

The Second Step in Egypt-Israel Peace Is a Tall One

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Despite their treaty's rock-solid record on preventing armed conflict, the two countries still hold fundamentally different views on further normalization.

March 26 marks the fortieth anniversary of the U.S.-brokered peace treaty signed by Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. To commemorate that historic moment, Israel recently organized events at the Truman Research Institute, the Institute for National Security Studies, Western Galilee College, Bar Ilan University, and the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, each involving heavy media coverage. Yet many participants were frustrated because authorities in Cairo did not allow any Egyptian officials or private citizens to participate in these events.

Neither diplomatic logistics nor the government's stated explanations adequately account for this omission. Several Egyptian officials stationed in Tel Aviv speak Hebrew fluently and are quite capable of addressing Israeli audiences. Moreover, while one such official said that Cairo wished to preserve its official commemoration of the agreement for an event to be hosted by President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi himself, no such event has been scheduled so far.

The same glaring divergence can be seen in each country's media response to the anniversary. Israeli news outlets have devoted ample space to celebrating the agreement, but barely any Egyptian outlets have covered it save for a few quotations from Israeli media. Rather, they have focused on the thirtieth anniversary of Israel returning the disputed Sinai town of Taba to Egyptian control—an event celebrated as a national holiday every March 19. Meanwhile, a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated website recently published a report calling peace between the two countries “imaginary” and lamenting its “catastrophic and counterproductive effects,” since it opened the door for Israel's continued existence. What is behind these wildly divergent responses, and what policy implications do they hold for regional relations with Israel?

PEACE WITHOUT NORMALIZATION

Forty years after the treaty, the current status of Egypt-Israel relations is full of important and encouraging milestones:

- No armed hostilities between the two countries for four decades
- Fully intact military agreements
- Ongoing diplomatic and consular relations
- Free passage of Israeli shipping in the Suez Canal
- Bilateral trade (though Egypt keeps it to a bare minimum)
- Close military cooperation to prevent terrorist attacks on Israel emanating from Egypt
- No Egyptian intervention when Israel confronts other Arab neighbors militarily
- Legalized Israeli tourism to Egypt (though Cairo does nothing to encourage it)
- Open channels of dialogue on establishing comprehensive peace in the region

Yet a sharp distinction must be made between maintaining these basic aspects of peace and taking relations a step further to normalization. Over the years, both countries have concluded that the first goal is far more important than the second.

Each country separates these priorities to a different degree, however, and Egyptian authorities have used this difference to further their own interests, often wielding it as a tool of punishment or reward. Cairo is well aware that many Israelis are so eager for recognition, warmth, and normal relations that they will often seize on whatever diplomatic door is opened—and willingly pay a price to keep it open if the other side threatens to close it. This is why Egypt will occasionally exchange delegations with Israel, send a group of tourists there, cooperate in certain technical fields, moderate attacks in the Egyptian media, ameliorate the security situation around the Israeli embassy, grant permission to hold bilateral cultural activities, marginally improve trade relations, allow meetings between Israeli and Egyptian notables, accept Israeli invitations to high-profile dinners, and participate in trade shows or cultural fairs with Israelis.

At the same time, the government allows local media to maintain a very hostile tone toward Israel. During last year's Ramadan observances, for example, Egyptian television aired a show in which an al-Qaeda member

operating in the country turns out to be an Israeli Mossad agent bent on compromising Egypt's national security. The government publicly praised the program, and its tacit endorsement of such warped views seems clear given the degree to which Sisi's camp has controlled the media since he rose to power. Most media depictions of Israel-related issues can be thought of as approved by government officials, reflecting a widespread desire to ostracize Israelis and Jews, foment fear and hatred toward them, and glorify the Arab struggle against them.

To be sure, Egypt is totally committed to maintaining the peace despite such rhetoric. After all, the al-Qaeda/Mossad conspiracy broadcast and others like it have aired at a time of unprecedented security cooperation between the Israeli and Egyptian militaries. Cairo is also keen on helping the international community expand peace with Israel to other Arab states. Yet its concept of peaceful relations is different from Israel's.

Egyptians see no foreseeable conflict with Israel unless it attacks them first or harms their national interests. Accordingly, there is no credible scenario in which they would fight on behalf of the Palestinians, Lebanese, or Syrians. This fact has already been tested and proven many times—during Palestinian intifadas, wars in Lebanon, Israeli military campaigns in Gaza, and other situations. Cairo has learned from its pre-1979 mistakes and will not enter a war against Israel again except under dire national security circumstances.

Egypt also sees itself as the reigning leader of the Arab world, and therefore entitled to continue pursuing Arab interests vis-a-vis Israel. This attitude did not change when the Arab League expelled Cairo from the organization's ranks for years after it signed the treaty with Israel. Ever since the 1973 war, Egyptian officials have concluded that Arab issues with Israel must be dealt with not on the battlefield, but at the negotiating table. As proof of this theory, they note that Sinai was restored to them without firing a single shot.

At the same time, Cairo seems to believe other Arab states are not strong enough to handle full normalization, theorizing that such an outcome would allow Israel to take control of their economic and financial systems. Hence, Egyptian officials seem to market their own approach to Israel as the best model—namely, sign a bilateral peace agreement, yet greatly limit normalization in order to forestall the supposed damage that Israel would do to the region's social, political, and cultural texture.

The bright silver lining to this cold-peace model is that Egyptian officials will never seriously consider abolishing the peace treaty, mainly due to strategic reasons. In their view, the international community would deem such a decision an act of aggression. This would in turn pave the way for Israel to attack and seize Sinai and the Suez Canal, greatly harming Egypt's economic interests while enriching Israel's own.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States can take several specific steps to lower the barriers that have long impeded true normalization between Israel and Egypt. For one, the Trump administration should encourage Cairo to enable tourist travel to Israel without requiring individuals to obtain permission from the country's intelligence and security apparatus. Egypt has Hebrew departments at thirteen universities, but graduates from these programs are generally not allowed to visit Israel. Likewise, few Egyptian businesspeople have been permitted to explore deals with Israel even when such cooperation would greatly benefit the country as a whole—for example, projects that draw on Israel's tremendous experience with water technology could help ease Cairo's scarcity concerns.

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