Open Collar Interview № 77 with Amb. Nabil Fahmy

EDITORIAL: PIR Center continues its *Open Collar* series – a cycle of informal interviews with our colleagues, friends, and partners who have made a significant contribution to the development of international relations and global security.

Today, we spoke with Nabil **Fahmy**, Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013–2014), an outstanding diplomat with extensive experience on the international stage, and Dean Emeritus of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo. Nabil Fahmy is a member of PIR Center Advisory Board and the Editorial Board of the *Security Index* Yearbook, as well as a close friend of PIR Center.

In this conversation, he shared his views on the challenges faced by Foreign Ministers, discussed key decision-making in complex geopolitical conditions, and reflected on his transition from public service to academia. He also spoke about living in different countries and adapting to new cultures. In addition, Nabil **Fahmy** offered valuable advice to young professionals aspiring to build a career in diplomacy and international relations.

The interview was conducted by Sviatoslav **Arov**, PIR Center Research Fellow.

«My father always told us: "Live your own life, but make the best out of it"»

About childhood

I was born in New York. My father was a diplomat [**editor**: Ismail Fahmy, Nabil's father, was a prominent Egyptian diplomat and politician. He served as Foreign Minister from 1973 to 1977]. During his diplomatic career, our family would go and live wherever he was posted abroad. I lived in New York twice, in Vienna twice, and in Cairo in between. So, my cultural upbringing was Egyptian, American, and Austrian all at the same time.

But I had a normal life. I went to school, walked and played with my friends, visited theaters and circuses, and spent my free time like any other child. Despite the multicultural environment I grew up in, Egypt has always been my home and where my roots were set. I never took any other nationality, even having spent most of my upbringing abroad.

Living in a multicultural environment, I acquired the skills of a good listener. As I lived in many foreign countries, I tried to understand the people who surrounded me: to be tolerant and open to different points of view. It helped me in my future life, and I have always had good relations with foreign counterparts.

Bilingual culture

All of my schooling was in English. I attended elementary school in the U.S., then studied in Egypt, but it was also in English. We had only three classes in Arabic: language, religion, and history. When I went to Austria, my education was also in English.

When I returned to Egypt, I was fondly considered the Egyptian who spoke broken Arabic with an American accent. Initially, I enrolled in a university in Cairo where classes were in Arabic, but

I felt completely uncomfortable, so I left and transferred to the American University in Cairo to study in English.

Nabil Fahmy (pictured second from the right in the top row, #3) as a member of a handball team of American University in Cairo, 1973

My father always told us: "Live your own life, but make the best out of it"

My father was a workaholic, but he never burdened us with his work. However, our discussions were basically on international events or sports, and I grew up in this environment. I was very curious and undecided about what I wanted to do in the future. The one thing my father always told me was: "Live your own life but make the best out of it." In other words, do not try to emulate somebody else, because the context, the consequences, and the opportunities are completely different from one stage of life to another.

My father was *larger than life*. When he entered the room, you definitely noticed him there, even if he was silent. But he was not the kind of person who would impose himself on you. He never tried to manage the family argument or discussion. He was always a participant in it, but he wanted us to develop our own ideas.

Ordinary life of Nabil Fahmy's youth

International figures came into our homes over the years very naturally. I saw many famous people who came to visit, but I did not feel anything special.

I saw Kurt Waldheim [**editor**: Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1972 to 1981] when we lived in Austria. As a teenager, I saw Bruno Kreisky [**editor**: Chancellor of Austria from 1970 to 1983] and a large number of prominent ambassadors. When I finished university, I met Andrey Gromyko, and later Jimmy Carter and Henry Kissinger.

Because the presence of these dignitaries was normal for me, I was never overly impressed by power or position. That is probably why I was never attracted to becoming a Foreign Minister.

I did not want to be involved in international relations

I got my bachelor's degree in Science in Physics/Mathematics at the American University in Cairo. Actually, nobody knows why it happened, and neither do I. When I told my parents that I would

like to study physics and math – I was originally studying engineering, but I quit and went into physics at another university – eventually my father asked me:

– What are you going to do in life?

And I answered:

– I do not know yet. I just want to get a degree.

Physics was something that I knew how to do well, and I thought, "I will decide what I want to do later." I emphasize, however, that I had no intention of going into government.

My older brother wanted to be a diplomat like my father, but he did not. I wanted to go into the private sector. At the university, I was on a full academic scholarship, but one year before I graduated, my scientific advisor called me in and said:

– Nabil, you need to change your major.

– What do you mean? I have one year left.

– You need to change your major. You are not serious about physics and math. It just comes easy to you. You are doing well because it is easy for you, not because you are interested. You solve the difficult equations but do not solve the easy ones. And you are not going to continue to study physics and math after this.

The beginning of a diplomatic career. Nabil Fahmy (pictured right) with his friend. Geneva, 1976

Anyway, I did not take his advice because I wanted to get my degree, first of all. But he was right. When I finished my undergraduate degree, I enlisted in the army. After that, I did a master's degree in management, but I did not open any physics books after I left college.

Even though I did not continue in physics, I can tell you that later on, as a diplomat, I started to concentrate on disarmament, weapons systems, and regional security.

Physics was very useful because it helped me envisage and understand things that I really did not know. So, it was not a complete waste of time, but it was not the best use of time.

On pressure produced by father's status

I cannot say definitively if I felt pressured because of my father's background. First of all, my father warned me about that. He said: "No matter how successful you are, nobody will immediately attribute your success to you but will infer that your success is because I am the Minister. And they will only attribute it to you in ten, fifteen years when you have worked ten times as much as any of your colleagues."

So, in that sense – yes, I felt pressure. My father very sincerely but emphatically said to all three of his children – even before I joined the Foreign Ministry – "Do not try to recreate me in your

image. Create the best that you can create." I did not feel pressure from him, and I never had to prove myself to him. That was the way we were brought up.

When I started my career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, my father was just a professional diplomat with me. There was no reprimand whatsoever, and there was no exceptional pressure. But there was also no flattery or pampering. In other words, I did the menial work like all the other young diplomats. So, it was fine.

Grand expectations from others were a source of pressure. Later, the pressure was relieved – but let me rephrase that – the pressure was reversed, not relieved. A year and a half after I joined the Foreign Ministry, my father resigned for political reasons [**editor**: Ismail Fahmy resigned from the government in 1977 to protest Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem]. So, the point was: would the Ministry take a negative position towards me?

I gained more than i lost from my father being the Foreign Minister

Looking at my career in hindsight, I do not really feel that I had any serious problems with pressure. And I would argue that in many respects, I gained more than I lost from my father being the Foreign Minister.

Let me tell you a short story. It was my first mission to Geneva, to the Conference on Disarmament. The head of the Soviet delegation was a ranking ambassador, while the American representative had been a lawyer in the Nuremberg trials when he was a young man. So, these were very senior people.

At my first meeting in the Conference, upon instructions from my government, I was asked to make a certain request – to add Arabic as a foreign language in the committee. And it got me into an argument with both these ambassadors. It was quite amusing because I was 22 years old, and they were 70-year-old stars in the middle of the Cold War, both arguing with me – and the whole committee was watching this.

Anyway, we postponed the argument to the next session. And as soon as we finished, both of them separately came to me and asked: "Are you Ismail Fahmy's son?" They had worked with my father previously and told me that my manners were like my father's.

Overall, I benefited greatly from my father's credibility with foreign diplomats and officials. It gave me recognition, which helped when I invested properly, but it did not open any doors based on favoritism.

The Role of Arms Control and Disarmament in Nabil Fahmy's Life

I have devoted a significant part of my life to disarmament issues. My diplomatic career started in 1976, two years before Egypt presented an initiative on creating a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear and Other Mass-Destruction Weapons. A little earlier, in 1968, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons had been signed.

I have always followed arms control, even as a young man and before I graduated from university. When I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was very motivated to continue working in that area. When I was posted to Geneva, I asked – and the ambassador agreed – to be assigned to work on arms control issues.

As a representative of a medium-sized country, ensuring national security for me is a matter of parity – parity in responsibilities, not in weapons systems. I am a realist, and either Egypt has to decide to spend a lot of money on arms, or it has to spend time trying to convince its neighbors,

friends, and adversaries to agree on norms where they do not constantly destroy each other and waste money. That is the real logic behind arms control for a country like mine. Arms control is an imperative component of Egypt's national security.

Working at the top level at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

I spent seven years as a policy advisor to the Foreign Minister from 1990 to 1997. I was dealing with the most pressing or topical issues: anything that was new or problematic before it passed to the Minister went by my desk.

It was a tremendous experience but also a tremendous pressure. I lived in this mode 24/7.

I hardly had time with my children growing up. One day, I went into my son's room at midnight and was shocked by a big teenager. I asked my wife:

– When did this guy grow up?

And she answered me:

– Nabil, you have been living in the office for six years. What do you think? Is he going to wait for you?

The very next day, I went to the Foreign Minister, and I told him:

Yasir Arafat, Nabil Fahmy and his son.
USA, 2000

– Minister, I want to leave next year.

He was surprised.

– What happened?

– Nothing happened. Just for me, it is important to balance my life a little bit.

Anyway, a year after that conversation, he called me in and said:

– Nabil, the only post available is Japan. But you know nothing about Japan. Would you like to go to Japan?

And I replied:

– Yes, I do. I want to learn, and it would be a very useful experience.

There was a huge world out there that I knew nothing about – on the time of being Egyptian Ambassador to Japan

The very first day I arrived in Japan, I was excited and curious about everything. I told my driver I would go downtown and walk alone. He said:

– You cannot go out alone, you do not know the language. You will go out on your own, but I will still accompany you.

So, I went into a big, populated area in Tokyo, and suddenly, I looked around, and I was the only one who looked different.

That first day, I realized that there was a huge world out there that I knew nothing about. As a child and young man, I looked to the West or the Middle East, but I did not have an eye for Asia at all. That very first day in Japan, where I then spent two years, was a tremendous learning experience that refined my own attitude toward globalization.

I tried to learn as much as I could. It was a wonderful but very complicated experience. The culture was different from the ones I had lived in before. It was very subtle in many, many ways, but it required a huge professional and cultural adaptation for me. I greatly appreciate the hospitality and the experience I gained while living in Japan.

Twist of fate

If I had not gone to Japan, I would not have gone to the United States as an ambassador. In my last three months in Japan, after I had been assigned to the Egyptian Mission at the UN in Geneva, President Mubarak paid a visit to Japan, and the visit went well. It paved the way for my future career.

President Mubarak asked me many questions about Japan, America, the world, and Egypt, and I was giving him very straightforward answers. He left and did not say anything. One week later, I got a message from Cairo saying: "Postpone your travel to Geneva, stay where you are for a while."

It was funny because I responded:

– I have already said goodbye to the Emperor, and once you have said goodbye to the Emperor, you cannot meet with anyone. What am I supposed to do?

I was told in response:

– Just stay where you are.

So, I stayed. And then, three and a half months later, I got a notification:

– You have been reassigned from going to Geneva to going to Washington.

It was mostly because of the dialogue I had with the President during his visit to Japan. Of course, I had known President Mubarak before, but he seemed to be testing me throughout this visit. Before I went to Washington, I was asked to go to Cairo to meet him. And he kept saying that it was he who had made that choice. It was an absolutely wonderful experience.

President Hosni Mubarak with Nabil Fahmy before his appointment as an Egyptian Ambassador to the USA. Cairo, 1999

My time in Washington

As a diplomat, I had been in the US before [**editor**: before being posted as an ambassador]. I was at the White House ceremony when the Oslo Accords were signed. Egypt was invited, the Foreign Minister was there, and I was his policy advisor, so I was there with him.

My time in Washington as ambassador did not start out too rosy. Very soon after I arrived, EgyptAir Flight 990 crashed, with more than 200 people dead. That was only twelve days after my arrival, so I was getting a real baptism by fire. And then, within a year, we had the 9/11 events, where everybody who was a Muslim or an Arab was accused of being a terrorist. It was quite a challenging period.

I would add that we were strongly opposed to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and there were moments of tension between the George W. Bush administration and the Egyptian administration, led by President Mubarak. Those were challenging times.

But before I left Washington, the Embassy got a call from the White House saying that President Bush had heard that Ambassador Fahmy was leaving, and he wanted to say goodbye to him. Bush said he wanted to see me to say goodbye, even though the President does not normally bid ambassadors farewell, at least with countries like mine. Anyway, when I went to see him at the White House, he immediately received me, saying:

– I want to say goodbye to you because you were always very clear in what you said. And whether you agree or disagree with us, we can understand what you are trying to say.

I have had many, many arguments with the Americans, but they are basically open people, so you can have the arguments, agree or disagree, and move on to the next topic.

On 9/11

The TV in my office was always muted. On September 11, 2001, I walked into my office and saw the plane hitting the Twin Towers. My first reaction was, “What is this delusional Hollywood movie that is so bloody and pathetic?” And then I turned on the sound, and it was the second plane that hit the tower; I had been in traffic during the first plane and was not aware of it. The first thing I did was call the White House, but it was completely congested.

President Mubarak called me from Cairo, anxious, and asked me what was going on, but I did not know yet. It was a big mess, and everybody was confused.

I saw a superpower in complete disarray because the US had not been attacked on the mainland since Pearl Harbor. It was an attack right in the middle of Washington and New York, as the Pentagon was also targeted.

For hours, I tried to figure out: Were there casualties that we had to take care of – Americans or Egyptians? How should we deal with our American friends? What should I have told Cairo when no one, even in Washington, understood what was going on? It was quite problematic, but to be fair, the Americans were able to start responding relatively quickly. Within forty-eight hours, they were back to communicating with foreigners like me, explaining what had happened.

As shocked as America was, the question remained: Who was the culprit here? Superficially, the culprit was anybody who was a Muslim or an Arab, especially if you were a Muslim Arab man. So, somebody like me, living in America – even though I was an ambassador – felt that Americans were looking at me with a different sense of suspicion than they did one week earlier.

Every week, I spoke two to four times publicly all over America, trying to explain that we were against terrorism, that we supported fighting criminals and all that, but that it should not become an ideological religious war.

There were cases when American audience members came up to me after my speech and thanked me for my explanation. It reflected how difficult the situation was.

It changed the American political mindset to be almost entirely anti-terrorism rather than focused on geopolitics. The American view of the Middle East became anti-terrorist, not geopolitical.

It took a while to rebalance, but those were tough times.

A *witch hunt*

I traveled a lot, giving speeches. I was searched at every airport, on every airplane, and more than once, simply because I was a man, a Muslim, an Arab sitting at the front of the plane.

And I was not going to complain about it because it was an emotional thing, not what they were trying to say. I mean, a lot of the people who searched me did not know who I was.

At some point, when it went on too long and when we began to be searched too often, even though we were ambassadors – at first, I never complained. But after three, four, or five months, it became tiresome.

Finally, I personally called our officials in Cairo and told them:

– The next American diplomat coming to Cairo, take him out of line, search him and his bags, emphasizing that they would not come in without a search and without a valid visa.

And even those in Cairo said:

– Are you sure you want to do this?

I replied:

– Yes, I want them to understand that while we will be patient, institutional segregation is unacceptable.

When American officials who came to Egypt experienced this, they understood it all. Some of them even called me and said: “Thank you for doing that because this way our system will understand reciprocity.”

I wanted to leave my diplomatic career after Washington

I completed my term in Washington and felt completely satisfied as a diplomat. I went back to Cairo, and being a minister was not particularly attractive to me, as I was familiar with this pressure when I was young. So, when I got back to Cairo, I went to the Minister and said:

– I am not coming to work any longer. I am going to stay home. Call me if you need me.

I did not want a day-to-day job. Within one month, the head of the American University in Cairo kept contacting me over and over again to come and create a school for global affairs and public policy at the American University in Cairo.

But I knew nothing about academic science. It took nine months of negotiation to convince me and give them an answer. And I only did it out of fear for my wife, who said:

– Nabil, say “no” or say “yes” and stop driving these people crazy.

And I said: “Okay, I'll be serious.” I did that, and I do not regret it one bit. Because even though academia is completely different from real geopolitics, it gave me the opportunity to think about the fundamental issues behind a lot of these problems.

I was no longer an official practitioner, but I was somebody with thirty years or more of experience.

I was constantly involved in think tanks, talks, and conferences. And a few years later, simultaneously with all this, I founded my own consulting firm. But I was asked to go back to government and become a Foreign Minister.

My way to the post of Foreign Minister

When I started my career as a diplomat – and considered going into the private sector – my father said: “Go and move to the private sector. In the private sector, you work for yourself, but in government, you work for the common good. It is not about what you want. You must serve all these people at the same time, even at your own expense.”

Secondly, it was a responsibility because, working in the government, you represent other people. It is not just your opinion. And I go back to why I never wanted to carry that burden.

I was asked to become Foreign Minister three times before I accepted. I was invited to become Foreign Minister, but again and again, I said: “No, I do not want to accept it.” I finally accepted the fourth time because they came to me and said: “We have had two revolutions in two and a half years, the country is in trouble, you have to accept.” And I agreed because of a sense of responsibility.

Besides our own domestic affairs, the region was also unstable. We had experienced two revolutions in two and a half years, we faced problems of terrorism, Western pressure, economic difficulties, and, of course, many issues in international affairs, including the ones near the borders.

All in all, it was a tough decision. I was sitting on the couch for two hours in my living room reflecting:

– If I say yes, I need to get Egypt to *that* point within the interim period, which is eighteen months.

When I met the Prime Minister, who wanted me to become Foreign Minister, I asked him:

– What kind of foreign policy are you going to implement?

– You are an expert. You will tell us what we need.

– Okay, here is what we need – I told him my plan – and if you want to accept that, I will do it.

And he gratefully accepted it. The post of Foreign Minister was a responsibility, not a pleasure. It was not glamorous. We had gone through two revolutions in two and a half years. It was a country with serious problems.

No matter how great the pressure and responsibility were, I knew exactly what I had to do. So, I did not feel any pressure. It was as if I was working automatically. Everything was programmed in my head.

I often joke – and it is actually true – that as Foreign Minister, my nightmares were easier than their days. Anyway, ministers do not sleep much.

They sleep for three or four hours and then they wake up, so their nightmares end and turn out not to be true. But in my days, I had to deal with instability at home, with a failed state in Libya, with the crisis in Sudan and Ethiopia, with the lack of a peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis, with instability in Iraq, with the civil war in Syria, and with the situation in the Gulf… We were in a major crisis situation. But I was living on adrenaline, I was motivated to get things done. I tried, I was happy. I agreed to take the position, finished it within a year, and left, and they moved on.

Nabil Fahmy has just been appointed a Foreign Minister. Official ceremony with President Adly Mahmoud Mansour. Cairo, July 2013

Working in an academic field

The problem with some academics is that they keep theorizing about what could have been, what should have been, or what would have been, and never put it into practice: how do you influence policy to make it better?

Now I enjoy my situation much more than when I was in government or academia because I am neither of the two, but I have had the experience of both. When I speak at conferences, I am always speaking from a practitioner's perspective but with an academic background. It is a little bit more useful.

The best city for living in

I am a city person. The quality of life in Tokyo was probably the best and most efficient. However, it was not something I was most comfortable with compared to my style of living, which is much more casual, less formal, and less structured.

I like big cities. I live in Cairo, so I like hustle and bustle. I like the noise, I like cars honking, and I like people shouting in the street.

New York, for example, is more to my liking than Washington, D.C., although I had a much better quality of life in Washington as an ambassador than when I was a young man working in New York. Geneva was probably the most scenic of all these positions, but Geneva was a place where I felt a little bit like a foreigner.

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (at tha time – Egyptian Minister o Defense) and Nabil Fahm during the talks in the two plus-two format. Moscow, 2014

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (at that time – Egyptian Minister of Defense), Nabil Fahmy and Sergey Lavrov during the talks in the two-plus-two format. Moscow, 2014

In Virginia, the homeland of John F. Kennedy's sister (pictured on the right). Also, in the picture: Muhammad Ali and Nabil Fahmy with his wife. USA, 2002

Nabil Fahmy at the diplomatic reception hosted by Barack and Michelle Obama, during UN General Assembly. New York, 2013

Piece of advice to the young generation

Firstly, learn from history, but look forward. You should not stop by looking backward. You should always think: how do I move forward? How do I create my own story?

Secondly, listen and watch. From my experience, I listened to what my opponents said and did not say. I watched them speak to understand what was going on in their bodies when they spoke. I always went into well-prepared meetings, knowing what my opponent really needed. When they chose to understate something or say too much, I drew conclusions from it. I have always been an avid listener and an avid observer. I did not get lost in what I was saying, and I knew what I was going to say. My attention was focused on what my interlocutor was going to say.

My third and final point is to never lose focus on what you need rather than what you want. In other words, your interlocutor can make a great argument or a very big mistake that can give you the opportunity to get much more than you need. And I caution you against giving in to someone else's argument just because it is excellent unless it is in your best interest.

I would argue that international relations are relationships. It is not a bargain. It is not a zero-sum game. I always want to focus on what I need and understand what my partner needs because I do not want to destroy them. I want to gain an advantage. But if it is a zero-sum game, it is not going to work out well in the long run.

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