissed as preposterous the Syrian claim that the revolt had been a popular expression of rejection of the Camp David treaty with Israel, rightly judging as not worth mentioning the Syrian claim that the revolt came in support of "Arab national martyr Abu Khater"—the policeman responsible for the death of six Israelis in the Sinai, condemned to life imprisonment, who then committed suicide.

Mubarak, whose government had hinted on Feb. 26 at "foreign involvement" in the rioting, now concentrated on the economic basis for such rioting, such as the soldiers' appalling living conditions. Eagerly awaited, Mubarak's speech did little to clear the political atmosphere. Everybody knows that something much larger was and is at stake.

## Plots and purges

The political drama behind the riots is being played at several levels. There is Egypt's internal political and economic situation. There is the relationship with Washington which is becoming stranger each day. Is it based on a state-

to-state relationship, or has Washington become another name for the International Monetary Fund?

Mubarak's first steps during and after the riots concentrated on solidifying the power structure of the government. At least half a dozen intelligence chiefs who had visibly failed at their task were demoted to posts closer to their actual qualifications such as "data and documentations" or "financial and administrative affairs." Paying the full price was Interior Minister Maj.-Gen. Ahmad Rushdi, who was replaced on Feb. 27 by Maj.-Gen. Zaki Badr. A close associate of Mubarak, Badr was governor of the Assiut province and has been considered successful in dismantling the Islamic fundamentalist network in his region.

When confronted with the riots the evening of Feb. 25, Rushdi, who had provided no advance intelligence, also proved unable to stop the riots' spread. By the early morning of Feb. 26, the army of Defense Minister Abu Ghazala, which had worked on contingency plans during the night, was ordered to move in with tanks and artillery. Though the army is credited with having restored order, it nonetheless took close to three days to totally end the rebellion.

Similarly, just prior to his speech at the parliament, Mubarak authorized a purge affecting no less than 21,000 members of the 300,000 strong security force, conscripts and officers alike. The central security police force, whose conscripts rebelled, was originally created by Nasser in 1967, and expanded by Sadat after the 1977 food riots, as a paramilitary security force. Most of its members are conscripts from the countryside who, because they serve for at least three years, are chosen by the military leadership to serve in that particular force. (University graduates and students only serve one-and-a-half years.)

The rioters obviously had no chance of overthrowing the government, and this was obviously not their aim. However, contrary to what Mubarak told the parliament, the rapidity with which the riots expanded nationally indicates two things: first, that preparation for the revolt had gone on for some time prior to the riots; and second, that however small, a network existed to coordinate the explosion.

There is little chance that the network was a communist one, given the low popularity communists generally enjoy in

Egypt, in the countryside in particular. It was almost certainly a religious fundamentalist network. It was not by chance that one of the first targets of the rioters was Turah jail, to release the Islamic fundamentalist prisoners.

How is it possible that Egyptian intelligence failed so miserably to notice that such planning was under way?

Admittedly, one of Egypt's problems is that it has too many official intelligence services—not counting the private ones—and that they spend much time neutralizing each other or running operations against each other. Within such intelligence warfare, any particular department or service could have allowed such an operation to develop. The question is *why*.

The Feb. 25 riots can as well be considered a warning to Mubarak's regime as a dry-run operation. Though Mubarak's prestige did not suffer much, the star of his ambitious defense minister, Abu Ghazala, rose high.

Coinciding with the intervention of the army on Feb. 26, a well-orchestrated press campaign began abroad, contrasting the "uninspiring leadership of President Mubarak," to quote the *Wall Street Journal* of the following day, to the "pretty sight" of the new "strong man," Abu Ghazala, to quote the London *Economist* of March 8 and several American media.

By Feb. 28, the French daily *Le Matin* ran a "scenario which could happen in the next few days: . . . Marshal Abu Ghazalah announces that President Mubarak has been dismissed, and that the army has taken over. In the name of the people, Abu Ghazala would try to save the regime by sacrificing the President. . . ."

Such scenarios have circulated widely abroad, and are openly talked of in Egypt itself. The desire of this "Egyptian Ariel Sharon" to be named vice-president, i.e., Mubarak's successor, "should anything happen," is legendary. In the last cabinet shuffle, he was appointed a mere deputy premier. What cannot be legally achieved, obviously has to be done in other ways.

## The State Department option

Aside from the clear differences in "style" between Abu Ghazala, who has imposed a fundamentalist *chador* [black robe] on his wife for a year and half, and the more cautious Mubarak, who shuns any personality cult, what would be the political differences between a Mubarak and a Ghazala regime? Abu Ghazala, a former military attaché in Washington, is as pro-American as Mubarak. While Mubarak's military career is certainly more prominent than Abu Ghazala's, both had the same kind of training between Egypt and the Soviet Union.

The answer lies in Washington. This was blatantly underlined during the March 10 visit to Cairo of U.S. Undersecretary of State Richard Murphy, who delivered an ultimatum to Mubarak. Washington had unilaterally withheld since October some \$265 million of economic aid, because it was not

satisfied by the progress of "economic reforms" within Egypt. That meant that three-man teams from the International Monetary Fund, who visited in December 1985 and again in early 1986, left, having failed to force the Egyptians to implement their recommendations. If the Egyptian authorities had forgotten them, Murphy re-stated them bluntly: Egypt has to impose an "agricultural pricing reform," i.e., end basic food subsidies; it has to curb imports to free foreign exchange for debt service; it has to push ahead with the "open door" policy initiated in 1974, opening its economy to foreign takeover, etc. Murphy arrived in Cairo authorized to disburse some \$150 million, and then, incredibly declared, "We do not want to get into an IMF-type of relationship with Egypt."

One of his aides, according to the *Financial Times* of March 12, was blunt: "U.S. assistance programs . . . don't last forever. You have got to take advantage of them while you have got them!" Is Washington seriously considering cutting aid to Egypt?

No need to dive into conspiracy-theories to see the old pattern. First, an IMF team visits Cairo with outrageous, genocidal demands. Then, the United States withholds economic assistance. Then, a large-scale military revolt erupts. Fourth, an American team arrives with a little money and a lot of threats, asking for more reforms. What does it mean? Ask President Marcos.

The United States has also cut aid to certain vital projects. For example, it has adamantly refused to get involved in providing Egypt with its first badly needed nuclear-power plant. To have been signed last October, the contract with either the West German KWU or the American Westinghouse has had to be postponed to the end of June, as Cairo desperately seeks financing. If such a project is scrapped, it is Egypt's entire strategy of developing the desert, of creating new towns and new irrigated lands, which goes down the drain. Without such projects, Egypt's growing population, branded its "problem number-one" by Egypt's enemies, will become a problem in fact.

As Egyptian observers remarked, it is within such a framework that the rivalry between Mubarak and Abu Ghazala takes on particular meaning. Abu Ghazala's position has been described as very comfortable these days. Mubarak is the President, he is the one who takes the blame for everything, and if large-scale riots erupt again, his army will appear as the saviors.

Upon the advice of the State Department, Egyptian insiders these days are reportedly reading a set of official documents from the American archives of the 1949-52 period, which detail how Washington decided to stop supporting King Farouk, and began favoring the army.

Mubarak is only ready to go so far in implementing "economic reforms," and knows that implementing the full IMF program would depend on the imposition of a harsh military dictatorship. He is not ready to go that far. Abu Ghazala apparently is.