



EGYPT, ISRAEL AND THE WEST IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB SPRING

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The Camp David Accords signed in 1979 by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin are often cited as a watershed event in the modern history of Israeli-Arab relations. The accords initiated an era of cold, yet stable peace between the former adversaries which can broadly be described as little more than the absence of war. In 2011, over three decades later, the future of Israeli-Egyptian relations is unknown. Following the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak as a result of a popular uprising and the rise of Egypt's Islamist parties, those hoping for quiet on the Israel-Egypt border are increasingly concerned.

Since the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, Egypt and Israel were sworn enemies, and subsequently fought four major wars over the following thirty years. As such, few anticipated the seemingly sudden shift in Anwar Sadat's policy when he became the first Arab leader to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Importantly, the peace between Egypt and Israel was never completely ingrained on a societal level. The main objective of the Egyptians was to secure U.S. assistance, and thus it makes sense that a more comprehensive reconciliation process was not embarked on and that relations never evolved beyond the mere absence of war. The diplomatic ties were often strained by political circumstances. While Israeli tourism to Egypt was constantly high, Egyptians rarely traveled to Israel.

As a result of this limited peace process, perhaps more properly defined as a "stabilization process," in the face of the recent regime change in Egypt the possibility of military conflict is not as unlikely as it might seem.

The fall of Egypt's President Mubarak will inevitably have negative implications for the relations with Israel. In a best case scenario, the February Revolution will turn out to be the starting point for an era of democracy in Egypt and the end of a long line of autocratic rulers. However, many Middle East experts predict that the revolution, and the Arab Spring in general, will lead to an increasingly unstable and unpredictable situation, where radical elements will be given the opportunity to rise to the surface. Indeed, across North Africa, it is now clear that at least in the short term, the main beneficiaries of the Arab Spring have not been the liberals that launched the protests, but the Islamist parties.

There are two main strategic factors to be watched in the

near future of Egypt-Israel ties. The first factor is Cairo's relations to Tehran. While Iran has for decades been a common enemy for Israel and the Arab states, there are indications that relations between Egypt and the Islamic Republic are warming since the fall of the Mubarak regime. The two countries have not had diplomatic relations since the Iranian revolution in 1979, and the signing of the Camp David Accords in the same year. In recent months, however, an Iranian delegation visited Cairo to discuss the resumption of political and economic relations and Egyptian leaders have expressed willingness to "open a new page with Iran." If Egypt-Iran ties grow closer, we are likely to see a deterioration in Egypt's relations to the West, and to Israel in particular.

The second factor to be observed in the future of Egypt-Israel relations is the way in which the Egyptian leadership relates to Hamas and Gaza. Under Mubarak, Cairo would cooperate with Israeli leaders against Hamas, and together they upheld a blockade against Gaza to prevent an inflow of arms and terrorists. In May this year, Egypt opened the Rafah crossing to Gaza which had been closed since 2007. A direct consequence could be seen on August 18 when a series of cross-border terror attacks were carried out in southern Israel, killing eight and wounding 40. Furthermore, if a more intensive conflict were to break out between Hamas and Israel, Egypt without Mubarak may be pressured by Islamist and nationalist elements to back Hamas either with money and weapons or even through direct involvement.

Both of these factors will obviously depend on the evolution of the power struggle in the new Egypt. The strong showing of the Islamist parties in the first round of Egypt's parliamentary elections is certain to have significant



implications for Egypt's foreign relations. The Muslim Brotherhood gained almost two fifths and the Salafi Nour party a quarter of the votes cast, figures that are unlikely to decline in subsequent rounds of voting, which will be held in areas generally considered more conservative. It thus seems clear that the parliament whose main task is to promulgate a new constitution for Egypt will be dominated by Islamist forces. More specifically, the Brotherhood has for a long time enjoyed relatively good relations with the regime in Tehran, which is a vocal supporter of Brotherhood offshoot Hamas. As such, the Brotherhood's growing power will likely lead the country to move closer to Iran and further away from the West and from Israel.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen what influence the elected parliament will have relative to the military council that retains executive power. Presidential elections are not likely to take place until April 2013, which would leave the ruling military council with effective power for another year and a half. That said, the prospect of continued military rule has recently led demonstrators to return to Tahrir Square, demanding that Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi step down from his post as head of the council. Tantawi has now promised a swifter handover to civilian rule, with presidential elections taking place in June 2012. While prolonged military rule is undoubtedly undemocratic, it would ensure some sort of stability on the Egyptian political arena for the near future. Moreover, for presidential elections to be meaningful, the role of the presidency in a new constitution will need to be determined. The recent liberalization in the political scene and holding of elections should not be confused with democratization, understood in the sense of the building of a constitutional democracy, complete with checks and balances limiting the power of the government, and the protection of minorities. Paradoxically perhaps, the liberalization of Egypt has in fact led to a worsening of the situation for religious minorities and women.

Thus, if a civilian president and parliament are to take over power sooner than expected, this is not necessarily commensurate with the strengthening of democratic institutions, and

is likely to lead to worsening relations between Egypt and the West, and with Israel in particular.

Several of the candidates for the upcoming presidential elections have taken a less than friendly stance towards Israel and the West. While it may be in the army's interest to prevent violence and cross-border clashes, the political leadership is more concerned with pandering to popular emotions. During and after the revolution, it became clear that the Egyptian public at large does not support the peace treaty with Israel. On September 9, an angry mob stormed and looted the Israeli embassy, forcing nearly the entire staff to evacuate. Perhaps even more concerning than the attack itself was the police and security forces' initial permissiveness towards it. This development illustrates a common problem in young democracies facing their first free elections. After years of oppression of radical elements by the Mubarak regime, political leaders in Egypt see the need to endorse popular anti-Israel and anti-Western views.

It is clear that whoever will lead the new Egypt is likely to take a more hostile stance towards Israel and the West than the Mubarak regime. The prospect of free elections prompts political candidates to appeal to popular anti-Israeli and anti-Western sentiments. In addition, the way in which Egypt chooses to relate to Iran and to Hamas is likely to determine the future course of Egypt's relations with the West and Israel. This, in turn, will be determined by the complex interaction between the new elected leaders and the military council. Therefore, as the Egyptian people elects its new leaders, it is imperative for the benefit of all parties to emphasize the importance of the new regime committing to upholding peace and stability in the Middle East.

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