

Policy Alert

Egyptian-Israeli Citizenship Issues Are Impeding Normalization

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Egyptian authorities are still using travel restrictions, intimidation, and loss of citizenship to discourage their compatriots from living in or even visiting Israel.

On December 20, Cairo announced that it was revoking the citizenship of Yasmine Nissim, a twenty-one-year-old Egyptian woman living in Israel. According to a statement published by the prime minister's office, the decision was made because she had acquired Israeli citizenship without notifying Egyptian authorities. Officials cited Law No. 26 (1975), part of which states that any person can be stripped of citizenship if they were "described to be Zionist at any time."

The verdict has generated a great deal of controversy in Egyptian media circles. The woman turned out to be the granddaughter of Muhammad Nissim, a Free Officer in the 1952 coup and a former intelligence operative who is widely known for his involvement in past espionage operations against Israel.

Over the past year, the Egyptian government has nullified the citizenship of nine Muslims and Copts living in Israel. Meanwhile, Egyptians who obtained citizenship in other foreign countries have generally been permitted to retain their native citizenship.

Currently, most Egyptians living in Israel fall into one of three categories. The first group is illegal expatriates whose main objective is to save as much money as they can before returning to Egypt. The second group consists of permanent residents who pay taxes and enjoy full rights and benefits in Israel such as healthcare, social security, and participation in municipal elections.

The third group consists of Egyptians who have acquired full Israeli citizenship. These individuals are usually motivated by the various advantages of holding an Israeli passport compared to an Egyptian one. Many of them have also been mistreated by Egyptian authorities when traveling back home to visit their families or returning to Israel. Egyptian Muslims can obtain Israeli citizenship through Israeli spouses; typically, the process involves obtaining a yearly residency card, successfully renewing it for five years, then having a lawyer petition the court system for citizenship. In addition, any children resulting from marriages between Arab Israelis and Egyptians receive Israeli citizenship automatically.

For years, the several thousand people who compose the Egyptian community in Israel lobbied Cairo for recognition, placing high-profile ads in top newspapers and sending letters to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and immigration authorities. The Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv eventually relented, asking the heads of the community (based in Nazareth) to formalize their status. In February 2017, the Israeli government approved the creation of a nonprofit, Algaliyah Almasriya B'Israel, "to advance the affairs of the Egyptian minority in Israel." The group's charter was then sent to the Egyptian embassy—which has yet to offer any response whatsoever.

Three factors help explain why authorities in Cairo tend to exhibit such callousness toward Egyptian-Israeli citizens:

1. They view any Egyptian married to an Israeli as a potential spy. The security services are especially prone to these suspicions.
2. They still believe that Israelis intend to undermine Egypt because it is the largest and strongest Arab country.
3. They believe that their country's dire economic situation could drive poor young Egyptians to seek marriage with Israelis out of desperation—hence their tactic of stigmatizing and punishing such marriages.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite nearly forty years of peace, mutual diplomatic representation, and high-level political and security cooperation, the Egyptian government is still hesitant to fully embrace Israel. Egyptians are not allowed to visit there without direct permission from the security services—one of only sixteen countries saddled with such intimidating travel restrictions. And the Egyptian community in Israel still faces a severe lack of cooperation from Cairo, including the threat of losing their native citizenship.

Given the negative effect that such policies have on Egyptian-Israeli normalization and wider Arab-Israeli peace, U.S. officials should address the issue more frequently and pointedly when engaging with Cairo. Lifting the restrictions for Egyptians traveling to and from Israel may seem like a minor issue compared to the multitude of

security and trade matters on the bilateral agenda, but even a small step toward warmer relations would represent great progress.

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