

The Future of Egyptian-Israeli Relations: Cairo More Committed to Peace Than Normalization

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Egypt remains an essential component of any future Palestinian peace process, but the country's deep anti-Israel propaganda is a persistent stumbling block.

According to a recent report in the British *Telegraph*, Israel withdrew its ambassador from Cairo quietly some time ago due to security concerns. Over the many years of exchanging diplomatic missions, while Egyptian diplomatic missions have always enjoyed their stays in Tel Aviv, security concerns have regularly curtailed the Israeli diplomatic missions' movement in Cairo.

Commenting on the Palestinian rhetoric against Israel, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated before his senate confirmation hearing, "Sometimes it takes another generation that's not carrying all that baggage of the past." Three decades ago, president Anwar Sadat stated in his Knesset speech that there was a "psychological barrier [between Egyptians and Israelis] that constituted 70% of the problem." Since that speech, the Egyptian side has been hindering any possibility of breaking the psychological barrier President Sadat spoke of in 1977.

Taking a second look at Egyptian-Israeli relations with the upcoming 38th anniversary of the peace treaty between the two countries, one of the main questions that bewilders observers is why peace has yet to be realized between the two peoples despite four decades since the end of the 1973 war. The question becomes more puzzling considering the high level of security and intelligence cooperation between the two countries with regard to the common security threats they face in Sinai.

While Cairo is making a sincere effort to improve the image of its relationship with Israel, the motivation is improving its standing in Washington, since it sees Israel as the gateway to American policy-makers. Following the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, a rift developed in America-Egypt relations, and Egyptian policy-makers

believe that leveraging relations with the Jewish state could help them in Congress, which they perceive as overtly sympathetic to Israel. Hence it was not truly surprising to see Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry go to Jerusalem, meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and watch a soccer game (a model of how relations between their respective populations should be), and then travel to Washington, DC, to give a speech at the Saban forum.

Observing Egyptian culture closely, including the way the young generation is taught to think about Israel, it becomes clear that the high-level relationship between the two countries would deteriorate should the shared security threats return to the pre-Islamic State level. Simply put, the Egyptian government would not have the incentive to continue building a covert relationship with a country viewed by the majority of Egyptians as the eternal enemy, expansionists desperate to take Sinai back and therefore a main reason to rally around the military.

The shaping of the young Egyptian mind on the subject of Israel starts in school, with the Islamic religious narrative that frames the Jews as traitors. This goes in hand with the media's constant depiction of the Jews as evil people who want to destroy Egypt.

When young people go on to university, where political activism prevails, they become drawn very easily into anti-Israeli propaganda, which overlaps with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The process concludes with conscription to the army, which views Israel as the main enemy.

The main purpose behind all of this is to make sure Egyptians do not desire normalized relations with the Jewish state. Anti-normalization discourse in Egypt derives its power from three fronts: the elite, bureaucracies and military. The first has the strongest influence since it is at the forefront, dominating the media, press and universities. Their rhetoric against the Jewish state is mainly centered on conspiracy theories that aim to spread fear and hate among the masses.

Egypt's elite are divided into two main categories: Islamists and non-Islamists. Islamist elites constantly spread hate messages against the Jews and Israel in their religious sermons, employing religious slogans and stories. What may come as a surprise to many is that the non-Islamists, who dominate Egypt's media circles, are the most vocal in their hatred and animosity toward Israel. Among them are the Nasserists, pan-Arabists, leftists and liberals. Their opposition to and defamation of Israel and Jews is constantly presented in newspapers and TV shows.

Among this group there is a small margin of Hebrew and Israel studies experts who are also divided when it comes to relations with Israel. Some are totally drawn in by the mainstream propaganda, refusing any dealings with Israel, while others perceive Israel as a strategic enemy that should nevertheless be dealt with.

One of the major ways in which the young Egyptians who are the future leaders of the country are immunized against the idea of accepting Israel is pop culture. For instance, while Israelis have an academic center in Cairo and every year their academics translate various books from Arabic to Hebrew, Egyptian elite circles are still debating whether translating a Hebrew novel to Arabic and selling it at an Egyptian book fair is considered normalization or not. Such fastidiousness is cause for bragging in front of their Arab brothers who accuse Egypt of betraying the Palestinian cause by signing a peace agreement with Israel.

There is a common fear among the Egyptian elites that Israel wants to dominate the region and replace its leadership. This is why they have a negative reaction when they hear a term such as the "New Middle East." They see nothing wrong with the current Middle East, where they carry a lot of influence and lead the game. While dealing with Israel as a reality, accepting it as a senior or junior regional partner is out of the question. This goes back mainly to their obsession with "world Jewry," which they think controls the world and, with the help of Israel, will be able to dominate their country financially, which will open the door to control of the entire country.

The second group are the bureaucrats, who are not only opposed to Israel but also to Western principles in general,

which tends to make them hostile toward anything foreign or new. They are influenced by both social conservatism and xenophobia, which has resulted in a total hostility toward anything that comes from outside, such as foreign investment. For instance, one of the common veiled references used by top government officials and their media proxies against Israel and the US are phrases like "fourth generation warfare" and "Hebrew Spring," which imply that both the US and Israel are conspiring against Egypt.

The government capitalizes on this sentiment by expanding its role in various fields, all in the name of combating foreign intervention and struggling against conspirators. Ultimately this mobilizes the masses around the military, which is perceived as the savior from the enemy. Military propaganda magnifies the army's role in modern Egyptian history, using anti-Israel sentiment to legitimize its role politically and economically.

Generally speaking, Egyptian foreign policy makers want to keep the peace but are not interested in comprehensive normalization. Understanding the Israeli desire for normalization, they use it as a card. They foresee no conflict with the Israelis unless they attack first or harm Israel's national interests, and despite much talk they would never fight on behalf of the Palestinians, Lebanese or Syrians. Since the 1973 war, the Egyptians have learned the lesson that pursuing Arab interests with Israelis should not be done on the battlefield, but instead at negotiation tables.

The major dilemma, however, is that for almost four decades, Egyptian media, dominated by intellectuals and with the approval of the government, have implanted the fear of both Israelis and Jews in the minds of millions of Egyptians. For instance, in the middle of all the praise in the West for the superb relations between the two militaries, a new Egyptian TV series was approved by the Egyptian government and is being prepared for airing this upcoming Ramadan which will depict the story of a Jewish girl who recruits an Egyptian military officer as a double agent.

Things get worse when it comes to **Egyptians living in Israel (<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Cairo-and-the-Egyptians-living-in-Israel-463142>)** who are married to Muslim and Christian Arab Israelis. They are not allowed to go back and forth freely and in some cases the government stripped them of their citizenship. According to the Egyptian Immigration, Passports and Naturalization Authority, Israel is one of 16 countries Egyptians cannot travel to without a permit from national security authorities. As a consequence, Egyptians do not travel to Israel except in three cases: diplomats at the embassy in Tel Aviv, Christian pilgrims and a few journalists trusted by the security apparatus.

If one hopeful thing can be mentioned, it is the change of perception among many Egyptians toward Hamas. For many years it was seen by a wide cross-section of Egyptian society as a resistance movement, its actions against the Israelis justified. Nowadays, after the government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated groups, the public has begun to view it for the first time as a terrorist organization.

If the Trump administration wants to achieve peace in the Middle East, Egypt will be an essential component, but deep anti-Israel propaganda in the country constitutes a serious stumbling block.

Haisam Hassanein is a Glazer Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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