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The Bennett-Sisi Meeting: A Rare Chance to Publicly Boost Relations

by [Haisam Hassanein](#)

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Brief Analysis

The welcome visit indicates that Egypt-Israel ties can thrive post-Netanyahu, potentially expanding from the security domain to economic and civil affairs.

P rime Minister Naftali Bennett meets with President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in Sharm al-Sheikh today, making him the first Israeli leader to openly visit Egypt in ten years. Scheduled in response to an invitation delivered last month by Sisi's intelligence chief Abbas Kamel, the summit is expected to cover a lengthy agenda that includes economic cooperation (mainly in the energy sector), Palestinian issues, counterterrorism efforts in Sinai, security challenges in the Red Sea (e.g., the Houthi threat off Yemen's coast), and perhaps even developments in Sudan. Why did Sisi request the meeting, and what does he hope to achieve?

Getting to know the new guy in town. Although former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu reportedly paid a secret trip to Cairo in 2018 to discuss Gaza-related issues, the last official visit by an Israeli leader came in 2011, when Hosni Mubarak was still president. Some Israeli observers had expected Bennett and Sisi's first encounter to occur at the UN General Assembly, where Netanyahu and Sisi met a few times. But Cairo apparently wanted to set a positive tone right away with a new Israeli government whose election platform centered on vociferous opposition to Netanyahu.

Preserving good messaging in Washington. Netanyahu supported Sisi ever since the general helped oust Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, and this support became a strong pillar for Cairo in Washington, particularly under the sympathetic Trump administration. Now that the U.S. and Israeli governments have changed hands,

Egyptian officials are concerned that this pillar might erode. Bennett seems intent on improving Israel's relations with the Democratic Party, which frayed under President Trump. At the same time, the Biden administration will likely [confront Sisi on human rights issues](#) at some point. Cairo therefore seeks Jerusalem's help to better its own image with Democrats. Thus far, Israeli officials have reportedly cautioned the Biden team not to overreact against autocratic tendencies in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, lest it push these partners toward China, Iran, [and Russia](#).

Demonstrating relevance on Iran. Because Tehran's malign influence remains the most pressing regional issue, Cairo has become more involved in related matters as a way of revitalizing its geopolitical prestige. Last month, Sisi became the first Egyptian leader in thirty years to visit Iraq, attending a multilateral conference that aimed to reaffirm Baghdad's place in the moderate Arab axis amid perpetual interference by Iran-backed militias. Cairo has likewise been active in addressing the economic and humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, another country plagued by armed Iranian proxies. In Beirut, for instance, state-affiliated Egyptian contractors have been brokering reconstruction deals, while the Egyptian military has established a field hospital to help with the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health challenges. The two governments have also discussed a deal to deliver natural gas to Lebanon through Jordan and Syria.

Making sure the Abraham Accords do not upstage Camp David. The normalization deals that Israel struck with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and other partners over the past year have shaken Cairo's longstanding status as the main Arab interlocutor with Jerusalem. The celebratory atmosphere surrounding subsequent people-to-people interactions and rapid economic deals were met with distaste among Egyptian pro-government elites, to the point where some engaged in verbal clashes with their Gulf counterparts on social media. In Cairo's view, its 1978 Camp David Accords with Israel were more significant than the Abraham Accords because they ended successive wars. Moreover, according to an October 2020 study by the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies, Cairo is troubled by the fact that Arab neighbors have engaged in such detente while allowing Israel to maintain its qualitative military edge in the region.

Policy Implications

Cairo's trust in Jerusalem has grown significantly in the past ten years, buoyed by high-level military and intelligence cooperation that did not exist during the first three decades of their peace treaty. Unlike other regional actors, Israel has not interfered in Egypt's internal affairs during its weakest moments, instead helping the country with border security, economic issues, and political backing in Washington. For instance, following Kamel's visit in August, the Israeli National Security Council eased travel restrictions to South Sinai and Sharm al-Sheikh in order to help Egypt's desperate tourism sector. In parallel, Sisi's longstanding focus on development and economic improvements has paved the way for bilateral business relations to move to the next level—officials have been discussing plans to [deepen energy cooperation](#), expand direct airline flights, and enlarge the Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) in Egypt, which would create more bilateral trade sectors and jobs.

Even so, question marks persist about key aspects of the relationship. For one, Cairo has yet to address the proliferation of Egyptian television programming that [promotes anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli conspiracies](#) among large Arab audiences at home and abroad—a trend that deviates sharply from Sisi's frequent emphasis on tolerance toward other religions. This Ramadan, for example, a show titled *Counterattack* propagated the notion that Israel has been secretly paying Arab nationals in Europe and the United States to push interfaith dialogue and undermine Egyptian interests. The show was sponsored by the General Intelligence Directorate and claimed to be based on “a true story.” U.S. and Israeli officials should privately broach the existence of such problematic programming with Egyptian intelligence authorities.

Questions surround policy toward Gaza as well. After the May showdown between Hamas and Israel, Sisi pledged to help with Gaza reconstruction and sent trucks full of aid to the territory, but the current status of his offer is unclear.

Israel may oppose additional assistance unless Hamas agrees to return the bodies of slain Israelis—a concession that may itself depend on Jerusalem agreeing to release Palestinian prisoners. With support from the Biden administration, Cairo has brokered quiet talks on these matters but with little progress. Meanwhile, just hours before Bennett and Sisi’s meeting, Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid delivered a speech proposing a new Gaza policy: economic development in exchange for security. The timing of his remarks implied another message—if Gaza reconstruction is going to be real as Lapid suggests, then Egypt will be a key player.

Haisam Hassanein is a Middle East analyst and a former Glazer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖



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