

*Title: Egypt - Saudi Cooperation to Excel - ICT Minister*  
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In the first visit by an Egyptian official to Saudi Arabia since the ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi on July 3, 2013, Minister of Communications and Information Technology Atef Helmy visited Saudi Arabia earlier this week in the context of improving relations and cooperation between the two countries.

In an exclusive interview with *Asharq Al-Awsat* in Cairo before the historic visit, Helmy stated that he intended to secure greater collaboration between Cairo and Riyadh, beginning with cooperation on a government level.

Atef Helmy—who has worked in the technology world for decades—took up his ministerial portfolio under former President Mohamed Mursi. Helmy began work as Egypt’s Minister of Communications and Information Technology on January 6, 2013. He tendered his resignation on July 1, 2013, “for the sake of the nation” before returning to work for the current military-backed transitional government led by Dr. Hazem El-Beblawi.

The following interview has been edited for length.

***Asharq Al-Awsat*: Why did you resign from the Mursi-backed Qandil government? Then, following Mursi’s ouster, why did you return to your ministerial position under a military-backed Beblawi government?**

Atef Helmy: Firstly, let me say that I have yet to address this issue with anyone in the media. [I returned] because I believe that every phase has its own requirements. Therefore, at the end of the most recent phase after I had performed my duty, I arrived at certain conclusions that continuing [in government] would not be in my best interest. This is a brief summary, but I accepted the position as Minister of Communication and Information Technology, and then resigned for the sake of the country. I believe that this response conveys a lot.

**Q: What do you say to those who view Mursi’s ouster as a military coup?**

I emphasize that what happened was by all measurements a revolution, because coups are led by the military. What actually happened was that on June 30 millions of Egyptians took to the streets simultaneously in all of Egypt’s governorates. It is not possible to interpret this, in any way, as a coup. Before June 30, 2013, there was communication between the military and the Mursi government regarding actions necessary to meet the will of the people. Therefore I do not believe that there was a coup orchestrating the whole uprising. I also believe that if the people had not taken to the streets on June 30, there would not have been any change at all, and there would have been any chance—not even one in a million—of the military taking any action.

**Q: You are the first Egyptian minister to visit Saudi Arabic since June 30, does your visit only concern cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the communications sector, or does the trip represent the Egyptian government’s intention to address other aspects of bilateral cooperation?**

I want to say that sometimes destiny brings various factors together which heave meaningful results. In this case, this ultimately resulted in an Egyptian Minister of Communications and Information Technology visiting Saudi Arabia after a historical situation led Riyadh to stand beside the Egyptian people. Therefore, this places a lot of importance on the timing of the visit. Technology has become a language of convergence between the people of the world, in addition to a means of communication between two brotherly peoples.

**Q: What will be the message from the Saudi side?**

To be clear, the primary message of this trip is a message of respect, appreciation, and love from Egypt's government and people to our brothers in Saudi Arabia, and one of honor and appreciation for the historic position taken by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The secondary message focuses on framing cooperation between the two ministries of communication and information technology in, including with regard to the public interest, as well as the interpretation of some of the topics that were discussed in the Conference of Arab Ministers this past March. There is a mutual desire between Saudi Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Mohamed Mulla, and myself, for greater cooperation on a government level, in addition to cooperation between other institutions.

**Q: Regarding the communications sector in Egypt, how has it weathered the often tense political situation in the country over the past two years and more?**

In spite of everything that has happened, Egypt's communications sector is functioning and progressing normally with the sector demonstrating promising prospects for the future. The system is managed efficiently and professionally, with a clear strategy and methodology. It operates as a market in terms of identifying programs, and uses performance indicators and quality measures in its operation. I think that all of these mechanics are crucial to the success of any institution. The communications sector also distinguishes itself through harmonious cooperation among all its business partners, which leads to a coherent strategy reflective of the hopes and aspirations of all [its customers and service providers]. This cooperation can be translated to programs, projects, and their implementation.

Therefore this sector, despite the challenges that Egypt now faces, continues to grow at a higher rate than that of other sectors. Hopefully the communications and information technology sector will grow at a rate of 5.8-10% this year. This sector also contributes to Egypt's GDP, improving its growth from 3.2% last year to 4.1% this year. We are also committed to creating up to 50,000 direct job opportunities in 2013-2014.

**Q: Egyptians are currently awaiting better access to high speed internet, how do you think this will help Egypt's telecommunications sector?**

There are two important very important discussions currently taking place. This centers on the creation of a digital society, which basically means putting in place a framework through which different sectors in the nation can interact harmoniously, and resettlement and optimization of information technology. In order to achieve this, there must be a basic structure of high speed internet across the country. Studies show that every 10% increase in internet speed has a between 1.3% and 1.5% improvement on GNP. This would also mean new job opportunities and increased investment.

**Q: There is talk about your ministry granting a new license for a fourth mobile phone carrier in Egypt, is this license a new way to create jobs and investment?**

There is no fourth license. Today we have four (telecommunication) operators in the Egyptian market, they are: Telecom Egypt in the area of fixed telephone line services (land lines), and the three other companies in the mobile phone area. We just introduced a principle standard license which allows Telecom Egypt to enter mobile services, and the other companies to use land line services. Therefore this is not a new license, but it is a consolidation of some of the services available to all companies in order to allow them to perform services that reflect the needs of Egyptian citizens.

**Q: In terms of investment in the telecommunications sector, what opportunities are there in this area for Egyptian, Arab, and foreign investors?**

I think that the Egyptian market is very promising, both for Arab and international investors. Today Egypt has achieved a number of goals in exporting information technology services, and it's becoming one of the leading countries in this area internationally. We are approximately one of the top five nations in terms of exporting information technology services, and over the past two years we have improved our basic communications infrastructure through the establishment of a Technology Village in Maadi, southern Cairo. As a result of our spending so much money on developing our human capabilities, in addition to other factors, Egypt is now extremely competitive in this sector. Therefore the Egyptian technology services market is very attractive, evidenced by fact that global companies are not withdrawing from the market in spite of the ongoing situation in the country.

As for local companies, I don't doubt that they have even greater opportunities than companies with foreign investors and I see a huge opportunity for investment in this sector. The other stage involves the communications market in particular, so we have begun introducing new services. We have announced another two services, namely

automated tracking and fund transfers through mobile phones. All of these issues open large areas for investors both in pre-existing companies and new companies seeking to enter the Egyptian market.

**Q: There is also interest in a digital technology project focusing on the Suez Canal. What can you tell us about this?**

The plan that we are working on is a medium to long-term plan that has three main goals. The first goal is to achieve a digital community in different parts of the country and make it easily accessible to Egyptian citizens by using a national identification number. The second goal is developing the sector, providing work opportunities for young Egyptians and attracting investors. The third goal is investing in different geographical regions of Egypt and laying 18 nautical telecommunication cables into the country from the Mediterranean and Red Seas. This would see Egypt becoming the country with the second-highest number of nautical telecommunication cables in the world.

Investment in these geographical regions and the laying of new cables will create a digital corridor through the Suez Canal. Attracting international investors and modern technologies like cloud computing will provide Egypt with other additional connections between its north, south, east, and west. Cloud computing will also give Egypt a competitive position globally, ensuring the creation of what we call the “Digital Suez Canal.”

**Q: Social network websites played a role in the “Arab Spring,” but some people are now noting that during this period of change, they are fomenting competition between different political, religious, and ideological views. How is it possible for the telecommunications sector to improve these differences?**

Let’s separate the internet issue into two parts; first: the basics. It is a nation’s responsibility to ensure that affordable high speed internet is available to citizens. The second part is the issue of content, and this is a sensitive issue. We say that everything has its uses whether practical or harmful, and therefore it is not right for someone to interfere regarding internet content, except in some instances relating to issues far outside the realm of telecommunications and information technology. The ministry is not interfering in any way with content, instead we are focusing on very important positive aspects, such as educating our youth and teaching them how best to use the the internet.

**Q: You are at the head of Egypt’s largest institution specializing in telecommunications and information technology, what words would you like to see to the Egyptian and Arab people currently using the internet?**

I would say to them, you are our hope for the future. The Egyptian revolution was carried out by people using technology, and therefore I advise you to focus on developing your abilities. I would also invite the youth to believe in the values of working together and working respectfully. All of these will ensure success.

**Q: Regarding the four channels that are currently blocked and their headquarters closed—one of them being “Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr”—can you confirm that this is because they are not in possession of official licenses?**

Yes, as we said in our address...they do not possess the special licenses required for live broadcast; it is the right of the state to have laws that are respected and abided by. On top of all this, commitment to laws includes protecting everybody’s rights, whether they are service providers or citizens who use the service.