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Egypt and its Involvement in the Disengagement Process: Strategic, Regional and International Aspects

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Summary: The Peace Agreement between Egypt and Israel is stronger than is sometimes thought. In the current global reality – a unipolar world under American hegemony – no dramatic changes are expected to take place in the region in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the mutual interests of Israel and Egypt – together with the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip – further strengthen the relations between the two countries.

Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty on March 26, 1979. The road to this agreement passed through several bloody wars, which brought the leaders of the two countries to seek the option of peace after failing to achieve their aims through forceful means.

The peace agreement required both countries to make harsh and painful concessions. Israel had to execute a complete withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, which was conquered from Egypt in June 1967. Egypt, too, paid a heavy price. She found herself shunned by the Arab world, and deprived of the leadership position that she had enjoyed ever since 1945, when the Arab League was established. In a demonstrative move, the Arab states, which denounced the Israeli-Egyptian treaty, had the League's offices transferred from Cairo to Tunis, and expelled Egypt from the League. Isolation from the Arab world also had adverse affects on Egypt's economy.

Even more serious were the domestic difficulties generated by the treaty. Sadat's peace policy was a highly personal initiative, which was opposed by many sectors of Egyptian society. Much to Israel's chagrin, these feelings prevented Egypt from meeting its commitment to affect "normalization" between the two countries (i.e. economic and cultural exchanges). Ultimately, they also led to Sadat's assassination in October 1981 by Islamist opposition organizations.

TESTING THE PEACE TREATY

The peace agreement faced a difficult test soon after it was concluded. In June 1981, soon after a summit in Egypt between the leaders of the two countries, and on the eve of Israeli elections,

Israel's air force bombed the nuclear reactor facility being built in Iraq. Ostensibly, this constituted an act of war against a member of the Arab League, requiring other League members to come to the defense of the country under attack. However, Egypt took no step other than to denounce the attack. Thereafter, her relations with Israel resumed their previous routine, and in early 1982 Israel duly completed her withdrawal from the Sinai.

After Sadat's assassination, his successor, Hosni Mubarak, faced a test that was no less difficult. In June 1982, in response to Palestinian terrorist attacks, Israel invaded an Arab country, Lebanon, in a military operation that resulted in a lengthy occupation of its territory. This military action, which was accompanied by some events that Arab public opinion considered traumatic (notably the massacre at Sabra and Shatila and the prolonged siege of Beirut), decidedly cooled the budding relations between Egypt and Israel. Indeed, the Egyptian ambassador was recalled from Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, beyond harshly criticizing Israel's actions in Lebanon, Egypt took no concrete step to challenge the peace treaty.

Throughout the period of Mubarak's rule, the two countries confronted several crises on the issue of the peace process. Specifically, and much to Egypt's displeasure, Israel consistently refused, until the convening of the Madrid conference in October 1991, to accept the PLO as an interlocutor for dealing with the Palestinian problem. Even when the first Intifada broke out, in 1987, close on the heels of Vanunu's disclosures about Israeli nuclear capabilities, and the Egyptian demand that all Israeli nuclear facilities be opened for international inspection (a demand that she continues to make today), Egypt did not annul the peace agreement, her commitments to which she continued to uphold.

Possibly even more strain was experienced during the second Intifada, in the course of which Israel reoccupied territories that had been transferred to direct Palestinian control in the framework of the Oslo accords. Israeli military activity in the territories scaled new heights when Arafat was besieged and held in complete isolation within the Palestinian Authority headquarters compound in Ramallah, access to which was under total Israeli control. Egypt responded in anger, and initiated a further deterioration in relations. Once again, however, she avoided any steps that might lead to military intervention on the side of the Palestinians.

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM GAZA

The Israeli government's decision to disengage from Gaza brought about some changes in the relationship. After the Sharm el-Sheikh summit held in February 2005, and the meeting between Mubarak and Sharon, relations between the two countries gradually warmed. Moreover, while Egypt had initially treated Sharon's disengagement plan with suspicion, her policy subsequently changed direction and she publicly expressed support for the plan. In many talks that took place between representatives of the two countries, Egypt expressed her willingness to take part in advancing the plan, while taking Israel's place in defending and securing the border line between Egypt and the Gaza Strip (known as the Philadelphi route), thus enabling Israel's complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

An agreement was reached between the two sides to enable the entry of 750 Egyptian National Guard soldiers in addition to the limited police force allowed by the peace agreement and already in place. The government of Israel, on the advice of Attorney-General Mazuz, did not see this step as a substantial breach of the peace treaty, which would require introducing amendments or changes to the agreement signed in March 1979 (even though the Prime Minister eventually agreed that the issue be brought before the Knesset for approval).

In sharp contrast to the debate held in Israel between those opposing and supporting Egyptian involvement in the disengagement plan, this issue receives no prominence in the Egyptian media. Indeed, it is vastly superseded in importance by more central issues on the Egyptian agenda, like the Presidential elections, the wave of terror in Egypt and the situation in Iraq. Thus, for example, despite the fact that in Israel there was a report on an impending agreement to be signed within the next few days on the subject in order to enable the Israeli withdrawal also from the Philadelphi route, the Al-Ahram weekly, on August 5, 2005, chose to state that Israel will continue to maintain a military presence along the Philadelphi route and that official Israeli sources implied that within a number of months an agreement might be reached for the replacement of the Israeli forces with 700 Egyptian security personnel. Furthermore, in an interview to the daily Al-Ahram on July 27, 2005, Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmed About Gheit claimed that the military mechanisms of both countries were still searching for the appropriate organizational, legal and administrative framework that would allow the deployment of forces along the border.

Why has Egypt agreed to be involved in Sharon's initiative? Should Israel be apprehensive of the entry of 750 trained Egyptian soldiers to the Gaza Strip? Could she exploit this momentum to introduce additional military forces under the pretext that they are intended merely to bolster her existing forces and prevent the smuggling of weapons into Gaza? Should Israel be wary of Egyptian "hidden intentions"?

As we have seen, the peace treaty between the two countries has withstood difficult tests in the past. In practice, if Egypt came to the conclusion that the circumstances and conditions require her to introduce military forces into Sinai, in violation of the agreement, she could easily do so. However, she must be aware of the possibility that Israel might respond with force or get the US to impose sanctions on her.

Egypt, the pioneering advocate of the modernization process in the Middle East, was also the pioneering advocate of the peace process in the region. Egypt had made peace its strategic choice as early as the Cold War, when she became disillusioned with the ability of the Soviet Union to help her further her national interests. Her advance towards peace with Israel was accompanied by a change in bloc-orientation. Egypt's choice of the United States and her transition to the US area of influence was slow and gradual, reaching its peak at the Camp David summit, where the leaders of Egypt and Israel recognized American hegemony and in fact bound the US to them in a strategic alliance. In practice, the peace agreement is tripartite – between Israel, Egypt and the United States.

As result of this strategic, historical step, Egypt gained instant benefits with long-term implications. She retrieved the territories lost in the Six Day War, after failing to win them back through forceful means. Also, she joined Israel in becoming one of the two main beneficiaries of US foreign aid (of which the two countries received together about 50 percent). The agreement also ensured a symbolic American presence in Sinai, in place to this day, which neither side would agree to waive.

In fact, since the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, Egypt has become a US strategic ally in the Middle Eastern arena. The US has equipped Egypt with the best modern military equipment, and has developed within Egypt military industries based on American technology. The Egyptian army also made the transition from a Soviet to an American military doctrine. The alliance between the two countries was expressed during the first Gulf War, when Egypt helped the US form an all-Arab coalition to fight side by side with American forces against Iraq.

The end of the Cold War, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc only proved to the Egyptian leaders the wisdom of their choice. This was in marked contrast to other Arab countries, such as Syria and Iraq, who remained pro-Soviet until the end, and who found the transition to a unipolar world difficult and uncomfortable. The strength of the US-Egyptian relationship was well expressed by Foreign Affairs Minister Aboul Gheit, in the above-mentioned interview, when he said: “Egypt and the US adhere to a stable relationship and cooperation which realizes the interests of both sides... I do not believe anything threatens this relationship, since it is one between a central force in the international arena – the US, and an influential regional power – Egypt.”

In fact, even should Egypt become entangled in the near future in a conventional military confrontation with Israel (a situation which could occur under an essentially different regime), her long-term military capacity would be limited due to her dependency on a steady arms supply in order to sustain a prolonged war — as occurred in the 1973 October War, with the Soviet and American air convoys, without which neither side could have continued fighting. However, the US would undoubtedly refrain from arming Egypt in the case of an attack on Israel.

CURRENT COMMON CONCERNS

Egypt and Israel share certain similar concerns and interests. The global Islamic terror threat is common to both countries. Egypt has experienced in the last few months severe terror attacks perpetrated by local Islamic organizations and by the Islamic organizations sponsored by Al-Qaeda, which brought an end to the decade-long *Hudna* between the regime and Egyptian Fundamentalist Islam. The aim of these attacks was to topple the pro-Western Egyptian regime. Thus terror has become a strategic, regional and global threat for Mubarak and his regime, constituting a clear and present danger. The ideological sources of global Islamic terrorism originate in this area; Bin Laden’s ideological father was Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian from Jenin, who left the West Bank after the Six Day War, and became over the years the latest reviver of Islamic Jihad. Moreover, the senior leaders of Al-Qaeda are Egyptians, past members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Egypt has a great interest in the outcome of Israel’s disengagement plan, since it could lead to the continued withdrawal from other areas. Stability and prosperity of the Gaza Strip would guarantee regional calm, strengthen the PA instead of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and encourage the moderate factors, interested in the continued Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Egypt knows that as long as the Palestinian problem remains, Palestinian terror will continue, and this could have implications for the entire region, including Egypt herself. Both Israel and Egypt share a common interest in the containment of the Shi’i threat, that is, the Iranian and Hizbullah direct and indirect involvement in regional terrorism as well as the Iranian nuclear program. Israel, Egypt, as well as Jordan, who are tied to the US, are in fact strategic allies even if this is not declared publicly.

Political stability in the region is very important to Egypt for her continued economic rehabilitation, which began as early as the late 1970s. Today Egypt is undergoing an economic development boost. Since the initiation of Sadat’s economic “opening up” (*Infitah*) policy in the 1970s, Egypt has come a long way from a socialist economy to a free market economy – a process compatible with her desire to become integrated into the global world economy. It is noteworthy that both Egypt and Israel use an economic system sustaining US globalization and supported by it. The last few years have witnessed the acceleration of the privatization (*Khaskhasa*) process that has resulted in the takeover by local and foreign private entrepreneurs

and investors of branches of the economy and market that were once under full government control. Since the retrieval of the Sinai Peninsula, this area has undergone major development, with the construction of several hotels, and the transformation of the area into a first-class tourist resort, and a source of foreign currency. In the last few years, a large-scale project was initiated to continue the development of the area, including the transfer of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians from the densely populated Cairo region to Sinai, while creating new places of work for them.

Egypt's involvement in the disengagement plan and redeployment along the Philadelphi route can also be read as Egypt's endeavor to be perceived by the US government and the international community as a positive element, advancing regional peace and stability, in addition to its active participation in six out of 17 peacekeeping operations worldwide, undertaken by the United Nations.

Recently, unparalleled diplomatic rapprochement and gestures of reconciliation have taken place between Egypt and Israel – most significantly, Egypt's decision to return its ambassador to Tel Aviv after four years of absence. Another gesture was the conclusion of the Israeli-Egyptian gas deal in Cairo on June 30, 2005, according to which Egypt will supply Israel with 1.7 billion cubic meters (60 billion cubic feet) of natural gas a year; the first deliveries of the 2.5-billion-dollar project are expected in the first quarter of 2006 and the agreement is for a period of 15 years.

One way or another, the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel is stronger than is sometimes thought. In the current global reality – a unipolar world under American hegemony – no dramatic changes are expected to take place in the region in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the mutual interests of Israel and Egypt and the disengagement from Gaza will only strengthen the relations between the two countries, to the benefit of the entire region.

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