



Riding the Egyptian-Israeli Roller Coaster 2011–2015

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Over the past four years, Egypt's relations with Israel have withstood a series of shocks. Amid unprecedented regional turmoil, the survival of the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty—which still anchors a relationship that has supported Arab-Israeli peacemaking for a generation—has received few headlines and perhaps even been taken for granted. Yet, at several points, the possibility of collapse and even confrontation was very real.

Given such a backdrop, this paper reviews the course of Egypt-Israel relations after the February 2011 fall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. It thus includes the difficult year under Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi followed by the marked improvement spurred by the Egyptian army's intervention and the election of former defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as president. Notwithstanding the improved strategic relationship under Sisi, Egyptian popular attitudes toward Israel remain predominantly hostile. Without progress toward the establishment of a Palestinian state, a significant warming of Egyptian popular sentiment will be unlikely. Nonetheless, strong Egyptian antipathy toward Hamas, support for the military's hardline position on Gaza, and Sisi's repeated public statements defending the relationship with Israel may encourage a more moderate, realistic Egyptian attitude. One sign of this realism can be found in the relative lack of public opposition to Egyptian statements of interest in buying natural gas from Israel's new offshore fields. Other

indications include new Egyptian television programs that sympathetically portray Egypt's now-vanished Jewish community and some TV commentators' argument for the benefits of normal relations with Israel. Continued progress, though, will depend on how events unfold in the next few years.

In a little-reported speech at the Davos Economic Forum in January 2015, President Sisi upheld Egypt-Israel relations as a model for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. In sharp contrast to senior Egyptian officials' traditionally grudging acknowledgment of the peace treaty, Sisi declared, "Nobody could tell what was going on in President Anwar Sadat's mind when he proposed his vision for peace...But the years that have passed have proven the accuracy and genius nature of his vision." Far from hiding his contacts with Israeli leaders, Sisi has commented to Western journalists, including the *Washington Post's* Lally Weymouth on March 12, 2015, that he often speaks by phone with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu about the

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potential for regional peace, among other issues. Before U.S. president Barack Obama's decision to resume U.S. military assistance to Egypt, Egyptian generals frequently commented to American visitors that Israel understood Egypt's security threats in the Sinai Peninsula better than their U.S. counterparts. Sisi personally emphasized the same case about cooperation with Israel during an October 2014 sideline meeting arranged by the Egyptian embassy with a group of influential Americans at UN General Assembly, as reported informally by Ambassador Dennis Ross. While this invidious comparison may have been meant to score rhetorical points, it nonetheless acknowledged the positive impact on Egyptian military attitudes of Israeli support for Egypt's counterterrorism campaign in Sinai.

The views expressed by Sisi and his military colleagues contrast sharply with Egyptian official rhetoric during Mohamed Morsi's presidency. Initially, in a June 25, 2012, statement on Radio Sawa, Morsi announced that he would commence a systematic review of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty to "achieve the interests of Egypt and Palestine first." Morsi said Egypt would maintain a "counterpart policy" (*siyasah nadiya*) with Israel because "Egypt is not less than Israel." Despite the vagueness of Morsi's language, *nadiya* implies antagonist as well as counterpart, suggesting he chose his words carefully. Morsi and his advisors repeatedly stated that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood leadership would respect Egypt's international commitments, a way of signaling to Washington, without mentioning Israel directly, that it did not intend to abrogate the peace treaty.

Post-Mubarak Shocks

After Mubarak's fall in February 2011, Egypt-Israel relations experienced a series of shocks. On August 18, Sinai-based terrorists crossed into Israel north of Eilat and killed eight Israelis. In retaliation, Israeli helicopters fired on targets inside Egyptian territory, reportedly killing three Egyptian police at a border post. (A joint Israel-Egypt investigation of the events was later conducted, but the results were never publicized.) Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak later expressed regret over the Egyptian losses and stressed that Israel had not intended to kill Egyptian police. Nevertheless, the incident infuriated Egyptians, leading to daily demonstrations near the Israeli embassy, located on the top floors of a Giza high-rise.

On September 9, on a Nile bridge adjacent to the embassy, an assembled crowd used sledge hammers to smash a concrete wall, built only days earlier by the Giza governor to prevent demonstrators from approaching the embassy from the bridge. In the prevailing post-Mubarak atmosphere, the police simply stood by while a parallel crowd swelled in the streets below. The embassy itself was closed, given that it was a Saturday, and only a small Israeli security team protected the premises. The situation was explosive, and Israeli ambassador Itzhak Levanon tried unsuccessfully to convince the Egyptian authorities to intervene as the crowds grew increasingly agitated. Levanon called U.S. ambassador Anne Patterson and asked for urgent assistance. A multichannel diplomatic effort ensued, whereby Patterson communicated with both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Egyptian military, U.S. secretary of defense Leon Panetta communicated with his Egyptian counterpart, Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, and U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton communicated with Egyptian foreign minister Mohamed Kamel Amr. The author, meanwhile, maintained phone contact with Ambassador Levanon.

Faced with these appeals, as demonstrators sought access to the embassy office from the lower floors as well as from the roof, the Egyptians appeared surprised by the scale and aggressiveness of the protestors, and insisted for hours that they could not use force to disperse them. Later that night, Ambassador Levanon conveyed that the demonstrators had reached the embassy's hard door and were using metal bars to pry it open. He said he had ordered the Israeli security personnel inside to shoot to kill if anyone broke in. Meanwhile, the embassy crowd torched several police vans and even burned vehicles belonging to the nearby Saudi Arabian embassy. Egyptian television provided live coverage of looters throwing documents off the Israeli embassy's entrance-level balcony. Finally, close to midnight, the Egyptians did the right thing and sent a special forces contingent, which cleared the area using minimal force. The U.S. embassy then mediated between the Egyptians and the Israeli security team, whose members wanted assurances that they could safely open the hard door and exit the building. Meanwhile, Egypt permitted Israeli aircraft to land at Cairo International Airport and to eventually evacuate embassy staff and dependents. This move came amid

requests by the Egyptian foreign minister not to evacuate the embassy. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, however, had instructed Levanon to carry out the full evacuation. Shortly before dawn, Levanon told Patterson that he had instructed his deputy and a small security team to stay behind to keep the embassy officially open. Patterson offered her residence as a safe haven for the Israeli team until security could be restored, an offer Levanon gratefully accepted. The incident thus ended without loss of life, despite never-substantiated claims that the Egyptian special forces raid had killed several demonstrators. The complete closure of the Israeli diplomatic mission was also averted. But questions lingered over the future of the bilateral relationship.

Once the intense emotions generated by the event had cooled, both countries decided it was in their shared interest to preserve an Israeli diplomatic presence in Cairo. After carefully studying the security situation following the embassy's evacuation, Israel chose to maintain a low-key diplomatic presence, with the ambassador flying in for several days a week and operating out of his official residence. Negotiations thus began over finding a suitably secure new location for the Israeli embassy. In addition, Levanon was replaced by Ambassador Yaakov Amitai, who tried to rebuild contacts with his Egyptian counterparts. The search for a suitable site having now been resolved, Amitai and his successor, Haim Koren, have repeatedly stressed to U.S. officials that the Egyptian side showed goodwill and a desire to support the reopening of the embassy. The slowness of the process, lasting some four years, appears to reflect complex talks on necessary security measures and the Israeli search for cooperative landlords rather than Egyptian foot-dragging.

In October 2011, Egypt's interim military regime, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), apparently decided to resolve two high-profile Israeli prisoner cases before the completion of parliamentary elections, which they saw as possibly further complicating ties with Israel. (Indeed, one of the first debates of the newly elected parliament resulted in a unanimous but nonbinding resolution to expel the Israeli ambassador and withdraw the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv.) On October 18, after years of indirect negotiations involving Hamas, Israel, and various other players, Egyptian mediators successfully secured the release

by Hamas of Israel Defense Forces soldier Gilad Shalit, who had been kidnapped near the Gaza border in 2006. Shalit was released into Egyptian custody and then returned to Israel in return for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. Netanyahu phoned Field Marshal Tantawi to thank him for Egypt's role in Shalit's release. Only a week later, Egypt released U.S.-Israeli dual national Ilan Grapel, a student who had been arrested in June 2011 and accused in the Egyptian media of being a spy. Both the United States and Israel had pressed hard for Grapel's release, but the Egyptians ultimately released him to Israel, which in turn released twenty-five Egyptian residents of the Sinai, most of whom had been convicted of smuggling. At the time of Grapel's release, Israeli embassy officials told their U.S. counterparts that they thought an agreement had also been reached on the release of Ouda Tarabin, an Israeli Bedouin convicted of spying by Egypt and jailed since 2000. Although the actual details remain unclear, Egypt did not release Tarabin, who is completed his fifteen-year sentence and was released in December 2015.

Throughout this sensitive period, Netanyahu imposed a policy banning unauthorized public comments about Egypt by Israeli officials. Given Israeli officials' propensity to speak to the press, the successful imposition of this policy was no mean achievement. Nor is there much doubt as to the policy's wisdom, given that every Israeli pronouncement about Egypt would inevitably have been played up and picked apart by an Egyptian media that had become both hypernationalistic and deeply sensitive to foreign criticism after Mubarak's fall.

The next test of the relationship was the June 24, 2012, election as president of senior Muslim Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi. While foreign policy was not a primary issue during the two-stage campaign, most of the candidates, including Morsi, made public statements indicating that they intended to "review" the peace treaty with Israel after the elections. This reflected a widespread belief among Egyptians that the treaty's security annexes imposed limitations on the exercise of Egyptian sovereignty in the Sinai Peninsula through restrictions on Egyptian military deployments, particularly adjacent to Israel and Gaza. The presidential candidates either did not know or did not care to acknowledge that the peace treaty annex included a mechanism

to review Egyptian requests to introduce additional military forces into Sinai. In fact, Israel had already agreed to augmented deployments of Egyptian military forces, including armor, in response to the increasingly visible presence of Egyptian and Palestinian jihadist militants in Sinai.

The peace treaty's provisions on Sinai soon came into play. On August 5, 2012, members of a jihadist organization that reportedly had moved into Sinai from Gaza slaughtered sixteen Egyptian policemen who were breaking their Ramadan fast near the Kerem Shalom border crossing with Israel. In the ensuing series of clashes, the jihadists were wiped out by Israeli and Egyptian forces on both sides of the border, but Egypt's defense establishment was deeply shocked and embarrassed by the incident. President Morsi fired General Intelligence director Murad Muwafi, and then removed Tantawi from the defense minister position, which he had held for twenty years, replacing him with the Military Intelligence director, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, a much younger and less senior officer. In his new position, Sisi appeared determined to adopt a more aggressive military posture in Sinai, and sent in armor and helicopter contingents without advance coordination with Israel. The Israelis did not complain publicly, but the story was leaked to the *Haaretz* newspaper, which ran an August 16, 2012, story headlined "Egypt Deployed Troops in Sinai without Israel's Prior Approval." While Israel did not deem the limited presence of Egyptian tanks in the Rafah area a military threat, the deployment triggered a quiet crisis given Morsi's refusal to engage Israelis directly and statements by Egyptian officials that Morsi was considering amending the peace treaty to provide Egypt with "full sovereignty" over Sinai.

Even as David Satterfield, director-general of the Multinational Force and Observers, was flying to Cairo with Israeli authorization for the Egyptian tanks to stay—as long as a retroactive request was made through Satterfield for their presence—Sisi withdrew them unilaterally. Despite this withdrawal, the peace treaty mechanism for resolving conflicts had been activated. Later, after a prolonged period during which Sisi declined to talk by phone with his Israeli counterpart, the Egyptian defense minister reportedly sealed the new understanding in a conversation with Barak. The sensitivity of this process, meanwhile, centered on Egyptian civilian

perceptions that the peace treaty undermined Egypt's sovereignty in Sinai, and as a newly appointed defense minister, Sisi maneuvered carefully to avoid any appearance of giving in to Israeli demands. The outcome, however, set the stage for a new strategic understanding between the two countries' defense establishments, an understanding that has grown steadily as the nature of the Sinai jihadist threat has become clearer.

The relationship's next test took place during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense against the Hamas-led regime in Gaza, which began November 14, 2012. President Morsi had already shown support for Hamas at the expense of its Palestinian Authority (PA) rivals, telling U.S. officials that he considered Hamas to be the Palestinians' true leadership. As Israeli airstrikes on Gaza continued, Morsi sent his prime minister to Gaza in a show of support for Hamas and recalled the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv. Even as Egypt sought to mediate a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, Morsi made clear which side he supported. On November 16, the Egyptian president was quoted by Al-Shorouk as "warning those who commit aggression against Gaza of the consequences of their actions, noting that Gaza is no longer alone as it was in the past, and it is incumbent on the aggressors to know that they will pay a high price if they continue in their aggression." One prominent backer of Morsi's Gaza position was then Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who floated the idea in a November 17 speech at Cairo University (as reported in *al-Masry al-Youm*) of a Turkish-Egyptian alliance that would maintain regional peace, presumably by constraining Israel. Indeed, Hillary Clinton wrote in her recent memoir, *Hard Choices*, of concern in Washington about the Egyptian reaction if Israel launched a ground operation into Gaza (pp. 480–87). When Clinton arrived in Cairo on November 21 to negotiate a ceasefire, she writes, she came with the text of a Netanyahu-approved ceasefire agreement, which she was authorized to present to the Egyptians on Israel's behalf. As Clinton describes in her book, Morsi and his advisors negotiated the ceasefire with Hamas while she and her team remained in contact with the Israelis. When the ceasefire was achieved, Morsi gained considerable credit in Washington for his moderating role, but in retrospect he appears to have effectively played the role of Hamas proxy, leaving most of the engagement with the Israeli

side to the United States. This offered a contrast to Israel-Hamas conflicts in the late Mubarak period, during which Egyptian intelligence negotiated with both Hamas and Israel to achieve temporary truces.

In the final months of Morsi's rule, the U.S. embassy made several unsuccessful attempts to open a channel between the Egyptian presidency and the Israeli ambassador. The official Egyptian position was that the Israeli ambassador had a channel through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and that this was sufficient to manage the relationship. Morsi similarly refused to return the Egyptian ambassador to Tel Aviv. At a farewell lunch at the Foreign Ministry in honor of Ambassador Amitai, a senior Egyptian official stated that "public opinion" would not allow the government to return the ambassador until Israel made a significant concession to the Palestinians such as freezing settlements or opening the border crossings with Gaza.

Rising Strategic Cooperation under Sisi

During the first half of 2013, Egyptian popular opposition to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood grew in intensity, culminating in June 30 mass street demonstrations calling for Morsi to step down. After a series of warnings from Sisi, the army intervened on July 3, arresting Morsi and his presidential advisors as well as most of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership. Sisi formed a transitional government headed by Supreme Constitutional Court chief justice Adly Mansour until a new constitution could be drafted and presidential elections held. Israel clearly welcomed Morsi's fall and Sisi's corresponding rise, but the extent of the transformation only became evident following an armed jihadist terrorist campaign against Egyptian security forces in Sinai. By September 2013, the Egyptian army had committed itself to a sustained counterterrorism campaign in Sinai, which included destroying most of the tunnels connecting northern Sinai to Gaza, a measure Israel had demanded without much effect ever since Hamas took over Gaza in 2007. Israel provided quiet but extensive assistance, approving the deployment of Egyptian armor and helicopters even close to the border and sharing intelligence on jihadist networks and movements. In spring 2014 conversations with U.S. officials, senior Egyptian military commanders expressed their appreciation for Israel's cooperation, at

times even suggesting hostility between the two countries had passed and a new, trusting relationship was being established. As Sisi noted to the *Post's* Lally Weymouth on March 12, 2015, "One example that reflects the magnitude of trust and confidence between the two parties is that the treaty does not allow Egyptian troops in the middle and eastern sections of the Sinai—the area that overlooks the joint border. But the Israelis said it was fine to have Egyptian troops in those areas. This means the hostile mood and skepticism have diminished with peace with Israel..."

The new Egyptian regime, meanwhile, was deeply suspicious of Hamas, which it saw as the armed branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. An Egyptian court declared Hamas a terrorist organization, and Egyptian officials told the media that Hamas was actively supporting Sinai-based terrorists. The Egyptian media, in turn, picked up and amplified the anti-Hamas message. Hamas officials in Gaza denied the Egyptian accusations, but repeated Hamas-associated statements in support of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood helped confirm the Egyptian narrative in the eyes of the Egyptian public. Egyptian popular and official hostility to Hamas was a major factor in producing a coordinated Israel-Egypt effort to resolve the latest outbreak of Gaza hostilities, in July 2014.

This round of violence, breaking the November 2012 ceasefire negotiated by Secretary Clinton and President Morsi, began July 8, when heightened Israel-Hamas tensions led to intensifying rocket launches into Israel followed by a new campaign of Israeli airstrikes, termed Operation Protective Edge. Although Hamas claimed that Israel had been the first violator, Hamas itself had likely done so in an attempt to break out of its isolation following Egypt's policy shift under Sisi. Among the repercussions of this policy shift, the tunnels' destruction cut off the flow of much-needed smuggling profits to Hamas. During Morsi's presidency, Hamas had expanded its official presence in Cairo and Hamas leaders were frequent guests at the presidential palace. By July 2014, however, Hamas leaders were no longer welcome in Cairo and the organization's Cairo-based representative, Mousa Abu Marzouk, was limited to contacts with the General Intelligence Directorate. Based on their conviction that Hamas was supporting the Sinai jihadists, Egypt largely closed the Rafah crossing

with Gaza to human traffic, adding significantly to Gaza's isolation.

After several days of Israeli airstrikes, Egypt presented a ceasefire proposal essentially identical to the November 2012 agreement. Israel quickly accepted the proposal, which the Egyptians appear to have discussed with the Israelis in advance. Hamas, however, rejected the offer, instead demanding a number of Israeli concessions, including the opening of a sea- and airport in Gaza, the release of Hamas prisoners, and the complete opening of the border crossings. On July 17, following its rejection of Hamas's demands, Israel widened the campaign with a major ground invasion, spurred by the discovery of a tunnel network from Gaza into Israel and armed incursions by Hamas fighters through some of the tunnels. In contrast to Morsi's earlier rhetoric and that of his cabinet ministers about "Israeli aggression," this time Egypt stuck to its ceasefire proposal and Egyptian officials blamed Hamas for not accepting it. Even as Gaza's civilian death toll and the massive destruction of civilian infrastructure mounted, Egypt officially maintained a balanced position. Noteworthy was the absence of popular demonstrations in support of the Palestinians. While a law adopted by the government restricted and arguably deterred street demonstrations, a pro-Hamas gathering called by the Muslim Brotherhood attracted very limited participation.

Although the Egyptians insisted that Hamas would accept the ceasefire once they realized no better option existed, the United States became increasingly concerned about the scale of destruction and frustrated by what they saw as Egypt's passivity. John Kerry, who became secretary of state in early 2013, made a series of visits to Egypt and Israel aimed at brokering a deal acceptable to Israel and Hamas. Both the Egyptian and Israeli governments objected to U.S. efforts to enlist Qatar and Turkey as additional channels to Hamas, arguing that rather than seeking to end the conflict the Qataris and Turks were encouraging Hamas to continue fighting in order to gain a better outcome. Once again, the scope of the transformation of Egypt-Israel security calculations could not have been more obvious. The fighting continued until August 26, when Hamas finally accepted Egypt's ceasefire proposal. The Egyptians hoped the next stage would involve returned

control of the Gaza crossings to Mahmoud Abbas's PA, which would facilitate reconstruction and allow Israel to lift many restrictions, but the Hamas-Fatah rivalry and mistrust remained so intense that Abbas shied away from a new PA role in Gaza. Egyptian hostility to Hamas also remains strong.

Egyptian Views of Israel: Mixed Prospects

Despite the new strategic cooperation, which largely occurs behind the scenes, Egyptian popular attitudes toward Israel remain overwhelmingly negative. Few Israelis visit Egypt, and those who do are often carefully watched by the security services, while the Egyptian government, social pressures, and popular hostility continue to impede Egyptian visits to Israel. An Egyptian actor recently made a YouTube video about his experiences dressing as an ultraorthodox Jew and asking passersby for directions to a synagogue. Although one man tells him Jews are "good people," most other Egyptians he encounters react angrily and push him away. An Israeli journalist who visited Cairo regularly when Mubarak was in power recently described her experience attending a play at a Cairo theater: after being interrogated by security officers, who held up the play's opening to do so, the playwright announced that the play would not be performed as long as an Israeli was in the audience—so the journalist left.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, other signs point to a brighter trajectory, including expressed support by Egyptian intellectuals for normal relations with Israel on highly popular television talk shows, as well as TV programs evoking nostalgia for the days when Jews were part of Egyptian urban society, especially in Cairo and Alexandria. Such programs contrast sharply with more typical Egyptian TV portrayals of Jews and Israelis as villainous enemies. Moreover, diplomatic relations have improved, as a new Egyptian ambassador has been appointed to Tel Aviv, and a new Israeli embassy has opened in Cairo.

An interesting example of the changing nature of the relationship, also alluded to before, involves the sale of natural gas. A Mubarak-era agreement to provide Egyptian gas to Israel via a Sinai pipeline was the target of many allegations that the deal enriched corrupt Egyptian businessmen, who sold the gas to Israel

well below market price and skimmed the proceeds. As Egypt faced an increasingly severe energy shortage, complaints intensified against the sale of Egyptian gas abroad and particularly to Israel. The Sinai pipeline was repeatedly sabotaged after Mubarak's fall, Egypt failed to deliver on its commitments to supply the gas, and the project's shareholders, only some of them Israelis, stopped payment. Egypt then unilaterally abrogated the agreement in April 2012, resulting in multibillion-dollar lawsuits and international arbitration. But in February 2015, *al-Masry al-Youm* reported that a settlement had been agreed upon and the arbitration would be dropped. In addition to an Egyptian deal with Cyprus to import natural gas, a March 19 *Haaretz* story reported on an agreement to sell \$1.2 billion in gas from the offshore Israeli Tamar field to a private group of Egyptian investors. Other ideas under discussion include piping gas from Tamar to Egyptian liquefaction plants for resale to Europe. Notable here is the lack of significant popular opposition to the idea of Egypt purchasing Israeli gas. Along with the expansion of the Egypt-based Qualifying Industrial Zones, which export goods, mostly but not exclusively textiles, with a minimum percentage of Israeli content to the U.S. market duty-free, a thriving energy market may help anchor Egypt-Israel peace for the coming years.

Conclusions

In reviewing the Egypt-Israel relationship since February 2011, one cannot help noting its resilience following a series of shocks. Also clear, however, is that Egypt's commitment to the relationship has wavered, an unsurprising reality given the country's post-Mubarak atmosphere. For its part, the SCAF was intermittently paralyzed by its overarching desire to avoid conflict with politically mobilized elements of the public. Morsi's support for Hamas, which he shared with Turkey's Erdogan, along with his refusal to engage Israel directly, removed an essential previous moderating element in the event of a crisis in Gaza or Sinai. Only when Sisi took power did the relationship stabilize and a new era of strategic cooperation begin, although whether Sisi's overt support for working with Israel will gain broader Egyptian public acceptance cannot yet be assessed. Should Israeli-Palestinian negotiations—or even a renewed effort to tackle the security, humanitarian, and economic challenges posed by Gaza—resume, both Israel and the Palestinians will need Egypt as an active partner. With much of the Middle East state system imploding, the United States and its regional allies should recognize and renew their commitment to supporting a strong Egypt-Israel relationship as a pillar of regional peace and stability rather than assuming it will simply continue based on the two countries' mutual interest.

