

REUTERS/ASMAA WAGUIH

HAS ELBARADEI'S TIME ARRIVED?

A mystery to many of his countrymen, viewed in Washington and Israel with suspicion, could Mohamed ElBaradei be the next leader of Egypt?

BY LOUIS CHARBONNEAU
UNITED NATIONS, FEB 15

FOR A MAN WHO describes himself as a potential "agent of change" in Egypt, Mohamed

ElBaradei draws decidedly mixed reviews. The veteran diplomat, international lawyer and Nobel Prize winner, has emerged as

a high-profile opposition figure over the past few weeks and a possible candidate to replace fallen autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

But Washington and Tel Aviv are deeply suspicious of the 68-year-old. They along with other allies were frustrated by what they said were blatant attempts by ElBaradei -- who ran the

U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency

(IAEA) from 1997 to 2009 -- to undermine their efforts to ratchet up the pressure on Iraq before the U.S.-led invasion and later on Iran over its suspected nuclear arms program.

More importantly, the citizens of the Arab world's most populous state have hardly embraced ElBaradei since his return on Jan. 27, three days after mass street protests

against Mubarak's rule began. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the movement that ousted the regime was its lack of a single leader.

Egyptians seem to respect ElBaradei but are wary of the long periods he spent away from the country. The army, which will surely continue to play a pivotal role in Egypt's leadership, is also cagey about this outsider.

"ElBaradei won't do," said Khaled Ezzat, 34, an information technology engineer in Tahrir Square in late January. "He doesn't have the experience here and he's a little weak."

At the same time, those who know ElBaradei say he may be just the man Egypt needs. In more than a dozen interviews over the past week, a number of senior advisers who served the Egyptian at the IAEA and diplomats who worked closely with him during his many years in Vienna, describe ElBaradei as charismatic and eloquent, a man with average management skills but an innate ability to inspire people. If his time at the IAEA is anything to go by, ElBaradei is both politically savvy and prepared to get tough.

The man himself downplays any run for the presidency, though he has not ruled it out altogether. He hopes the next president will be in the "40s or early 50s", he said. But

"EGYPT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A LOCOMOTIVE FOR CHANGE, FOR MODERNIZATION, FOR MODERATION."

he is ready to help transform Egypt into a democracy that treats people with dignity and respects human rights.

"Right now the Arab world is in a sorry state of affairs," he told Reuters a few days before Mubarak stepped down. "Right now we have six or seven civil wars and most (Arab nations) are characterized as authoritarian countries."

"Egypt has always been a locomotive for change, for modernization, for moderation," he said. "Hopefully it will pull up the Arab world and help it catch up with the rest of the world."

IN CAIRO, MIXED FEELINGS

ELBARADEI'S COSMOPOLITANISM may be an advantage among some Egyptians but it is a source of suspicion for others.

When he first returned home to publicly oppose Mubarak in early 2010, authorities harassed his supporters and the official

media tried to ridicule him, saying he knew nothing about Egypt and had no political experience.

The government's campaign appears to have worked, at least in part. "I'm not convinced by ElBaradei, even as a transitional figure, he hasn't really been present in the country," Omar Mahdi, a sales manager, told Reuters in the first days of the protests.

Crucially, ElBaradei lacks deep connections with the military -- a key factor in Egyptian power politics.

All the same, ElBaradei's arrival in Cairo just as the protests got under way emboldened the crowds at a critical point. Could he end up being a sort of compromise figure, somebody who threatens neither the army nor the democracy movement?

"ElBaradei is a very acceptable option because he will not stay," said Islam Ashraf, 24, a quality operations coordinator.

"But we're not really interested in faces. What matters to us is having another system."

SUSPICION ABROAD

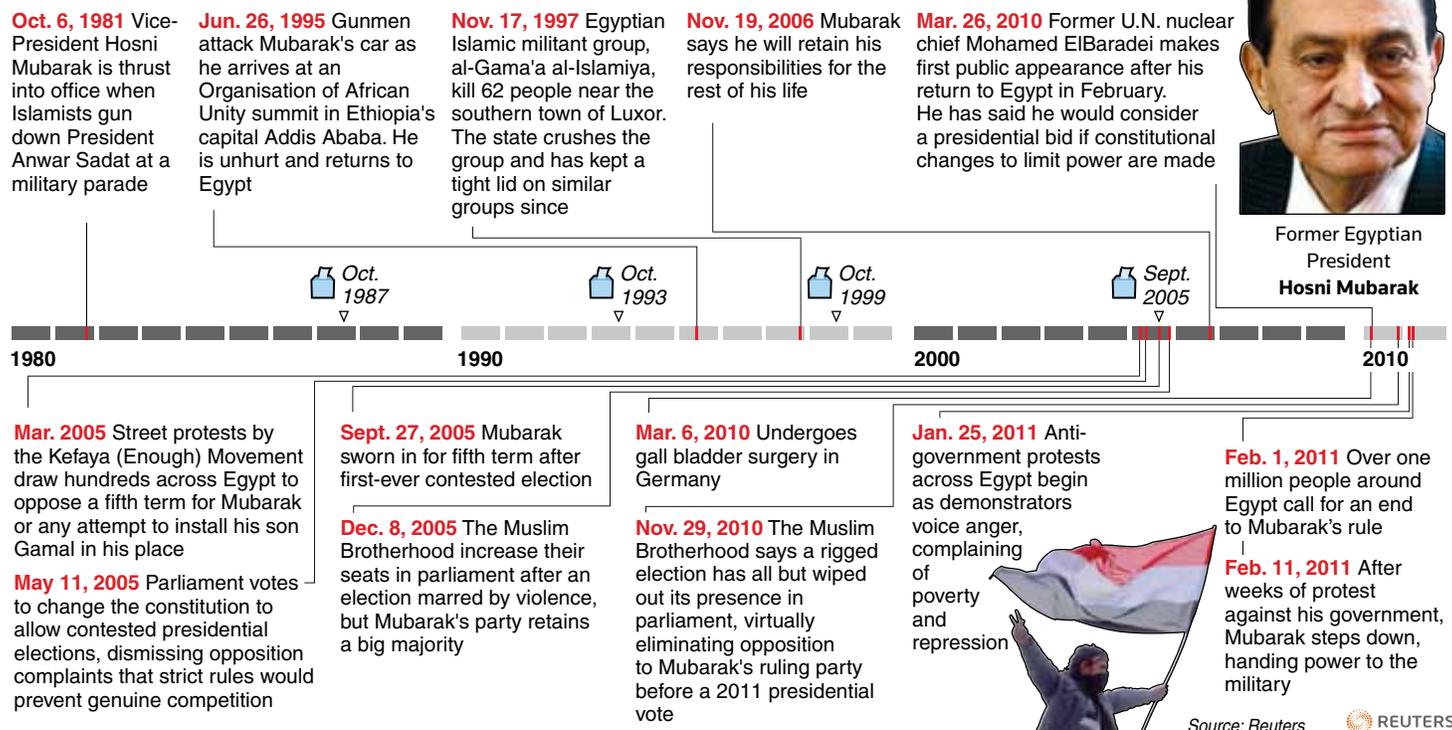
U.S. OFFICIALS HAVE been reluctant to talk publicly about who they would prefer to be in charge of Egypt. Privately, however, they doubt ElBaradei is a serious player in Egyptian politics.

EGYPT'S HOSNI MUBARAK'S 30 YEARS IN POWER

 Dates of Mubarak's reelection



Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak



Source: Reuters 

The Obama administration is also loath to be seen as anointing a potential successor to Mubarak. Those factors played a role in the studied indifference with which the United States responded to ElBaradei's return to Egypt.

ElBaradei also has critics in Washington, Israel, London, Berlin and Paris who have not forgotten their frustration at what they describe as his attempts to undermine their drive to ratchet up the pressure on Iran over a nuclear program they fear is intended to develop weapons capability but Tehran says is for peaceful energy purposes only.

Suspicion of ElBaradei runs especially deep in Israel.

Several former IAEA officials told Reuters ElBaradei's support for the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East is widely viewed in Israel as a call for the unilateral destruction of Israel's nuclear arsenal -- the existence of which the Jewish state neither confirms nor denies -- which would render Israel vulnerable to attack in a hostile Middle East.

"I have my disagreements with the Israelis just as I have had with the Americans," ElBaradei said.

One of those disagreements concerned the Israeli bombing in September 2007 of what U.S. and Israeli officials said was a nascent nuclear reactor in Syria built with the help of North Korea. One former IAEA official said ElBaradei "went through the roof" when he found out about the Israeli strike against the facility, which Syria says was not a nuclear reactor.

Another diplomat said ElBaradei took the Israeli action as a "personal attack against him" and a "vote of no-confidence" because the Israelis decided to bomb the facility rather than ask the IAEA to confront Syria and inspect the site.

"The Israelis decided that ElBaradei could not be trusted to do anything about it so they chose to act pre-emptively and solve the problem," the diplomat said.

Two years later, in September 2009, Israel and France suggested that ElBaradei was sitting on IAEA findings that pointed more concretely to a covert Iranian nuclear weapons program. ElBaradei angrily denied any such cover-up. The Israeli ambassador to the IAEA made clear his disapproval of the outgoing IAEA chief and conspicuously left his seat empty during a closed-door gathering of agency member states who took turns heaping praise on ElBaradei for his 12 years at the nuclear watchdog.



TO INVADE OR NOT: United States Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) confers with Mohamed ElBaradei in the U.N. Security Council chamber at U.N. headquarters in New York, March 7, 2003, at a meeting on the status of weapons inspections in Iraq, shortly before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. **REUTERS/PETER MORGAN RE**

ElBaradei doesn't hide his disapproval of other Israeli policies, especially those regarding the Palestinians. But he does say that Israel's right to exist is beyond question.

"Israel is here to stay," he told Reuters. "The idea that a democratic Egypt will cancel the peace treaty and go to war with Israel -- this is total nonsense. Nobody wants to see yet another fight or confrontation."

But he also made clear that Israeli security ultimately depended on a resolution of the Palestinian problem and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

"We understand that they (Israel) have to live within secure and recognized boundaries," ElBaradei said. "But if they continue to carve up the Palestinian territory, they are not helping their security," he said. "It's a very short term view."

He added that relations between Egypt and Israel constituted an imperfect peace and could be improved.

"It's a pseudo peace," he said. "You cannot even publish an Arab book in Israel. You

cannot have an Israeli book published in Cairo. That is a very narrow definition of what you call peace."

INSPIRING, BUT NO MANAGER

IS ELBARADEI THE man to change that?

Kenneth Brill, a former U.S. ambassador to the IAEA who got to know the Egyptian well during his years in Vienna, said that one of ElBaradei's strongest assets is his lack of links to the Mubarak regime. While his years out of Egypt mean he lacks a political base, it has blessed him with clean hands in a country rife with corruption.

"One of the things that makes him credible is that he's the anti-Mubarak, he's not corrupt," said Brill, a former senior U.S. intelligence official who now heads the Fund for Peace think-tank in Washington.

ElBaradei himself said his decades in democratic countries like the United States, Switzerland and Austria had given him an appreciation for how the rule of law and respect for human rights work in practice,

something he'd like to bring to Egypt.

Many former associates credit ElBaradei with transforming the IAEA from a sleepy technical agency into one of the most high-profile organizations in the United Nations system.

"He...boosted its budget and made his own position a powerful one by using his bully pulpit to criticize the Americans, Iranians, Israelis and others," one former IAEA official said.

On the other hand, almost all also voiced doubts about his skills as a manager, saying he had little interest in budgetary or human resources issues at the agency.

"He's a terrible manager," said a former Western ambassador who had regular contact with ElBaradei for years.

Would that matter? One senior Western diplomat said that despite lacking a "Harvard Business School soft-touch", ElBaradei is a "true leader".

"Isn't history full of people who were good leaders but poor managers?" he said. "I think he can rise to the challenge if given the opportunity."

"My guess is he has a political future," said Michele Dunne, a Middle East expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

"He could very well be a presidential candidate, but we have no idea what the rules will be and who will be able to run," she said.

Dunne said that both ElBaradei and Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa have emerged as viable candidates after 18 days of demonstrations forced Mubarak to resign following 30 years in power.

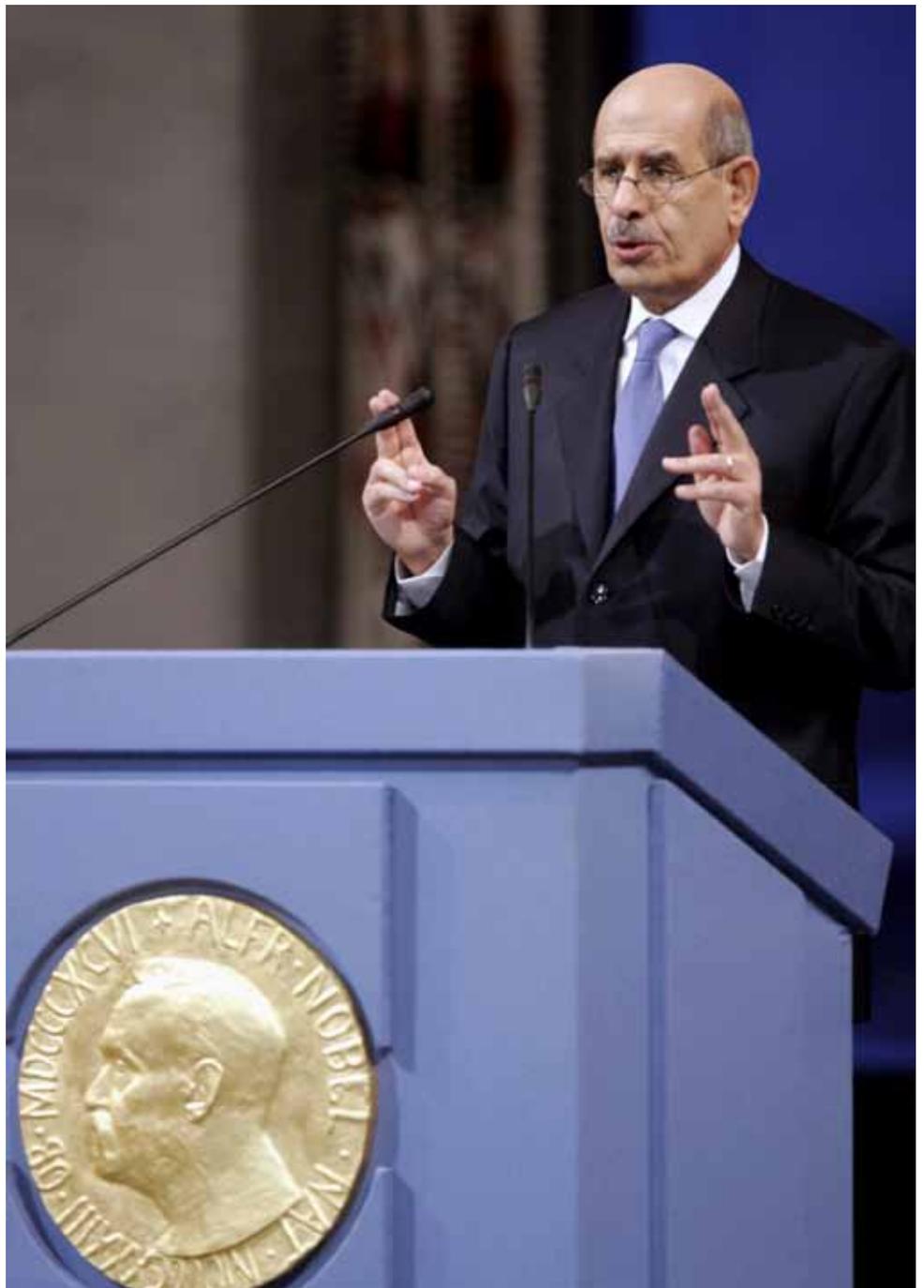
"Both of them came out of this looking quite good," Dunne said.

A LAWYER, LIKE HIS FATHER

ELBARADEI WAS BORN in 1942 in Cairo. His father, Mostafa ElBaradei, was a lawyer and at one point the head of the Egyptian Bar Association. Mostafa was a staunch supporter of an independent legal system and free press, views that annoyed the government of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt from 1956 to 1970.

ElBaradei followed in his father's footsteps and graduated with a bachelor's degree in law from the University of Cairo in 1962. He then joined the Egyptian diplomatic service. While posted in the United States, he continued his education at New York University, where he received a doctorate in international law in 1974.

For the next four years he worked as a



MAN OF PEACE: ElBaradei speaks after receiving the Nobel Peace prize in Oslo in December, 2005. The prize was shared between ElBaradei and the IAEA." **REUTERS/CLARO CORTES IV**

special assistant to the Egyptian foreign minister. It was a watershed time in Egyptian foreign policy, as Cairo ended its special relationship with the Soviet Union, cultivated ties with Washington and made peace with Israel.

ElBaradei was a member of the Egyptian delegation at the U.S.-brokered talks in 1978 between Egypt and Israel that led to the Camp David Accords and a full peace treaty between the two countries the following year.

In 1980 he returned to the United States, where he began working for the United Nations and taught international law at New York University. Several years later, he moved to Vienna to work at the IAEA, where he held a number of senior positions until he was elected the agency's chief in 1997.

It was the United States that proposed ElBaradei as a replacement for Swedish diplomat Hans Blix. Egypt did not endorse him. Several former IAEA officials and



HALLS OF POWER: Mohamed ElBaradei speaks with journalists after a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the State Department in Washington May 24, 2006. **REUTERS/YURI GRIPAS**

diplomats said it was probably because ElBaradei had no links to the Mubarak family - as well as concerns in Cairo that he was soft on Israel.

Several former senior agency officials suggested that ElBaradei may not have forgiven Mubarak for opposing his candidacy as IAEA chief.

“He never thought much of Mubarak,” one former official said.

In his office on the 28th floor of the IAEA building, ElBaradei kept a low profile in his early years. The agency was created in 1957 to promote nuclear verification and security, safety and the transfer of peaceful atomic technology. At first, it was mainly an accounting body that kept track of countries’ declared nuclear programs and carried out routine inspections to verify that those declarations were correct.

But its role changed after the 1991 discovery of Iraq’s clandestine nuclear weapons program. It became clear that routine IAEA inspections of all signatories of the 1970 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) were insufficient.

The IAEA proposed a much more intrusive inspection regime and throughout the 1990s, IAEA experts dismantled Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s nuclear arms program and monitored North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear



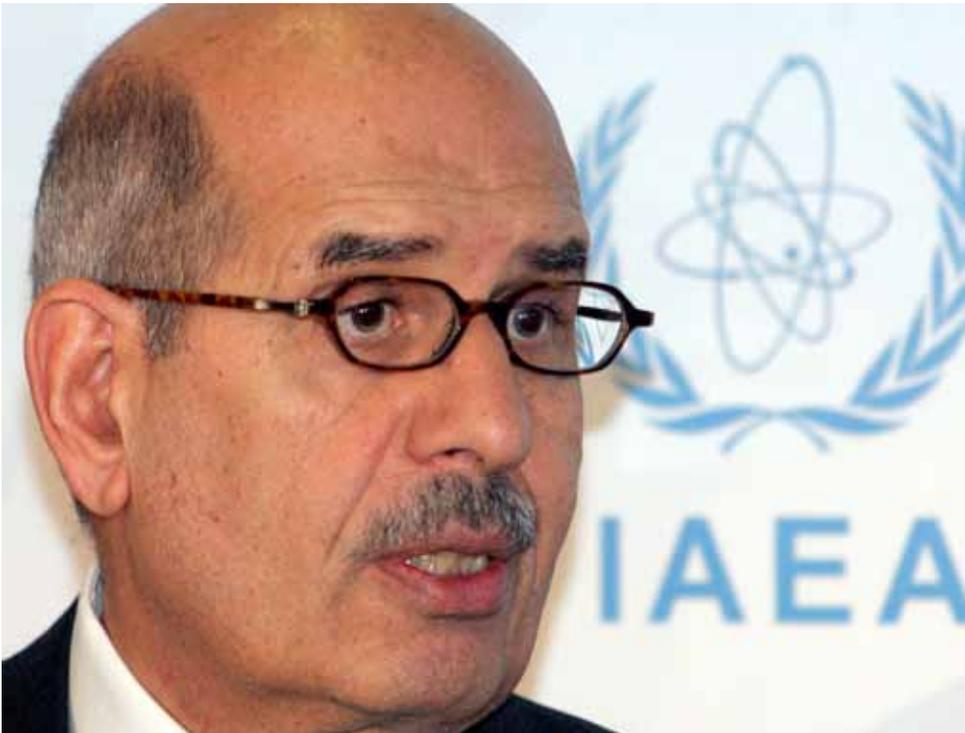
PEOPLE’S REVOLUT: Protest posters on a shop window in the opposition stronghold of Tahrir Square, in Cairo, February 10, 2011. **REUTERS/STEVE CRISP**

complex, which was mothballed under a 1994 agreement with the United States.

FALLOUT OVER IRAQ

INITIALLY, ELBARADEI got on well with the Americans. He was seen as shy and reclusive but had a clear vision of how he wanted to improve the agency. He rarely spoke to the media.

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, ElBaradei decided the IAEA needed a makeover. He announced that beefing up security at nuclear installations worldwide should be a priority if countries were to protect themselves against terrorists willing to hijack a plane and ram it into a nuclear power plant. The administration of President George W. Bush backed ElBaradei’s campaign to boost



ATOMIC EXPERT: ElBaradei briefs the media after a board of governors meeting at the IAEA in Vienna in March 2006.
REUTERS/HERWIG PRAMMER

the profile of the IAEA and focus attention on nuclear security.

But in 2002, as it became clear that the Bush administration was preparing for an invasion of Iraq, relations between the IAEA and the U.S. began to sour.

ElBaradei had long urged Iraq to allow U.N. inspectors back into the country to finish verifying that Saddam's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs had been fully dismantled. IAEA and UNSCOM inspectors had fled in 1998 ahead of U.S.-British air strikes against Iraq.

In the summer of 2002, Baghdad finally agreed to allow the IAEA and inspectors from the newly formed UNMOVIC group to return. Initially ElBaradei and the IAEA's Iraq Action Team, led by French nuclear weapons expert Jacques Baute, were convinced that the Iraqis were still trying to develop atomic weapons.

But it soon became clear that this was not the case. The weapons were nowhere to be found and all U.S. leads led nowhere. In early 2003 ElBaradei infuriated the Bush administration when he announced that he had found "no smoking gun" in Iraq and voiced skepticism about whether any smoking guns would ever be found. The U.S., readying for war in Iraq, alleged that Saddam Hussein had revived his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

Baute discovered that the intelligence backing Bush's allegation in his State of

the Union address that Iraq had tried to buy processed uranium from an African country was based on crudely forged documents. ElBaradei informed the Security Council about the forgeries in early March 2003. It made no difference. Two weeks later, the U.S. launched its invasion.

ANOTHER SPLIT WITH WASHINGTON

SIDELINED IN IRAQ, ElBaradei turned his attention to Iran, where agency inspectors suspected the country was doing what its neighbor Iraq was not -- developing an option to produce atomic weapons. Washington was turning up the pressure on Iran and ElBaradei feared it could be next in line for U.S.-led regime change.

Determined to prevent another war, ElBaradei did everything to ensure that his reports on IAEA inspections of Iran's nuclear program could not be used to justify a military attack against the Islamic Republic. Over the objections of the IAEA Department of Safeguards, ElBaradei and his political and legal advisers regularly toned down language in inspection reports and removed allegations they felt were less certain than others.

U.S. officials accused ElBaradei of undermining their efforts to pressure Iran, accusing him of altering his inspectors' reports in order to make Tehran look better and prevent the IAEA's 35-nation board of

governors from passing the Iran dossier to the U.N. Security Council.

ElBaradei's chief inspectors -- including former deputy director general Pierre Goldschmidt of Belgium and his successor Olli Heinonen of Finland -- pushed ElBaradei to take a tougher public stance on Iran. ElBaradei resisted until 2008, when former IAEA officials said he finally caved.

"He had had faith in the Iranians that they were ready to resolve their problems but didn't know how to do it," Heinonen told Reuters. "I think he lost his illusions in January 2008.

He didn't go back (to Tehran) afterwards and his line on Iran hardened."

ElBaradei's hands-on approach to the inspection reports was not the only thing that annoyed Washington.

The hawkish U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for arms control, John Bolton, dismissed French, British and German efforts to negotiate with Iran as a waste of time and launched a behind-the-scenes campaign to prevent ElBaradei from winning a third four-year term at the helm of the IAEA.

In late 2004, the Washington Post reported that ElBaradei's phones had been bugged and U.S. officials were poring over the intercepts looking for statements that could be used to oust him.

Some of those intercepts were later shown to Reuters in Vienna by intelligence officials. Rather than showing collusion with Iran, the transcripts proved little more than that ElBaradei was doing his job by speaking with the Iranians about their nuclear program.

Bolton's efforts to oust ElBaradei failed. The Egyptian's third term was unanimously confirmed in 2005 when all 35 members of the IAEA board -- including the United States -- voted for him. Several months later he and the IAEA received the Nobel Peace prize for what the Nobel committee said was "their efforts to prevent nuclear energy from being used for military purposes and to ensure that nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is used in the safest possible way."

But the real reason ElBaradei and the IAEA received the award, agency officials and diplomats said, was his refusal to back down in the face of intense U.S. pressure to support the Bush administration's erroneous allegations about Iraq's nuclear program.

YES WE CAN?

ELBARADEI SAID THE IRAQ experience taught him the importance of "playing by the rules and complying with international law." But it also made him an internationally

recognized personality. He became increasingly confident in front of television cameras and was regularly featured on CNN and other television channels.

"He became a quote machine," one diplomat said. "He really became media savvy. It was exactly what he needed. He does have an ego and the media helped feed it."

Bolton remains sharply critical of ElBaradei. He told Reuters that ElBaradei's approach to Iran was evidence of a profoundly "anti-American" attitude and proof that he cannot be trusted.

"He altered the Iran reports," Bolton said, adding that once the IAEA finally referred Iran's case to the Security Council in 2006, ElBaradei tried to undermine the council after it imposed sanctions on Tehran for refusing to halt its uranium enrichment work.

"He proposed deals with Iran that would have undercut the U.N. Security Council resolutions as if they didn't exist," he added.

In his upcoming memoir "Age of Deception," rushed to print months early because of the

news in Egypt, ElBaradei pulls no punches in his description of Bolton, who he writes was his "ideological opposite, a champion of 'us-versus-them' foreign policy; he opposed multilateral diplomacy and consistently worked behind the scenes to discredit the IAEA, often blocking efforts to resolve nuclear proliferation issues peacefully. He strove to undermine everything that I stood for."

ElBaradei denies being anti-American and makes no apologies for his approach to Iran. He points to the events leading up to the Iraq invasion when the New York Times and other U.S. media outlets ran hyped-up articles citing unnamed intelligence sources that claimed that Iraq had huge stockpiles of WMD around the country, reports that were later shown to be false.

"I saw that the media, despite being called independent, how easily it could be manipulated," ElBaradei told Reuters. "I saw that in Iraq, and I went to great lengths in Iran to ensure that the media would not be manipulated with the story."

People who worked closely with ElBaradei defend his approach to Iran. One described him as "extra scrupulous" but determined to persuade Tehran to comply with its obligations not to develop nuclear weapons.

ElBaradei's relations with Washington improved in the last year of the Bush administration, though people close to him at the time said he was pleased to see the Republicans voted out of office and overjoyed when Barack Obama won the White House.

When Mubarak resigned on Friday and handed all powers to a military council, ElBaradei told Reuters it was the "greatest day" of his life. Asked if he was going to run for the presidency, he said: "The issue is not on my mind. I have lived enough and am happy to see Egypt liberated."

(Additional reporting by Jonathan Wright in Cairo, Arshad Mohammed in Washington and Mark Heinrich in London; Editing by Simon Robinson)



CELEBRATION: A man waves an Egyptian flag from a car while celebrating the resignation of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak on the Edgware Road in London February 11, 2011. **REUTERS/ LUKE MACGREGOR**

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COVER PHOTO: Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the U.N. nuclear agency, talks during an interview with Reuters at his villa February 27, 2010. **REUTERS/ASMAA WAGUIH**