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CAIRO (AP) — After decades of mistrust, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Thursday his country wanted closer relations with Egypt.

He spoke at a news conference in Cairo of forging "comprehensive" and "unfettered" ties, something that if realized could mean a new and powerful alliance that could reshape the turbulent Middle East.

Ahmadinejad's visit to Egypt is the first by an Iranian leader in three decades. He used his three-day stay to try and cement ties while attending an Islamic summit.

Warmer relations could have uncomfortable repercussions for the U.S. and its wealthy Gulf allies, giving Iran a foothold to spread its influence in Egypt — the most populous Arab country with 85 million people.

In turn, Egypt could gain an avenue to influence the fate of Syria, a key ally of Iran, as well as reap economic benefits such as increased tourism and investment.

But it is not clear how far Egypt will go in cozying up to Washington's arch foe Iran.

Former authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak, ousted in Egypt's 2011 uprising, was a key U.S. ally in the Middle East who shared Washington's deep suspicions of Iran.

The warm welcome Ahmadinejad received from President Mohammed Morsi, the Islamist elected after Mubarak, reflected Egypt's attempts to strike an independent foreign policy and reassert its historic regional leadership role.

However, it caused a backlash at home, where some among the mostly Sunni Muslim population resent what they see as Shiite Iran's bid to spread its influence in the Middle East.

Ahmadinejad played down a public admonishment by Egypt's most prominent cleric, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayeb, who warned on Tuesday against Iran against spreading its Shiite faith in the predominantly Sunni Muslim Middle East and demanded that it does not meddle in the affairs of Gulf Arab states.

In a goodwill gesture, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran intends to cancel visa requirements for Egyptian tourists and businessmen.

Iran wants closer ties with Egypt

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Asked whether Iran was prepared to share its nuclear technology with Egypt, Ahmadinejad dodged the question, saying only that his country would have no problem cooperating with Egypt in "technical, technological and scientific" fields.