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Egypt's October War Should no Longer Be the State's Legacy

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Nov 10, 2020

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Brief Analysis

In a [speech](#) last week, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi argued for Muslims worldwide to celebrate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad by being polite like the Prophet and taking the example of his good ethics toward “all the others.” This appeared to be an implicit message on Muslim-Jewish relations during a time when normalization has made those and Arab-Israeli relations increasingly visible. The statement aligned with Sisi’s public acceptance of the Abraham Accords. Yet some of Sisi regime’s internal messaging broadcasted to the Egyptian public during the month of October, via state media and Al-Azhar, seemed to have a different tone regarding their Jewish neighbors.

During the Mubarak years, the month of October was consistently glorified by the Egyptian state and its media machine in commemoration of “winning” the war against Israel. Articles and TV anchors would mark the historical win and use the event as a means of spreading nationalist ideas among the public, while movies were broadcast to internalize the war in the Egyptian collective memory. Indeed, Mubarak’s legitimacy over the course of three decades stemmed from being the Air Force Chief during the Yom Kippur war.

This year, during the annual [October 6 speech](#), President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi did not mention Israel by name. He did, however, stress the historical significance of the war as it restored the dignity of the Egyptian army and motivating the public to look forward to the future for the development their country.

State-owned media similarly refrained from calling Israel an enemy, but did emphasize the importance of winning the war against the “Israeli counterpart.” For instance, the official state TV [Channel Akhbar Masr](#) encouraged the Egyptian public to learn from the war by combating terrorism and international conspiracies.

In contrast, Egyptian Army spokesman [Tamr Mohamed Al-Rifa’ai](#) posted a documentary film on Twitter produced by

the Egyptian Navy to celebrate its 53rd anniversary on October 21, in which Israel was still shown as an enemy being attacked by Egyptian vessels. Similarly, private media owned by regime-aligned businessmen also referred to Israel as “the enemy.” [Ahmed Mousa](#) of Sada El-Balad TV station hosted a veteran Egyptian combat soldier to talk about his experiences killing Israeli soldiers. On-air, the government-backed host offered pants with the blood of a deceased Israeli soldier to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a souvenir.

In the same vein, Al-Azhar University organized an exhibition for engineering students, where tens of them participated alongside their professors to demonstrate stories of the October War. [Dr. Mohamed Al-Mahrsawi](#), head of the of the university, glorified the importance of this exhibition as a way to help students who did not live the war become inspired by it and feel the momentum that needs to be passed between generations.

On a different note, a famous Egyptian [YouTuber](#) went out on the streets of Cairo randomly interviewing young Egyptians about basic facts of the October War only to find out that many youngsters seemed not to know much about it except for a severe hatred toward their Jewish neighbors.

In short, the October War—and Israel’s role in that narrative as the enemy—is still a major feature of state messaging to the Egyptian public. After all, Israel is an easy means of mobilizing the public—it worked under Mubarak, and Sisi likely sees no reason to change this formula. Yet President Sisi does not have the same legitimacy from the war as some of his predecessors, as he has never fought against Israel.

Even so, a [segment of his regime](#) is convinced that the Jewish state should be the prime target of domestic propaganda. It is the same force that pushed for cold peace during Mubarak’s era. They believe that the Sisi regime cannot stay in power without a real enemy against which to mobilize the public. Under this view, neither the threats coming from Libya nor terrorists in [Sinai](#) are adequate enemies, especially since the latter are mostly Egyptians. Hence, they look for non-Egyptians to blame such as Israel and Western powers. Even though regional powers such as Qatar and Turkey are currently also fulfilling the role of the foreign enemy, there is a conviction that Israel should remain in the picture.

After all, Israel is an easy target after its many wars with Egypt and the public consensus in Egypt that nobody can doubt Israel’s bad intentions against the country. So, even if not all Egyptian officials are convinced by the strategy of continuing to emphasize enmity against Israel, it makes for an easy story to sell to the public. This is especially the case when enemies of the regime are accusing the regime of being an agent of Israel. The officials’ strategy of encouraging public anti-Israel sentiment allows for a counter-narrative that Sisi’s oppositionists are actually Israeli agents, and this counter-narrative helps insulate the regime against accusations of pro-Israel alignment. Qatar is, for instance, being labeled as the “Israel of the Gulf.”

The utility of this strategy, though, is likely to decrease with time. Egyptian security officials are likely to struggle with disseminating this narrative to younger generations; in the age of social media, young Egyptians have unprecedented access to western sources on the war, and may well start doubting the official narrative of an unequivocal Egyptian win.

There is also a huge suspicion of Israel’s public diplomacy to the Arab world through its Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages—there, Israeli officials and activists have access to the Egyptian street directly. These pages have created access to Israeli viewpoints that were impossible in times when Israel’s only avenue to an Egyptian audience was through a yearly interview of Mubarak with an Israeli journalist, whom the former President did not hesitate to embarrass in front of his audience.

On the one hand, the strategic relationship between Egypt and Israel has borne fruits: Egypt has helped navigate potential unrest in Gaza while serving as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, and Israel has aided Egyptian efforts to deter terrorism in the Sinai. Yet the ongoing importance of the October War in institutional memory suggests that

Egypt is unlikely to follow suit in the near term with any echoing of the style of warm normalization with Israel that its Gulf allies are pioneering.

Egypt's anti-normalization camp—whether government officials or intellectuals—remains strong, and the state has incentives to preserve a cold peace in their ongoing fight with Islamist opponents in the diaspora in Turkey and Qatar that accuse them of being pro-Israel. So while there may be a small pro-normalization camp that would prefer to capitalize on the celebratory atmosphere in the Gulf, such supporters would be unlikely even to suggest such a move out of fear of risking their reputation and political standing—along with their socioeconomic implications.

The United States should therefore be mindful of Egyptian rhetoric on the ground when it comes to involving Egypt in future Israel-Gulf projects, such as the Abraham Accords. Egypt may have demonstrated itself to be a constructive strategic partner on security issues, but it has played the middleman for decades, unable to push Palestinians for a real peace with Israel. Egypt has also been unable to utilize American-sponsored economic deals with Israel such as the QIZs. Egypt never fulfilled the potential of the deal and many Egyptian businessmen cannot benefit from it because of the government restrictions, which raises the question of how they can be trusted as an effective economic player alongside Israel and the Gulf.

If the United States hopes to continue its efforts towards a broader normalization, it should point out the negative effects of messaging on the October War while encouraging and highlighting crucial aspects of Sisi regime opening toward Israel, such as restoring Jewish heritage in the country and the continued security cooperation in Sinai. Ultimately, shifting away from the current internal messaging strategy on Israel would also be good for Egypt. Without this crutch, officials will be encouraged to forge a [new legitimacy](#) for the state based on current realities apart from the legacy of the October War, which has become increasingly distant from the current leadership in any case.



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