

Cairo's Embassy Riots: Anti-Israeli Sentiment in Egypt Has Nothing to Do with Palestine

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

The anti-Israel hatred ingrained in Egypt's nationalist ideology may well be the downfall of Egypt's revolt.

The diplomatic documents had barely stopped drifting down from the Israeli Embassy in Egypt when *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof referenced the root causes of the attack, as he saw them: "Attacking the Israeli embassy doesn't help Gazans, doesn't bring back the dead," he tweeted. "Instead it helps Israeli hardliners." It was the standard response of an armchair analyst, for whom all Middle Eastern current events -- and particularly the most outrageous ones -- are inextricably linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But to assume that the Egyptian protesters who attacked the Israeli Embassy in Cairo last Friday, tearing down a protective wall and ransacking the premises, were motivated by cosmopolitan, pro-Palestinian concerns is to completely ignore the sad truth that Egyptians overwhelmingly hate Israel for wholly Egyptian reasons: Despite 32 years of peace under the Camp David Accords, Egyptian national pride remains tied to the country's previous wars with the Jewish state. It's therefore all too predictable that the groundswell in Egyptian nationalism that ousted Hosni Mubarak this spring has been accompanied by an equally powerful surge in anti-Israeli sentiment.

The valorization of war with Israel is something that millions of Egyptians experience everyday as they drive over the 6th of October Bridge, one of Cairo's busiest thoroughfares that was named for the date on which Egypt attacked Israel to launch the 1973 war. Meanwhile, approximately 500,000 Egyptians have left the congestion of Cairo for October 6th City to the southwest, which is home to October 6th University, and an additional 140,000 Egyptians now live in 10th of Ramadan City, which is named for the equivalent date on the Islamic calendar and houses the 10th of Ramadan University. Cairene schoolchildren, for their part, visit the October War Panorama, where they are taught that Egyptian forces defeated the "enemy" in the 1973 war, without any mention of the Israeli tanks that were rolling towards Cairo as the war ended. And while the anniversary of the Camp David Accords routinely goes unrecognized, Egyptians commemorate April 25, when Israel completed its withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982, and

October 6 as national holidays.

Against this backdrop, Friday's attack on the Israeli Embassy was practically inevitable: The early success of Egypt's January revolt in forcing Hosni Mubarak's ouster unleashed an unprecedented wave of Nasserist-infused nationalism, inspiring calls from across the Egyptian political spectrum for the reconsideration of the Camp David Accords. Egyptians bristled, in particular, at the Camp David clauses limiting the number of Egyptian troops in the Sinai Peninsula, and they viewed the amending of these clauses as the next step towards restoring national dignity after toppling their dictator. But Israel's retaliation for a cross-border terrorist attack on August 18, in which it accidentally killed six Egyptian soldiers while chasing Palestinian terrorists who infiltrated Israel via Sinai and killed eight Israelis, was the spark that ignited Egypt's tinderbox. In its immediate aftermath, a coalition of liberal, leftist, and Islamist parties protested in front of the Israeli Embassy, demanding that Egypt expel the Israeli ambassador, ban Israeli naval forces from the Suez Canal, and increase Egypt's military presence in the Sinai Peninsula -- actions that would constitute severe violations of the two countries' peace treaty.

When Egypt's ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ignored these demands, the protesters viewed it as deeply unpatriotic. "I'm angry at SCAF," one prominent protester, who asked that her name be withheld for fear of retribution, told me. "Soldiers died, and they didn't do anything about it." For those protesting outside of the Israeli Embassy, Egypt's response to the killing of its soldiers paled in comparison to that of Turkey, which banished Israel's ambassador as retribution for the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident. "What Turkey did for the flotilla showed Egypt that a government can actually do something [regarding Israel]," the protester added.

Egypt's activists therefore began looking for alternative patriotic standard bearers against Israel. They settled on 23-year-old Ahmed Shahat, who became a national hero when, on August 21, he scaled the outside walls of the apartment building in which the Israeli Embassy is housed and removed the Israeli flag from the thirteenth floor. The Egyptian Twitterverse dubbed him "Flagman" and, perhaps sensing the growing public frustration, the Egyptian government followed suit: Shahat was rewarded for his anti-Israel feat with a government job, a new apartment, and a meeting with the prime minister. "Other people went to the Israeli Embassy trying to do the same thing, thinking that this is a heroic thing to do, because it was awarded by the transitional government," said liberal Ghad party leader Shadi Taha.

After protesters aided a man who fired shots at the embassy in escaping capture on August 26, however, the Egyptian government reversed course, erecting a concrete barrier around the building. But the new barrier, which loosely resembled the structure that Israel has built in the West Bank, became an instant target for activists, who called on their followers to dismantle it during Friday's protests. "Rather than dealing with our political demands, the SCAF built a wall," Shady el-Ghazaly Harb, a leader in the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth, told me. "So the people can't accept this anymore, and they took down the wall, and I understand this. But breaking down the embassy, I have hundreds of question marks."

Like other activists, Harb believes that the Egyptian military permitted the attack on the Israeli Embassy to occur so that it could justify cracking down on the protests. "They knew the pizza was coming, and they left the door wide open," he said. Indeed, soldiers didn't immediately intervene to stop the assault on the embassy and, shortly thereafter, the Supreme Council used the attack as a pretext for a variety of autocratic moves, including expanding Egypt's draconian emergency laws, reviewing satellite television licenses, and raiding the offices of *Al-Jazeera Mubasher*, which often broadcasts Egyptian protests. Harb fears that, given the domestic anxiety that the embassy attack has catalyzed, the public will rally around the Supreme Council's new measures. "The people will accept them," he said. "And, well, they have the right, because they're not happy with the chaos that they're suffering from, though this is a deliberate chaos that the SCAF does not want to stop."

If attacks on the Israeli Embassy are so harmful to your cause, I asked Harb, isn't there something that you can do to

stop or discourage them? "Nothing," he replied. "How can we stop thugs from attacking the Embassy?" Indeed, the anti-Israel hatred ingrained in Egypt's nationalist ideology may well be the downfall of Egypt's revolt.

Eric Trager, The Washington Institute's Ira Weiner fellow, is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is writing his dissertation on Egyptian opposition parties. ❖

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