
Interview

Youssef Wali, Egypt's Agriculture Minister

The following is an interview with Egypt's Minister of Agriculture Dr. Youssef Wali. The interview was conducted in Cairo on Dec. 23, 1982.

EIR: We were very impressed by the El Salhia land reclamation project, which we visited last week.

Wali: Unfortunately, certain interest groups in Egypt oppose, to a certain extent, what El Salhia means. However, since being appointed Minister of Agriculture last January, I have given the project my support in order to facilitate the development of the area. The people working on the project are farsighted concerning the future of agriculture in Egypt.

EIR: We would like to know as much as possible about the overall land reclamation programs in Egypt. What we saw in El Salhia was very impressive and the rest of the world must know about it, to give them hope.

Wali: After the 1973 war, there was an increase in the standard of living in Egypt. This increase was also related to the Open Door Policy. There was a large migration of people out of the countryside. There is now a shortage of labor in agriculture, even though the statistics show that there is sufficient labor. So, for the future, we must emphasize labor as a major component of the economy.

In El Salhia, it is the first time we have had such a huge area irrigated with a pivot system. I think that those who are opposed to the project are those who in general are against everything that is new.

Some who oppose land reclamation from an intellectual point of view think that its feasibility must be calculated on the basis of energy consumption. It has been agreed that the pivot irrigation system uses more energy than the sprinkler system, which uses more energy than the drip irrigation, so perhaps when we repeat this project we will use drip irrigation instead of the pivot system.

One of the good things about the Salhia project is that it is the first farm with complete mechanization, for potatoes, tomatoes, maize and so forth. We can set up the same kind

of project in Sudan, where there is no pivot irrigation, no drip irrigation, no sprinkler system. We can take our trained personnel and given them machines to train others.

EIR: Basically, what you are saying is that you can lead all of Africa in agricultural development.

Wali: That's right. It is along the same lines that your magazine has written its recent cover story: "Egypt's Fight to Become the Japan of the Middle East." I agree with that concept. It is a very smart approach to take. We have to fight, though, to become the new Japan. It is not an easy game. Our transformation into a new Japan will not be served to us on a golden platter. We will have to work hard; we must be organized; we will have to avoid mismanagement, to avoid corruption, to avoid miscommunication, to become the Japan of the Middle East. I agree 100 percent with your vision.

The Ministry of Agriculture is now running an experiment with 1,000 acres for rice production. For the first time we have full mechanization for the transplanting and the harvesting of this rice, and we are increasing the production of these 1,000 acres by one ton per acre. That means we can increase the production of one million acres of rice by one million tons, which equals on the international market 2.5 million tons of wheat. Comparing us to Japan is very appropriate, because things are small and limited here in Egypt, like in Japan. Some of the fanatics think that we must have huge collective farms, but this is not necessary. There is equipment that can be handy for the small farmer, like what is done in Japan, in the Philippines, in China, in Thailand, and in Taiwan.

EIR: What are the government's current plans for future land reclamation projects?

Wali: For future land reclamation projects, we have three major areas. First, to increase productivity in old reclaimed land, approximately 912,000 acres. We are trying hard to put this area under the proper cropping system, the proper management, to reach the maximum productivity. We welcome the participation of investors, from the United States, from Europe, from the other Arab countries and even from inside Egypt. Second, we wish to reclaim virgin land. We hope to reclaim 650,000 acres within the current five-year plan. This is 12 times larger than the area of El Salhia. To do this, we are using drip and pivot irrigated cash crops, which will be sold to other Arab countries for hard currency. Third, we have what we call the triangular development approach. We have combinations of countries working together: Egypt, France, and Sudan. We have Germany, Egypt, and Sudan and we have Egypt, Sudan, and multinational companies working together in Sudan, where we have a pilot experiment. We are leasing one million acres, and we have cultivated 75,000 acres in four years.

EIR: How many projects are included in your plan to reclaim 650,000 acres of virgin land?

Wali: It is a lot of projects! In the area of El Salhia, we have no less than 250,000 acres. On the west side, we have another 250,000 acres. The other areas lie within the New Valley and Upper Egypt.

EIR: What is the profitability of these projects?

Wali: The expenses are about 4,000 Egyptian pounds per acre. Profitability is reached within no less than 5 to 6 years, perhaps 10.

EIR: We have been looking at the Qattara Depression project from the standpoint of agricultural development as well as energy. Also, we have been receiving reports over the past year and a half about massive fresh water deposits in various locations in the Western Desert. The estimates we have seen, so far as scientists know, is that this water may last 100 years, but there is the possibility that it may be an underground river.

Wali: I am of the opinion not to contaminate the Qattara Depression with salt water by a canal from the Mediterranean Sea, because the hydrostatic pressure may affect the delta area and the cultivated areas. If we want to use the Qattara Depression for electricity, it is better to fill it with water and use it either for agriculture or for fish.

EIR: Where would you get the fresh water from?

Wali: That is easy. Because we already have the seepage of water from the canals, it can be oriented toward the Qattara Depression. This drainage canal will not exceed 1,000 per million salinity. It is not like the water from the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps we can mix this drainage water with the fresh water from the Nile.

EIR: Earlier you said that people are raising the issue of the energy intensity of the land reclamation projects. Our view of economics is that a successful economy is one that uses a lot of energy, and highly organized forms of energy, and the net measure we use for economic success is how much free energy an economy ultimately creates. In other words, we do not believe that energy saving is an economically successful concept.

Wali: No, you are not right. For any country, any society, any family, there are five major problems: food, energy, population, inflation, and pollution. So it is not a matter of energy, it is energy as related to these four other factors.

EIR: There are international organizations, like the Club of Rome, which are trying to present a pessimistic outlook for the future of the world. And they are trying to apply pressure through various financial instruments to force the world to adopt traditional types of agriculture, which would imply a reduction of world population. *EIR*'s philosophy is that we can improve things qualitatively throughout the developing sector by a massive exportation of technology from the advanced sector.

Wali: I am a believer of the

I am against those of the Club of Rome and others—they are very.

or communist fanaticism—you have to develop a country, you have to make sure that country has food. If people don't have food, they lose hope, they can be disoriented, they eventually lose their independence. I myself am a firm believer in the transfer of technology from the United States.

EIR: California is very similar to Egypt, because the Imperial Valley was developed out of desert.

Wali: That is true. The Imperial Valley is a depression in the desert. We have the same thing here in Egypt, in Fayoum. It is a depression also. It too can become an area for the cultivation of winter vegetables, for lettuce, for all the crops which are grown in the Imperial Valley. It is the same for the artichoke, a Mediterranean crop which is cultivated in California on the basis of very up-to-date knowledge. It can be cultivated here, too, because we have the same ecosystem. Olives—the same ecosystem. Asparagus is an Egyptian vegetable. It is cultivated nowadays in the United States. Egypt is not cultivating asparagus, and Egypt is where it originated!

EIR: Is it your opinion that you are getting enough from the United States or could you use more, in terms of technology?

Wali: I believe that in the United States there are two groups. One wants to help the United States and to help Egypt by making sure that both have very strong agricultural and industrial sectors. These are very wise and farsighted people. At the same time, you have the other group, which thinks that Egypt must only be helped bit by bit, with little pieces of aid just to keep us happy. This approach will only mean failure, and the United States cannot afford another failure in the Middle East after Iran. It would be a disaster, especially since Egypt provides equilibrium to the area.

EIR: In the case of a number of countries, such as Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and virtually every African country, the IMF has posed some very tough conditionalities. The IMF has forced these nations to reduce the size of their development programs, to shut down the investment part of their budgets.

Wali: Mexico now is on its knees, from the United States. Mexico is offering the United States oil for 10 years, for debt payment. However, it is not a matter of the IMF being a magic stick. It is stupid to follow the IMF's orders like the Bible or the Koran. Everything must be discussed. There are many countries that are not directly following what the IMF wants. We in Egypt are following the formula of the IMF, but according to our own environment. For example, we increased the prices of agricultural commodities, but not for sensitive items that could lead to strikes or something that the government cannot contain. Why do that? It's not right. We can move, slowly but surely. And where there's a will, there's a way.