

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

12/7/2023

1:45 — 2:15 PM

Fireside Chat with Sameh Shoukry

[Sameh Shoukry](#), Minister of Foreign Affairs, Egypt

Moderator: **[Steve Clemons](#)**, Founding Editor at Large, Semafor

Introducer 0:08

That the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sami Shoukry is here in Washington this week. He previously served he's no stranger to Washington. He was the ambassador of Egypt to the US before and the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the UN. So he's well versed on all these. And in 2022, he presided over the UN Climate Change Conference, and he will be on stage today talking with the inimitable STEVE CLEMONS of semafor editor at large please join me in welcoming them to the stage.

Steve Clemons 0:42

Mr. Minister so truth in advertising. I'm Steve Clemons. I knew this fine gentleman when he was ambassador. And we know each other's scandals just a little bit. But, Mr. Minister, thank you so much for joining us. We're gonna talk about some heavy topics here and I want to open up with a note of you know, seriousness about what was triggered on October 7. You were next door to a lot of what has been evolving and happening are a major Egypt is a major stakeholder in the conditions in and around both Gaza and a partner, you know, nearby Israel. I just want to know from a human perspective, what did you your compatriots in the Egyptian government and Egyptians feel when they saw what Hamas did on October 7?

Sameh Shoukry 1:33

I think we were very clear at the highest level that we condemn any form of military activity, any form of attack on civilians. The events of October 7th were totally unacceptable. We indicated so from the very outset, the consequence events that have taken place since are equally dangerous for the peace and security in the region. And do have a direct effect on our national security. So it is a complicated situation, one that I think is complex and needs to be addressed from various perspectives. But certainly, we refuse totally what transpired

Steve Clemons 2:21

Do you think the act, the acts the killing of 1200 Israelis, the kidnapping of hundreds of hostages now make Hamas never again a legitimate representative of Palestinian interests?

Sameh Shoukry 2:37

Well, I think we have to recognize that the conditions upon which government has we're literally outside of the realm of legitimacy, it was a civil strife and struggle, where they were able to depose the Palestinian Authority and remove it from Reza consequently, subsequently, govern Reza by virtue of their ability to do so, by having the arms to be able to maintain their status. So what they are or what they will be is, I think the final context up to the Palestinian people to decide that. It's, it's for them to designate who is legitimate to govern.

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

Steve Clemons 3:25

Did you see what was coming? And I asked this like New York Times has done incredible reporting on Operation Jericho wall, a year's worth of intelligence that clearly, the Israeli military and his intelligence establishment had enormous information on what was being planned. There were worries when they saw exercises that certain analysts said this is what's going on and even an emergency meeting the night before, so did Egyptian intelligence and did you see what was happening as part of the question is, why wasn't there an action by Israel politically, and militarily before but, but as a neighbor, did you see this coming along?

Sameh Shoukry 4:07

well it's difficult for me to comment on the security aspects or the intelligence aspects of this, but what I can say is that this isn't strange. Of course, it is different in its intensity and its repercussions. But this isn't the first time that there's been a conflict between Israel and Hamas. This is the sixth conflict. For all of those conflicts. We were always utilized by both parties as interlocutors and facilitators to regain tranquility between them. There's an ongoing relationship between Israel and Hamas. So there's degrees of understanding. So the I think this this issue, what should have been monitored shouldn't be within the context of their ongoing relationships. And I'll leave it there.

Steve Clemons 4:07

So you've been an outspoken critic in the past of those that had been paid lip service to his two state solution and have done very little. And, you know, obviously, this town and many others around the world are looking with, with shock and horror, you know, some of what they're seeing unfold with Israel's reaction to the Hamas terror attacks what's unfolding with 1000s of people killed or innocence on the Palestinian side. And it raises the question about when you begin thinking about day after solutions, of why weren't we thinking about this on October 6 On October 5, before what had frozen and paralyzed this conflict to leave it vulnerable for the kind of exploitation of this moment?

Sameh Shoukry 5:40

Well, we've been dealing with stagnation in the application of the two state solution for some time now, some various Israeli governments have departed from endorsing the two state solution and some of you will come out actively to indicate their refusal to implement the two state solution which left a vacuum the vacuum was filled and usually in this Consequently, this circumstance

Steve Clemons 6:08

So that's prime minister Netanyahu

Sameh Shoukry 6:10

I think yeah, Prime Minister Netanyahu has been stating that he is not an advocate of the creation of a Palestinian state. So in terms of lack of achievement and frustration

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

Steve Clemons 6:23

let me interrupt you there on there. I mean, we know that there are many Palestinians that also don't want to stay don't see it in those terms. Many Israelis do in a case going back to this John Kerry comment that we can't want peace more than they do. From a US perspective. And I always thought that was wrongheaded, that in fact, the strategic consequences of this blowing up creates consequences for all of us. So we have to want peace more than they do. Is it so tell me who's right John Kerry or Steve Clemons.

Sameh Shoukry 6:56

Steve Clemons. Definitely since I'm here and he's not

Steve Clemons 7:00

so in that in that in that case, then why are we paying attention as much attention and not looking at something that's more of an imposed circumstance that both sides will need to politically acquiesce to?

Sameh Shoukry 7:14

Well you are reading from my playbook, aren't you? I believe that this this resurgence of again lip service to the two state solution by many is deflection from the gravity of what's happening in this conflict. But that doesn't discount that it still remains the consensus of the international community that the only resolution of this conflict is on the basis of two state and even the terminology is maybe deficient. Since it isn't a two state solution. Israel is a state it is recognized by a variety of regional players Egypt, Jordan, the Abraham accords. It is the deficiency of the creation of a Palestinian state that we should contend with. And certainly if we have the resolution on the political will, and there are in the international community, like the United States, which President Sadat had always contended that the US has 99.9% of the solution. Its ability to influence both Israel the Arab world to agree to this as the Bible way to end the conflict and create the status of integration and the regional cooperation. So if if we consider that then we should apply it.

Steve Clemons 8:35

Now some have criticized Egypt, now, I don't know what the truth is I genuinely don't know the answer to this question, for not allowing for greater shipments of humanitarian aid fuel support medical supplies water through his borders when President Biden successfully convinced President Al Sisi Gillette 20 trucks in at the beginning. I interviewed someone who said, wow, that's like what a State Department low level staffer could have gotten the president United States could only get 20 trucks. So we're Why were you? Why was Egypt so resistant and letting in early aid? What's the state of play today and what are your concerns?

Sameh Shoukry 9:16

That's absolutely not the case. Egypt from day one indicated that the Rafah crossing would be open. Despite that there were those who wanted the Rafah crossing close. And when we did not

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

go along with the closing the Rafah crossing, it was bombed. It was bombed once when we tried to repair it it was bombed twice, injuring four Egyptian citizens and subsequently it was bombed for a third time rating a 60 foot greater the day that it was allowed to operate. This was in coordination with Israel. With the help of the United States. Ambassador David Satterfield, we have constantly sought to provide as much volume of assistance as possible. But there's a mechanism, a mechanism that we have to respect because if we don't then the convoys would come under military attack. That is certainly what we want to avoid. Because of the lives of those

Steve Clemons 10:20

And whats the state of play right now?

Sameh Shoukry 10:21

It still is the same that Israel has to agree to the number of trucks entering it has to met the assistants and that takes a very prolonged maybe sometimes over the due process, and then we can have the flow of drugs so in no way has Egypt at any point restricted. On the contrary, we are constantly striving to have more assistance. 100 120 200 Rafah crossing we have indicated will be open on a 24 hour basis. It's wasn't initially designed to undertake this, this activity, but it's certainly capable of doing so and we have staffed it on a 24 hour basis. To do so I don't know why this constant trying to deflect on Egypt. Egypt has every vested interest from an aerial perspective and from a security perspective to provide the Palestinian symbolism as much support from a moral perspective. The conditions of the civilians is really dramatic. And we have every intention, if provided the opportunity, if not restricted by conditions by Israel, that we can provide as much assistance as possible.

Steve Clemons 11:42

And from a humanitarian and moral perspective. Would Egypt be willing to host those who want to escape this conflict in Gaza to temporarily resettle in the Sinai or elsewhere so that they they could be there to escape this conflict, this horror that is unfolding right now. What do you think that escaping this conflict would be by

Sameh Shoukry 12:03

Wouldn't you think that escaping this conflict would be by advocating a cessation of hostilities rather than by displacing people outside of their homes outside of their territories? What was declared in initially by the israeli representatives that the solution is to displace these people and have them go to Sinai or go to anywhere else in the Arab world is in contradiction of international humanitarian law and is inappropriate, that we should think that solution should be at the expense of human beings and their displacement. So displacement is not a recognized form of dealing with any conflict situation. And there's no reason why the Palestinians should leave their territory. Palestinians. Citizens were not responsible for what happened on October the seventh and should not be penalized for what happened on October the seventh. And we will continue to advocate but certainly we we will provide whatever assistance whatever shelter is needed, and will continue to do so from a moral perspective as well.

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

Steve Clemons 12:02

How do you see the United States in this right now? You know, Senator Bernie Sanders just sent a letter around to his colleagues objecting to the aid for Israel, saying that America could not be complicit in the indiscriminate killing of people and that Benjamin Netanyahu had decided not to go to war against Hamas, but to go to war against the Palestinian people very stark words, and said America simply couldn't be complicit. Does your part of the world do and I don't want to put this just on you but do Egypt is the neighborhood see the United States is compromised?

Sameh Shoukry 13:14

We believe that the situation is a grave one and that from a humanitarian perspective, the the Secretary General of the United Nations would invoke Article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations and transfer this issue to the Security Council on the basis that it represents a threat to international peace and security on the premise that there's a potential collapse of the humanitarian situation.

Steve Clemons 13:53

tell us more about that? I mean, I think a lot of people may not be tuned in to what that means, both in terms of the collapse, and what are the powers that he's now moved to the Security Council with article 99.

Sameh Shoukry 14:32

It is his moral authority as Secretary General to draw the attention of the Security Council and it poses a challenge to the Security Council to rise to the occasion and deal with this threat. From all accounts that I received, and I am in constant touch with the United Nations humanitarian services, they convey to me a very painful image of the inhumane conditions that currently exist for the 2.3 million inhabitants of Palestinian inhabits of Gaza. So I believe this is all an issue that the international community has to deal with and has to contend with the values that has have always been advocated in the protection of human rights and people's right to life as the basic should be preserved. So again, I commend the Secretary General

Steve Clemons 15:32

But article 99 and what he's done in moving this and Security Council, you know, it seems to me that one of the - from my perspective that there's a problem, you know, Lloyd Austin, our Secretary of Defense has come out and said, for all of the civilians that are that are that are dying right now in Palestine, that this will lead if not change to Israel Strategic defeat. When it comes to these it will not win strategically in this battle and contest. If we continue to see the death of so many innocents, Tony Blinken has said the same but to many people in the world, America looks pathetically weak in this in this equation of supplying bombs on one hand, and providing ignored counsel on the other.

Sameh Shoukry 16:16

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

I think this is an issue for the United States to contend with and to set its policy within the context of its interests and that of the region. United States has a responsibility as the sole superpower in the world that has the resources, the abilities to impact the situation. And should I believe in, as far as we're concerned, be actively engaged, to advocate for a cessation of hostilities, that has always been the traditional manner in which the international community has dealt with, with conflicts to ask for a cessation and to resolve it through diplomatic means resolve it through political means, and to deviate from this pattern for this conflict, raises questions of credibility and double standards.

Steve Clemons 17:09

What kinds of governance do you think might work the day after the bombs stop falling? Do you think the Palestinian Authority has any shred of solvency that it can be used in in that way?

Sameh Shoukry 17:22

Well, I don't believe it's appropriate for us to consider the day after, because this is a reflection of the day to day what's happening today. So until we have a definitive ceasefire, where we can assess the situation and the various various components of what we have to deal and contend with. I would not engage in a discussion about the day after or else I will be complicit in the continuation of this suffering

Steve Clemons 17:55

I was talking about the day during and ask Is there anything Israel could do that would trigger a suspension of your relationship with Israel that would trigger a military response from Egypt?

Sameh Shoukry 18:09

That's absolutely out of the question.

Steve Clemons 18:11

So there is nothing they can do that would trigger an armed or military response. from Egypt, you would allow

Sameh Shoukry 18:18

that's totally hypothetical. But of course if for unknown reasons, we will attack them that would be I have no no inclination or no nothing to lead me to believe that that is the case on either side. I think the issue of animosity and antagonism between Egypt and Israel is totally an issue behind this. We're almost half a century of peace, peace that both have extracted their best interest from a high level of confidence and certainly it is in the 21st century. There should be no military conflict between states but rather, dealing with the issues through diplomatic means we don't agree on on all issues, but that doesn't in any way jeopardize what is a very stable foundation.

Steve Clemons 19:09

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

try to I've been trying to think about what was lost on October 7, in terms of the broader vision and hope in the Middle East. You know, when I look at some of the things you've been promoting, like the Cairo economic future forum, major Business and Economic Forum's the Saudis, the same thing with its FII initiatives and others, the Abraham accords and what was sort of promised on this, how would you scale the impact of what has happened on the Abraham accords on the notion that the Middle East broadly and North Africa are worth investing? In and worth the risk? Because it seems to me risks have gone through the roof, when in fact, a lot of the world a lot of the investment in you know, transatlantic community began to look at the Middle East North Africa as a possibly a good bet, again, is that all ruined?

Sameh Shoukry 20:06

Temporarily, I believe it is negatively impacted by the conflict by the constraints that have put on regional integration. But it is not it is temporary. I believe in nature. I think there's a recognition within the region that the only way forward for all of us is through normalization, through integration, through cooperation and to end the conflict that there is so much potential in a healthy, productive relationship. But you have to create the environment. Certainly the environment of conflict is not conducive to investment or to exploring new avenues of cooperation.

Steve Clemons 20:49

What is the state of Egypt's relationship with the United States now? Is it gotten easier over time as it now going into some rough water because of the concern that America's playing both sides of this conflict in Israel, Gaza is going to be a comfortable relationship for you in the UN, with human rights residents with Ukraine resolutions?

Sameh Shoukry 21:12

Well, we have a very deep and resilient relationship with the United States. We consider it a strategic relationship and we hinge Egypt success on the direction of this relationship. We value it we have taken benefits from it, and I believe that mutual benefits also the United States has has extracted from this relationship. We are always looking for ways to enhance it. Believe we have always had parallel interests we have never intersected with US interests and we continue to play a very vital role in maintaining the stability of the region. That doesn't mean over the last four decades, we haven't had differences of opinions. And in hindsight, I believe many would think that our advice hadn't been heated would have provided better interest for the United States. So this is a very stable relationship, one that we depend on. And we recognize the value of this relationship and how we have benefited benefited from it.

Steve Clemons 22:21

You may be interested again, in this article 99 and you and I were talking offline about the two state solution as you as you said, You've been you've been for it before it was a fad. And what do you think the pathway could be to actually achieving the beginnings and outline of a two state solution and getting beyond the talk?

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

Sameh Shoukry 22:41

The outlines are well defined the negotiations since Oslo between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have been extensive. I think all of the components of the parameters of a solution of the creation of a Palestinian state are well known to both sides. It is a matter of the right political will to implement it and since there is lack of political will to implement it, it has to be on the international community to decide whether it's in its best interest to find

Steve Clemons 23:13

There are some countries that are going to recognize Palestine now.

Sameh Shoukry 23:17

There are there are I think this conflict will result in the recognition of certain European countries of Palestine. As I said it's the two state solution might be a contradiction in terms since there is Israel as a state. It is the recognition of the State of Palestine which will have a moral effect and will probably lead that there will be some implemented mechanism to to legally create the state.

Steve Clemons 23:48

Do you think the crisis rises to the level where other global stakeholders like China, like turkey maybe others jump in to become advocates of the Palestinian side of negotiations? Because there's a perception that US can't play both sides? So do you see this becoming a dividing line, particularly in the global south with with us but also with one of our big geostrategic competitors China is I've been interested in China's signals on this, you know, they've gotten involved in ways I couldn't, wouldn't have expected.

Sameh Shoukry 24:24

Well most of the global south has already recognized the Palestinian Authority and the as have recognized Palestine as a state, as has China. But that doesn't preclude that still desire to go beyond this moral recognition to an implementation that will lead to the end of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and thereby, free the region from this constant agitation. So we will continue to promote promote it, but not in the way it has been in the past three decades in terms of lip service, and not really doing anything to incentivize will say pressure, but say incentivize both parties that it's it is time to really end this conflict.

Steve Clemons 25:15

Now, you're having elections in a few days in Egypt, as I understand, are you going to be back to vote

Sameh Shoukry 25:19

I definitely

Steve Clemons 25:20

who do you think is going to win?

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

Sameh Shoukry 25:21

I believe the President will win

Steve Clemons 25:25

Is it a problem that there's not much doubt about that?

Sameh Shoukry 25:27

I don't necessarily think it's a problem. I think it's a process and a process that the President has done a marvelous job that he's he's being reelected, if that is the case on the platform of his achievements. And if there is an overwhelming confidence in his leadership, that should only be a recognition of stable Egypt, which is in the best interests of the region and international.

Steve Clemons 25:58

So what is the North Star of governance of states in the Middle East you have so many different versions and forms of government? America is obsessed with democracy. We have democracy summits, I don't know if Egypt falls under that line, or it falls under the autocracy line. But do you as you sort of look at America's concerns about democracy and autonomy and civil justice and freedom of expression, you know, journalistic self expression is Egypt being its best self

Sameh Shoukry 26:29

Egypt is aspiring to reform aspiring to provide greater political involvement for all of the various political components and will continue to, to actively endeavor to implement all of the common values that you have just stipulated, but then we have to also address the issue of sovereignty and it is up to each individual people to define the manner in which they reach those objectives and aspirations at what pace and dealing with the various challenges and consequences and not to try to impose the experiences of others. This is an incremental process of reform for any society and one that has to be done with care. So it's not to reach results that we see in the region. We have the situation so then Libya, in other parts where I think the instability has not served the purposes of the peoples of those countries or the general stability of the region.

Steve Clemons 27:42

Let me ask you finally, you know, as we see 2 million people you know, basically congested in southern Gaza right now. And I just, you know, want to tell people, this is a serious deal. I've looked at the maps that the Israeli Defense Forces have shared as to where in the grid people should go for safety in a world where the internet is not operating. I mean, this whole thing of what may unfold Israel says it's killed half of Hamas has battalion commanders out there that they are going after. I'm just interested in from your perspective, you're a major voice in this. Is there anything that can be done that has not been done to either get to a ceasefire or to a reorganization of Israel's approach to deal with the innocents that are in the way of their agenda? That hasn't happened yet? Is there anything we haven't done that you think needs to be done?

*****Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to the [original YouTube recording](#) as well*****

I think the voice of the consensus has not materialized within the international community to call for us humanitarian suspension of this crisis. This crisis. The current status of the 2.3 million that you refer to Gaza is the most densely populated place on the planet and the consequences of this military activity, I think is quite apparent in the number of over 16,000 civilians killed 6000 7000 of them children. I think there's a moral responsibility on all of us to bring this conflict to an end as soon as possible. And deal with all of the other issues but without continuing to impact those who are not responsible. Those who are innocent.

Ladies and gentlemen, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry thank you

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>