

New Tremors in Egypt-Israel Relations

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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An Interview by *Bernard Gwertzman, CFR.org*

Renewed hostilities along Israel's border with Egypt's Sinai are leading to questions about the future of the flailing Middle East peace process, says expert David Makovsky. The political climate in Egypt has shifted in favor of the country's various Islamist groups, Makovsky says, and the Egyptian military fears "mid-level officers are going to be unable to enforce discipline among their rank and file troops to impose order and stop terrorist acts and infiltration into Israel." He also says Middle East diplomacy is stalled over EU reluctance to back President Obama's May peace proposals, which stress a return to 1967 boundaries, with land swaps, as well as Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state.

GWERTZMAN: What do you make of the recent round of violence?

MAKOVSKY: We don't have all of the answers right now. Here are some elements, though, to think about. The Sinai desert, which has been patrolled routinely by Egypt for years, could now be used as a launching pad by non-state actors -- whether they are offshoots of Hamas with Hamas acquiescence, or al-Qaeda, or other elements that would like to provoke a profound deterioration in Israeli-Egyptian relations leading to an abrogation of the 1979 peace treaty and perhaps even war. It would have sounded fanciful if I had said this a year ago.

What's of concern is that Israel has agreed quietly to acquiesce to an Egyptian request (JPost) to allow eleven hundred Egyptian soldiers into the Sinai, on top of the eight hundred allowed in January. Under the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, Egypt was obliged to keep the Sinai demilitarized. Yet the fact that they have eleven hundred more troops has not stopped the smuggling. What's more concerning is that the Egyptian military seems to fear that mid-level officers are going to be unable to enforce discipline among their rank and file troops to impose order and stop terrorist acts and infiltration into Israel.

GWERTZMAN: Amid the terrorist attacks, five Egyptian security guards were killed, possibly by Israeli gunfire. This led to widespread protests (Reuters) in Egypt against Israel. Do you detect growing anti-Israel sentiment in Egypt?

MAKOVSKY: I have been concerned for many months that the political context in Egypt, when it comes to peace with Israel, might be changing; that the public senses that, when there are elections, Islamist parties -- led by the Muslim Brotherhood but not exclusively -- could be a dominant political bloc in Egypt. That would mean that you would have a military that has had excellent relations with the Israelis but does not want to be in a confrontation with the public. Therefore, the political context for Egyptian-Israeli military-to-military relations, which have been very good, is very

much liable to deteriorate.

It's not just these parties. A former foreign minister, Amr Moussa, is running for president, and since he wants to win, suddenly there is political capital to be made in saying: We're going to take a tougher position toward Israel. Even though he's not part of that Islamic cluster of parties, he wants their votes in the presidential elections. To be fair to him, he has defended the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, but the disorder this weekend shows that things on the ground can be very fragile, and if it wasn't for a lot of behind-the-scenes diplomacy over the weekend, things could have deteriorated much faster. My fear is there are non-state actors out there -- whether it's Hamas, this Popular Resistance Committee (PRC), al-Qaeda -- that see lawlessness in the Sinai as a way to ignite a deterioration in the Egyptian-Israeli relationship.

GWERTZMAN: It's often been said that the Palestinians shoot themselves in the foot. With the Palestinian Authority ready to go to the UN in about a month to seek recognition as a state, will this terrorist act by the PRC set back that effort?

MAKOVSKY: People recognize the Palestinian Authority doesn't control Gaza, and the military wing of Hamas has never been much interested in diplomacy anyway and sees it as futile. The idea of Palestinian statehood now is misguided, because there is a way forward with the Quartet -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- trying to broker a resumption of peace talks based on Obama's speeches to Congress of May 19, 2011 and to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee on May 22, 2011. The president offered something that the Palestinians dreamed of for a long time: borders based on the pre-1967 war borders, with mutual swaps. Now that they have it, they seem to be indifferent toward it. That's where they're shooting themselves in the foot.

GWERTZMAN: Obama is preoccupied with U.S. economic problems. Does he have a plan for negotiations?

MAKOVSKY: While [Obama's speeches] were not a radical departure in U.S. policy, [they were] still something different. What the United States has tried to do is go to the Quartet and say, "We have now articulated a new American policy. Are we going to be able to unite around it?" The United States is trying to get the Quartet to agree on a text and facilitate the resumption of peace talks. Now the United States has asked Tony Blair, the Quartet representative, to finalize the differences over the text. I'm told by the administration that this will come to a head next week, one way or another.

But you asked an important question, which is where is the United States now? What has happened is that President Obama has paid a domestic political price for his Middle East speeches. He got virtually no support from Democrats in Congress. I think his view is: I've stepped up to the plate and paid the domestic political price, but where are the others? So we're in this unusual situation where Tony Blair is the person trying to narrow the differences over the text. It probably demonstrates that until after next year's presidential elections, the United States is not going to be leading the charge on the issue.

GWERTZMAN: Why are the Europeans not enthusiastic about it?

MAKOVSKY: It was hard for Obama to say Israel should negotiate based on the pre-1967 borders, plus swaps. But he also said that the Palestinians should recognize Israel as a Jewish state with equal rights for all its citizens and a Palestinian state with equal rights for all its citizens. You're having elements within the EU and the Russians who are nervous about using that language because they don't want to do anything at odds with the Palestinians [who don't want to publicly acknowledge Israel as a Jewish state]. It's very odd because the Palestinian Declaration of Independence of 1988 very clearly cites the UN partition of 1947 where the plan was to have both a Jewish state and an Arab state. Why the Palestinians can't affirm the premise set in 1988 is odd to me.

GWERTZMAN: So, it's really the issue of whether the Palestinians would agree to call Israel a Jewish state?

MAKOVSKY: Some Palestinians say that to accept Israel as a Jewish state would prejudice the issue of Palestinians' right to return to homes formerly in Israel. Israel has come a distance this summer in saying that if the Quartet came out with a statement, it would view the statement as the basis for negotiations. While there has been no media attention to this, it's a way for Israel to basically help reshape the discourse.

There seem to be eight European states that say they would support it and eight that say they would oppose it, and others are in between. And many of them are nervous about a Palestinian statehood declaration because they have separatist movements in Europe, and what is the precedent if the United Nations leap-frogs any negotiations? Many of them are looking for a way out; they want an exit ramp off this whole September at the UN business. It might be that the Europeans have to take a position that is not fully to the Palestinian liking, just as the United States took a position that was not exactly to [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu's liking in May.

GWERTZMAN: There have been unprecedented rallies of unhappy Israelis. Has Netanyahu weathered this?

MAKOVSKY: A lot of the polling is preliminary, so it's hard to know. But this is the biggest protest movement Israel has seen that has not been directed by political forces from above. This is a spontaneous outpouring of the middle class in Israel that believes that it is being squeezed -- that on its shoulders is the bulk of the military reserve duty; on its shoulders are the taxes. They're concerned about excessive taxing, as they see it, and about a concentration of power at the very top, in the hands of certain Israeli tycoons or oligarchs, with a weak anti-trust system that needs to be sharply improved.

This is a middle class mass protest movement that believes the system is skewed against them. It's not a coincidence that the biggest numbers have come out in the Tel Aviv area. They have been very careful not to make this a protest against the ultra-Orthodox or against the settlements. But it's hard to escape that this is about trying to reorder the country's national priorities. And look at how Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin won in 1992: It was about reordering national priorities. While the opposition movement has not been totally able to take advantage of this, this is something that Netanyahu has to take seriously. And the fact that he put forward an [informal] commission (AFP) led by an academic, Manuel Trachtenberg, who has very high credibility and is seen as someone who is not a rubber stamp for Netanyahu, is a sign that Netanyahu realizes there has to be a credible response.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. ❖

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