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## RECALIBRATING A RELATIONSHIP

*THE SINAI ATTACKS HAVE BROUGHT TO LIGHT THE NEW DYNAMICS OF THE EGYPT-ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP. IT'S TIME FOR SOME REASSESSMENT AND READJUSTMENT.*

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### INTRODUCTION

There is an Egyptian proverb that says those who worry about demons will tend to run into them. Like much folk wisdom, it has solid psychological foundations; the likelihood of a problem rearing its head often appears to be exacerbated by constantly fretting about it. Ever since Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president of Egypt on February 11, 2011, the demon named “Now What?” has been keeping the Israeli government up at night. On August 18, it finally leapt up at them.

That day, a group of armed men attacked Israeli buses, as well as civilian and military vehicles north of Eilat, near the Egyptian border. Eight Israelis, both civilians and soldiers, were killed. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) set off in hot pursuit, shooting at the attackers from a helicopter. The helicopter crew either failed to notice, or ignored, that they were shooting over the Egyptian side of the border. In the pursuit, three Egyptians—an officer and two enlisted men—were killed and another three later died of their wounds. Israeli minister of defense Ehud Barak, while blaming Palestinian groups for the assault, made comments to the effect that the attacks were largely Egypt’s fault as there had been a major security collapse in Egypt since the former regime had been ousted six months earlier.<sup>1</sup>

The way matters unfolded over the next few days pointedly illustrated the answer to a question that had been asked repeatedly both by international media and the Israeli government since Hosni Mubarak’s ouster: What did Egypt’s January 25 Revolution mean for Israel? The simplest answer is that it is no longer business as usual.

The relationship between Egypt and Israel has changed and both countries will have to navigate new waters carefully and wisely.

### LIFE WITH MUBARAK: EGYPT-ISRAEL RELATIONS UNDER THE OLD REGIME

The relationship between Egypt and Israel that existed under Hosni Mubarak was a complex one that is perhaps best examined in the context of its most friction-inducing factor: the Palestinian issue.

The Palestinian problem tends to produce a deeply visceral reaction in most Arabs. To ignore that fact is to ignore generations of regional public protest on the matter and any number of international pulse-taking polls. James Zogby, of the Arab American Institute, which regularly conducts polls on Arab issues, wrote in September, “The importance of Palestine to Arabs is not exactly news. Our public opinion polls across the Middle East have consistently demonstrated the central role this issue plays in shaping the Arab world view.”<sup>2</sup>

The 1978 Camp David Accords, signed between Egypt and Israel, takes into account the Palestinian issue by referring to the “legitimate rights” of the Palestinian people, a framework entailing a just resolution to the regional conflict, and, among other things, a withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>3</sup> Having accomplished a partial withdrawal (to questionable effect) both Egypt and Israel have seen fit to rest on their laurels. The years since have seen one successive U.S. president after another run his ship aground on the cliffs of the so-called peace process. Innumera-

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ble photo ops attest not only to the stagnation of the peace process, but also to the absence of democracy in Egypt: a procession of U.S. presidents have been photographed with Mubarak, recording iterative, failed attempts at peace.

However, as long as Mubarak was in power, Israel could continue to say that it was pursuing a course of peace, since it had the legitimacy of Egypt's participation behind it. And Egypt could say that it was doing its part to bring about peace to the region. As a piece of not-so-amateur theatrics, it worked well. However, as the peace process steadily lost credibility, the Egyptian government proceeded to look worse in the eye of its citizens. This was especially true during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in December 2008. Then-Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni visited Egypt directly before the attacks started, which made it look as if Egypt were complicit.

The image that the Egyptian government was not helping the Palestinian was painted many times. Following Hamas's electoral victory in 2006, Egypt's involvement in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations rarely seemed to support the Palestinian positions. The Egyptian regime didn't like Hamas any more than the Israelis did. In fact, that Hamas had won a democratic election clanged several warning bells in Cairo, where there was not much official enthusiasm for democratic elections of any sort, let alone ones that ushered in an Islamist winner. The Egyptian regime had been busy keeping the Muslim Brotherhood under its thumb for decades and bearing in mind the success that the Brotherhood had had at the polls in 2005, when it won 20 percent of the seats in Parliament, the regime was keen on keeping it there.

Hamas's takeover of Gaza in 2007 made Egypt's distaste for the group more salient. Egypt has always had something of a complicated relationship with Gaza. The area was under Egyptian administration from 1948 until the 1967 War, when Israel gained control of the territory. When the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty was signed in 1979, Gaza remained under Israeli occupation. There is a common misconception that the network of tunnels that run from Gaza to Egypt was not built until 2007, when Israel blockaded Gaza following Hamas's takeover of Gaza. In fact, those tunnels were first active in 1999–2000, but it was only after 2007 that both the Israelis and the Egyptians began to take notice.<sup>4</sup> Following the June 2007 takeover of Gaza by Hamas, Israel blockaded the Gaza Strip to put pressure on the group. The tunnels

enabled vital supplies of food and medicines, but they also saw a brisk traffic in weapons that created problems for Israel and, in a more complicated manner, for Egypt. The weapons smuggled out of Sinai allegedly found their way to Palestinians, to the obvious distress of the Israelis. Correspondingly, weapons smuggled into Sinai—according to the Egyptian government—were used to train and arm anti-regime militants and terrorists.<sup>5</sup>

Egyptians were not pleased that their government helped Israel enforce the blockade of Gaza. Things reached an unpleasant climax in January 2010, when the Egyptian army clashed with demonstrators on the Palestinian side of the Gaza border. The demonstrators pelted the Egyptians with rocks and were met with tear gas. It didn't help public perceptions that Egypt was constructing an underground steel barrier to block off the tunnels. Comparisons with what was known as the

Israeli-built "Apartheid Wall" were inevitable. The cherry on top was the army's clash with international activists who had accompanied a convoy that had originally set out from the United Kingdom. The convoy was led by British member of Parliament George Galloway, who was unceremoniously deported from Egypt on January 9, 2010.<sup>6</sup>

Undemocratic or not, the regime still had to nominally explain to its people why it was depriving beleaguered Palestinians of aid and, worse still, colluding with the Israelis. The state press went into overdrive, attempting to justify the situation. Abdel Monem Said Aly, then head of the state-run Ahram Centre for Strategic and Political Studies and later Chairman of the Board of Al-Ahram (until he was replaced in late March 2011, following the January 25 revolution,) laid out the reasons for Egypt's concerns:

The geographic link generates risks and challenges for Egyptian security, the safety of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the economic prosperity of Sinai and, of no less importance, the relationship between Hamas and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt.

Three additional security risks from Gaza were added in the last few years. The first involved smuggling of arms into Sinai and contributing to the training of terrorists who carried out deadly operations in Taba, Sharm al-Sheikh and Dahab on the Gulf of Aqaba coast. The second was the demographic invasion of Sinai

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by three quarters of a million Palestinians in January 2008. This alerted Egyptians to the possibility of a Palestinian takeover of Sinai, whether under pressure from Israel or by Hamas planning to create strategic depth for its very small territory. The third, a much more strategic security risk, involves Hamas becoming part of a much larger coalition of radicals that are targeting Egypt for having changed its posture to one of peace and moderation.<sup>7</sup>

Bittersweet relief for the Egyptian government came in the form of a young Egyptian soldier, who unwittingly sacrificed his life to the greater good of the regime. He was shot and killed—almost certainly by a Palestinian sniper—during the border clashes, and the government used anger at his death to turn public opinion against the Palestinians.

This emotional and political seesaw sums up Egyptian-Israeli relations that existed under the Mubarak regime. There was a great deal of pragmatic cooperation, but the Egyptian public generally perceived this cooperation to be at their expense and that of their Palestinian brethren. The Egyptian-Israeli partnership benefitted both countries in strategic and financial terms: the two received military and financial aid, particularly from the United States. Western publics and policymakers also viewed the Mubarak regime favorably because it was a reliable partner for Israel and often followed the West's lead on the world stage. However, the domestic costs were high for Egypt. As the country's foreign policy became increasingly quiescent, it had to take a back seat to new players on the field. Countries like Turkey and even tiny Qatar began to wield the regional influence that had once been Egypt's prerogative. At home, an increasingly dissatisfied public was both angry and ashamed at a foreign policy that embarrassed many and pleased few. And that was laid directly at the door shared by the Mubarak regime and the Israeli government.

While the Mubarak regime was largely impervious to public opinion, it invariably had its finger on the nation's pulse and understood well the importance of safety valves. The Palestinian issue was, in large part, one such acceptable safety valve. The regime often allowed demonstrations in support of Palestine (while keeping crowds firmly in check). If the regime had realized that those demonstrations would wind up being dummy runs for the ones that eventually brought the whole system tumbling to the ground in January of this year, it un-

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doubtedly would have reconsidered. As it turned out, Egyptians were used to turning out to support Palestine and, almost by default, voice their displeasure at both Israel's actions and their own regime's perceived complicity. Those demonstrations, attended by otherwise disparate groups united in their displeasure at Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, provided training in organizational logistics which would later prove useful in toppling a regime.

## AFTER THE REVOLUTION

The Egyptians killed as a result of the August 18 incident were not the first Egyptian casualties at the hands of Israeli troops at the border, but they were the first ones in an Egypt where Egyptian life seemed to matter.

Under former management, the deaths of the Egyptian soldiers would have been regrettable mostly to those nearest and dearest to them. As news, it would have made the opposition press, where it would have gotten play but no tangible results, and it would have been buried in an inside page in the state-owned papers. For most countries, such incidents would have been an affront to national dignity. But wholly undemocratic and generally indifferent to public opinion, the Egyptian regime was largely impervious to such matters and, additionally, was able to effectively muffle dissent by anyone who felt differently. But on rare occasions there had been official responses to such incidents. In 2004, three Egyptian policemen near Rafah, on the Egyptian side of the border, were accidentally shot and killed by Israeli guards. Then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon expressed his "deepest apologies" while Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Abul Gheit demanded an investigation.<sup>8</sup> The aggrieved Egyptian reaction and the correspondingly contrite Israeli one might have had something to do with the fact that anti-Israeli sentiment was high at the time in Egypt: the previous month, local papers had covered the story of a thirteen-year-old Palestinian girl, who had been repeatedly shot by an Israeli officer near a checkpoint in Gaza. It would have been an unwise and unnecessary move on the Egyptian government's part to ignore public opinion entirely.<sup>9</sup>

In August 2011, moments after news agencies published accounts of the deaths, Egyptian social media began to vibrate ceaselessly with news and commentary on the matter. The deaths of Egyptian soldiers by Israelis touched a raw nerve. Once an independent Multinational Forces Overseas (MFO) report confirmed the

following day that the Israelis had shot the soldiers on the Egyptian side of the border, public opinion could not be turned back. A crowd of several thousand demonstrated in front of the Israeli embassy, demanding the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador from Egypt (who was out of the country at the time) and the recall of the Egyptian envoy to Israel. A young Egyptian scaled the walls of the building that housed the Israeli embassy, pulled off the Israeli flag, replaced it with an Egyptian one, and promptly became known as “Flagman”—an Egyptian hero.

The furor provided many of the new players on the Egyptian political scene an opportunity to show that they represented the people. It gave them a chance to take a stand on an issue that is a known commodity. Most importantly, since the only people who were actually in a position to do anything, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), were unlikely to alter the status quo in the immediate future, these individuals could demand justice and honor, knowing that there would be no tangible results, and thus no downsides.

The first political players to react were the presidential candidates, possibly because individuals move faster than political parties, which have to deal with a vast machinery. The candidates vied to lambaste Israel, call for the redemption of national honor, and, in some cases, for the annulment of the peace treaty.

Amre Moussa, former Egyptian foreign minister and former secretary general of the Arab League, who is the current frontrunner in presidential polls, was the first to comment. “Israel and any other [country] must understand that the day our sons get killed without a strong and an appropriate response, is gone and will not come back,” Moussa posted on his Twitter account.

Those are strong words for a former top diplomat, particularly when one takes into account that Moussa was secretary-general of a conspicuously inert Arab League when Israel pounded both Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and 2008, respectively. Moussa recently came under fire when Wikileaks released a cable revealing that he had approved the deal on natural gas exports to Israel. It was important, therefore, that he appear to be on the right side of the argument, this time.

Known simply as “the gas deal” and a major source of public resentment in Egypt, the Egypt-Israel gas arrangement was the subject of a major corruption inquiry

launched in April, in which the former minister of petroleum, Sameh Fahmy and Egyptian businessman and Mubarak crony, Hussein Salem, have been implicated. At a hearing in mid-September, Amr Arnauty, a member of the Administrative Supervisory Authority, testified that the government, then led by Prime Minister Atef Ebeid, had assigned East Mediterranean Gas (EMG), an Egyptian-Israeli company—in which Salem is a major shareholder—to sell gas (1.7 billion cubic meters annually) to the State of Israel in 2000. The fifteen-year contract was signed in 2005, with prices to be set between a minimum of \$0.75 and a maximum of \$1.25 per million British thermal units (Btu), unless Brent Crude reached \$35 per barrel, in which case the price would rise to \$1.50.<sup>10</sup> By the time gas exports actually started, in 2008, international prices had tripled, with the direct cost of exporting the gas weighing in at \$2.56 per million Btu. The prosecution alleges that the deal cost Egypt \$714 million in lost revenue.<sup>11</sup>

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Hot on Moussa’s heels was Magdy Hetata, former chief of staff of the armed forces. Hetata not only demanded an apology from Israel, but also the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador, a lawsuit against the state of Israel, an investigation into the affair, and a retooling of the peace treaty. He also demanded that the files of previous similar deaths be reopened—something that could

cause further embarrassment to the former regime, the Israeli government, and any new Egyptian government, which would feel it had to act on the information.

Though they disagree on almost every domestic policy, the Islamist and the Nasserite presidential candidates oddly found common ground in their moderate positions on Israel. While Abd al-Moneim Abul Fotouh, a former leader in the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamdin Sabahi both called for apologies, and cessation of gas exports, they did not go as far as the others. Those familiar with the views held by Sabahi—an ardent Nasserite, who has always opposed normalization with the State of Israel—were surprised at how relatively tempered his response was. He stopped short of calling for the annulment of the peace treaty, instead saying that he would put the agreement up for referendum.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising reaction came from Mohamed Selim al-Awwa, a noted and well-respected Islamist whose pro-Palestine views are a matter of public record. Awwa was against any escalation of the crisis, firmly quashing any calls for war or the expulsion of the ambassador. He also specifically said that any attack on

the Israeli embassy was both illegal and a moral and religious sin.

The political parties, meanwhile, came to a quick consensus: Israel must apologize, there had to be an investigation, and, ideally, the Israeli ambassador had to be expelled (and the Egyptian envoy recalled). Initially most parties called for at least a reassessment of both the gas deal and the peace treaty; however, those positions were generally moderated once the SCAF made it clear these issues were not up for discussion. Individual announcements aside, there wasn't a single party in the country that didn't voice its anger and a demand that the government do something.

So the government did something.

Prime Minister Essam Sharaf (whose appointment was the direct result of public pressure on the SCAF, and who was practically baptized in Tahrir Square by activists and demonstrators when he paid the square a visit the day he was appointed) unsheathed his online sword. "Our glorious revolution took place so that Egyptians could regain their dignity at home and abroad. What was tolerated in pre-revolution Egypt will not be in post-revolution Egypt," he wrote on his Facebook page.

The Egyptian cabinet produced announcements both on state television and on its website deploring what had happened in language that would have been unthinkable under Mubarak and hinted at expelling the ambassador. The cabinet largely took its cue from public opinion. "This is probably what the new Egyptian government is going to look like," an Israeli government official told the *Los Angeles Times*. "They have to follow the beat of the street. For Israel, that means more tumultuous times."<sup>13</sup>

However, it isn't the cabinet that runs the country but the SCAF—the military council that has ruled Egypt since it pushed Mubarak aside. As soon as the number of demonstrators outside the Israeli embassy swelled over a thousand, a SCAF general promptly called in to a popular talk show to clarify the situation. He said that the Israeli military had already offered an apology about what had happened, that there would be an official investigation into the incident, and that under no circumstances was either Egypt or Israel interested in this situation escalating to war.

In this case, the backtracking that followed on both sides was impressive in its promptness and enthusiasm.

Both Israeli president Shimon Peres and defense minister Ehud Barak expressed regret over the incident. This, of course, was not the same as an official apology, but it was not to be sneezed at, considering that Israel has refused to apologize to Turkey—formerly its strongest ally in the region—over its killing of nine Turkish nationals intending to break the Gaza blockade last year. Indeed, considering that Israel has rarely apologized for the inadvertent deaths of any Egyptian soldiers over the past thirty years of peace, or for mistreatment of Egyptian prisoners of war during the 1956 and 1967 wars (despite admitting to atrocities),<sup>14</sup> it was quite a shuffle forward. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu carefully avoided apportioning any more blame to Egypt. After some waffling, Barak confirmed that there would, indeed, be a joint investigation (as opposed to an Israeli one).

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This was followed by Egyptian foreign minister Mohamed Amr's statement that recalling Egypt's envoy to Israel "was never on the table."<sup>15</sup> The official statement released, in fact, makes no mention of any such recall.

It seemed friction in the relationship had reduced: the SCAF, the government, and the political parties had settled on a moderate tone. The Egyptian masses, however, still demanded a tougher response. On September 9, following peaceful daytime demonstrations in Tahrir Square calling for a swifter resolution to promised political reforms, an unruly crowd made its way down to the Israeli embassy in Giza. Over the course of several hours, the crowd proceeded to knock down a wall erected by the army to protect the embassy. It's unclear how it started, but the situation deteriorated—apparently through the involvement of a group of ultra-violent football thugs, still angry about their run-in with the security forces at a football match the week before. Over the next twelve hours or so, the situation rapidly got worse, and crowds stormed the building, ultimately breaking into the peripheral offices of the embassy. While most of the embassy staff, including the ambassador, had been airlifted out earlier, six Israeli security personnel remained locked inside the building. According to Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel placed frantic calls to both President Obama and SCAF members, and a group of Egyptian commandos was sent in to rescue the Israeli personnel. Down in the street, the security forces finally resorted to tear gas and live ammunition. Three people were

killed, over a hundred people were arrested, and another four hundred injured.

Condemnation of the violence and the embassy storming was almost universal in Egypt, although almost all the parties laid the blame at the feet of the SCAF's inability to respond appropriately to the border shootings. The general attitude was that violence was an entirely unacceptable response, and not merely because it handed Israel the moral upper hand. One particularly surprising response came from the Salafi group al-Da'wa al-Salafiya. The group's statement termed the storming "irresponsible actions" and said it weakened Egypt's position vis-à-vis Israel and any amendment of the peace treaty. Another reference to the treaty turned up in a statement by the Socialist Party of Egypt, which blamed the SCAF, again, and said that any attempt to liberate Egypt from "shameful agreements" with Israel and its sponsor, the United States, would require a long struggle.<sup>16</sup> There would be no more violence.

Nor, apparently, would there be any blunders by government officials, even if they happened to be the prime minister. On September 15, Prime Minister Essam Sharaf said grandly, in an interview with a Turkish television channel, that, "The Camp David agreement is not a sacred thing and is always open to discussion with what would benefit the region and the case of fair peace ... and we could make a change if needed."<sup>17</sup> That was, however, the last time that suggestion emanated from the prime minister's office.

What happened on October 12 is perhaps indicative of the new balance of the Egypt-Israel relationship. Israel formally apologized to Egypt for the deaths of the six soldiers. The apology, announced by Defense Minister Ehud Barak "expressed deep regret and apology" and offered condolences to the families of the dead. Five weeks later, Egypt proved to Israel—and anyone else paying attention—that it was still a regional force to be dealt with. On October 18, Hamas released Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit after five years of captivity. The Egyptian-brokered deal saw 1,027 Palestinian prisoners released as part of swap. Shalit's release on its own would have been significant. But it was doubly so after the revolution because Mubarak and his security head envoy, Omar Suleiman, had been unable to pull this off for five years.

There have been hiccups in the relationship, of course. In June, Egyptian authorities arrested Ilan Grappel, a

young man with dual Israeli-U.S. citizenship, on charges of spying for Israel. Grappel claimed that he had been working for a legal aid organization in Egypt but had made no secret of his dual nationality. He was released to the Israelis on October 27 in exchange for twenty-five Egyptians incarcerated in Israel, among them three minors.

## TO AMEND OR NOT TO AMEND: THE FUTURE OF THE CAMP DAVID TREATY

How the Egyptian people, or indeed political parties, apparently, felt about the State of Israel was one thing. How they viewed they should deal with it was another. And apparently, dealing with the State of Israel is a fact of life, no matter how distasteful. As Egyptians would say, one just had to squirt some lemon over it (to mask the unpleasant taste) and just get on with it.

It was never likely that all those demonstrators outside the Israeli embassy would bring about an outcome that the SCAF didn't want. Major General Hamdy Badin, chief of military police, told journalist Yasmine al-Rashidi, that it was "out of the question that such a decision would be made. To ask an ambassador to leave or to recall our own ambassador would escalate a situation in a way that we are not ready for and do

not want. We will not be asking the ambassador to leave, we will not be recalling our own envoy, and we will not be asking the embassy to remove the flag."<sup>18</sup>

The military understands what the public's emotional response may ignore: that a war with Israel is both impossible and impossibly costly. The Egyptian military and the Israeli government have things in common: both are deeply worried about Hamas and both value the financial and technical support from the United States that a sustained peace brings. As long as the military remains powerful in Egypt (and it is likely that it will continue to hold the reins, one way or another, even after the elections that are starting on November 28) there will be no wars with Israel—provided there are no further escalations.

Yet, in the wake of the August 18 incident, the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt proved mutable, not only in rhetoric, but in practice. Although the peace treaty specifically limits Egyptian deployment in the Sinai to 750 soldiers, without tanks or artillery, Israel has agreed to allow the deployment of thousands of

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soldiers, with helicopters, armored cars, and the tanks of the battalion it had allowed in when Egypt's military was conducting its Sinai clean-up in July. Those tanks will stay in Sinai although Israel has so far not indicated that any more will be allowed in. The Sinai has always been a difficult territory to govern and, in the wake of the revolution and the resulting security gap, tribal and extremist factions have been battling for supremacy. In late July, the Egyptian military signaled the end of its patience by initiating Operation Eagle: it sent in over 1,000 men, arrested over twenty extremists, made peace with many of the tribes, and promised development and jobs. Part of the Egypt-Israel relationship is based on Egypt effectively protected Israel's borders, and it does Israel no good to cripple its neighbor in that regard. Without Egypt, Israel cannot effectively control or secure its Sinai borders and it knows it.

Though it is extremely unlikely that any Egyptian government will ever suggest annulment of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, Israel should face up to the fact that there is high Egyptian interest in amending it. The amendments will probably relate to security concerns—in line with Article IV, paragraph 1—particularly in regard to the allowed Egyptian troop deployment in the Sinai.<sup>19</sup> By permitting Egypt to violate the treaty in its recent deployments, Israel has already indicated that it understands that the status quo isn't particularly beneficial for anybody.

Some in Israel seem to have recognized this. Sort of. In August 27, *The Economist* quoted Barak as saying, "Sometimes you have to subordinate strategic considerations to tactical needs."<sup>20</sup> Following Barak's announcement, the speaker of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin, noted that it was all very well for the prime minister and defense minister to run around making statements but that the "Knesset's approval was needed before making any changes to political agreements."<sup>21</sup> There have been no further announcements as of early November.

In fact, it could have been extremely advantageous to Israel had its government sought to amend the treaty before the Egyptian election season. Indicating such a willingness could have prevented Egyptian political parties from using the treaty as part of their campaign platform. The Israeli government would have also found it vastly easier to negotiate with the SCAF—which is highly pragmatic and concerned primarily with internal security—than with a newly-elected government, the makeup of which is an unknown factor and which will assuredly

be more answerable to the popular, anti-Israel outlook of the Egyptian public.

It appears, however, that the Netanyahu government has no intention of renegotiating the peace treaty. The day after Sharaf's Turkish interview, where he said that the treaty was "not sacred," the director-general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, Rafi Barak, summoned Egyptian ambassador Yasser Reda to express Israel's "irritation over the recurrent calls from senior Egyptian officials over the need for modification to the peace treaty and other anti-Israeli statements."<sup>22</sup> During the thirty-minute interview at the foreign ministry headquarters in Jerusalem, Barak told Reda that "from Israel's perspective, there are no intentions whatsoever to reopen the peace treaty and the step cannot be taken unilaterally."<sup>23</sup>

While it is certainly true that such a step cannot be taken by either party on its own, it is to Israel's advantage to consider indicating that an amended treaty is an option. Negotiation is always more advantageous when it is on one's own terms. Until a new Egyptian government is elected (which could be mid-2013, according to the latest SCAF timeline) Israel would be dealing with the army—an entity that will take an all-encompassing view of the situation. It will bear in mind that impossibility of war, the desirability of a cooperative neighbor—which, if not precisely a friend is most definitely an ally—and of continued international (read U.S.) financial and military aid.

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## POST-REVOLUTIONARY EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS

In light of the January 25 Revolution, Israel no longer has the luxury, or the security, of dealing with a handful of Egyptian leaders. While the move toward democracy in Egypt is likely to be a slow and painful grind, Israel is still going to have to deal with a government more accountable to its people. And considering that any new government is going to struggle with the prodigious social and economic burdens left by the former regime, a populist foreign policy may be considered an easy crowd-pleaser. While it is unlikely that public opinion will decide foreign policy, it will no longer be possible to discount it. As a result, Israel is going to have to rethink its own policies, particularly in respect to the Palestinians and its closest neighbors. Considering the domestic problems that Israel is currently struggling with, and particularly in light of the prominence of reli-

gious movements and the strength and apparent vehemence of belief of its settler population, it will be especially hard for this Israeli government to start learning new sheet music.

Assuming that Egypt and Israel can both see their way to being a little adaptable, there is much room for maneuver. To start with, the SCAF is unlikely to relinquish much power soon, regardless of the elections scheduled to begin this November. There is no doubt that the military leadership has Egypt's interests at heart, and it has a vested interest in keeping the peace with Israel and in maintaining its privileged economic status and a friendly relationship with Washington. A solid relationship with Israel is integral to those requirements. Eventually, however, an increasing amount of power will pass to an elected civilian government, which will in all likelihood—if the response of the political parties following the storming of the Israeli embassy is any indicator—be just as pragmatic about the benefits of the peace treaty.

The direct Israel-Egypt relationship has changed because of the January 25 Revolution. In addition, Israel must understand that its treatment of the Palestinians, and its actions or inactions on the peace front, is now likely to have indirect bearings on its relationship with its neighbor, with very real consequences. As Daniel Levy puts it, “Quite simply, Israel cannot have a strategy for managing its regional posture without having a Palestinian strategy.” Unfortunately, he notes, “Today it no longer has one.”<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that the vast majority of Egyptians have no real interest in Israel either way: the sentiment is directly related to the country's treatment of Palestinians, and if that were to improve, then anti-Israeli sentiment is likely to subside. For reference, one can look back to the heady days of the Yitzhak Rabin government, when it looked as if peace were on the horizon. The lull in hostile activity towards Palestinians meant that there was a corresponding lull in hostile sentiment toward Israel. Israelis were even permitted to turn up as sympathetic characters in Egyptian soap operas, an unofficial litmus test of public opinion.

## EGYPT'S RETURN TO REGIONAL INFLUENCE

One important development to watch is Egypt's relationship with Turkey. Turkey has used the Arab Spring, its economic power, and an anti-Israel rhetoric to carve

out for itself a regional leadership role that once belonged to Egypt. Having shaken off a self-serving dictator, Egypt is likely to want that throne back. It will not do for a regional leader to be seen as less determined or principled than Turkey, and this will mean that Egypt will not be able to bend over backwards to accommodate Israel any longer.

Concurrent with the August Egyptian-Israeli border incident, the more-than year long-spat between Turkey and Israel reached its climax. On September 2, in response to Israel's refusal to apologize for the May 2010 flotilla confrontation, Turkey promptly announced that it was expelling the Israeli ambassador and downgrading military and diplomatic relations. It was an act that brought the Egyptian reaction sharply into focus. The Egyptian independent daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm's* headline threw tact to the wind: “Turkey Teaches Egypt a Lesson and Expels the Israeli Ambassador.”<sup>25</sup> With Israel's increased regional isolation, and as long as Arab publics lap up anti-Israeli rhetoric and actions, an Egypt seeking a leading regional role may be forced to be more aggressive than it would be otherwise inclined.

Turkish premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan's September 13 visit to Cairo for the Arab League meeting was another irritant to the SCAF. Two days before the visit, huge billboards of Erdogan, with his hand on his heart standing in front of Egyptian and Turkish flags, popped up all over Cairo. When he arrived at the airport, he received a welcome more fitting for a rock star than a head of state. Erdogan has been much admired in Egypt: for apparently making his country a player on the global stage, for proving that Islam and democracy are not incompatible at home, and for what is perceived to be a strong stance against Israel. His expulsion of the Israeli ambassador resonated with Egyptians in the wake of the border shooting. Lost in the excitement was the fact that Turkey had been waiting fifteen months for an apology to the Mavi Marmara incident and the expulsion was an end-of-the-line action. It's easier to be heroic when one is done being pragmatic.

Nor did he come empty-handed. The Turkish delegation included 280 businessmen, who signed about \$1 billion worth in contracts in a single day, according to Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

Israel must be paying very close attention to the new relationship between Egypt and Turkey, two of the most populous and militarily powerful nations in the

*Turkey has used the Arab Spring, its economic power, and an anti-Israel rhetoric to carve out for itself a regional leadership role that once belonged to Egypt.*



region. Both have been strategic partners with Israel, but those relationships are no longer as close.

There was enormous fuss surrounding Erdogan's speech at the Arab League meeting, and it echoed that which accompanied Obama's, at Cairo University, two years ago. While he struck all the right notes, with his emphasis on democratic reform and backing of Palestinian statehood, it remains to be seen whether he will prove as much of a disappointment to Egyptians and Arabs as Obama has been.

## SO WHERE DOES THE UNITED STATES COME IN?

The U.S. administration has been consistently behind the curve during the political upheavals of the region. To be fair, it has not been an easy scenario to foretell. However, a democratic Egypt, with strong institutions and a respect for human and civil rights enshrined in a new constitution, is in America's interest. Indeed, it is vital for the stability of the region. Support for this nascent democracy will not necessarily be easy, given that the country is currently governed by a military that does not particularly appear to believe in, or value, civilian rule. Yet, the United States will need to step carefully to avoid antagonizing the military, an institution that is an important domestic and regional player, but that sees its power threatened by the encroaching reality of democracy.

Of course, funding is an enormously pliable tool. It can be handed over to encourage and it may be withheld to make a point. Egypt and Israel are the two largest recipients of U.S. military aid. To date, the U.S. has generally only threatened to cut off aid to Egypt and has been even more timid in the case of Israel. Sabers that aren't rattled occasionally are merely wall decorations. If the United States is going to have any credibility in its role as regional peacemaker, then it needs to find a way to politely coerce when polite requests are ignored.

In addition to funding, encouraging investment is an excellent way to prove support. Particularly in Egypt's current uncertain economic environment, encouraging American companies to do business in Egypt would let people know that the United States is not simply an arbiter of Israeli interests. It is also vital to find a way to undo the damage caused by Obama's speech at the United Nations on September 21, when he spoke of the importance of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, while making it clear that the United States would use its Security Council veto to block a Palestinian request for statehood. The speech was widely viewed by Arabs as surprising in its lack of sensitivity to Palestinian suffering, and it was generally considered to be the latest nail in the coffin of the United States as a broker in the peace talks.

Ultimately, the United States should be more receptive than proactive at the moment. It has not had a particularly good record of predicting needs or trends in the region—understandably so, since it has only ever had to deal with dictatorships in recent history. Simply saying that it is on hand to provide technical or financial support—in the form of investment as well as grants—would be an excellent idea.

Adaptability is a challenge to any successful nation. If one cannot take the status quo for granted, then one must adapt the current state of affairs to one's needs. Perhaps one of the more interesting byproducts of the revolution is that it is likely to reintroduce an art that had been missing for too long from the region: the art of diplomacy. Finesse, it appears, might end up trumping brutal force after all.

- <sup>1</sup> Anshel Pfeffer and Revital Levy-Stein, "Netanyahu: We Will Respond Firmly When Israelis are Hurt," *Haaretz*, August 18, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> James Zogby, "On a Collision Course With Arab Opinion," Arab American Institute *Washington Watch*, September 19, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Text of Camp David Accords available at <<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/Camp+David+Accords.htm>>.
- <sup>4</sup> One report puts the first tunnel at 1999, Alexandra Robinson, "Gaza's Tunnels: An Inside Perspective," *The Palestine Chronicle*, July 24, 2011, available at <[http://palestinechronicle.com/view\\_article\\_details.php?id=17002](http://palestinechronicle.com/view_article_details.php?id=17002)>; According to the Israel Security Agency, the use of tunnels in Gaza began in September 2000, " Hamas Use of Gaza Strip-based Subterranean Route," Israel Security Agency, available at <<http://www.shabak.gov.il/English/EnTerrorData/Reviews/Pages/hamas-tunnel.aspx>>.
- <sup>5</sup> Abdel Monem Said Aly, "The Egyptian Paradox in Gaza," *Bitterlemons-International*, January 8, 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Abigail Hauslohner, "In the Siege of Gaza, Egypt Walks a Delicate Line," *Time*, January 11, 2010.
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- <sup>11</sup> Tamsin Carlise, "Corruption Inquiry Focus on Egyptian Gas Contract," *The National*, April 26, 2011
- <sup>12</sup> Zeinab Al-Gundy, "Sinai Crisis: Presidential Candidates, Parties and Movements React," *Abram Online*, August 25, 2011.
- <sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Fleishman and Edmund Sanders, "Israel Apologizes for Egyptian Soldiers' Deaths," *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2011.
- <sup>14</sup> Zeinab Al-Gundy, "Sinai Crisis: Presidential Candidates, Parties and Movements React."
- <sup>15</sup> Stephen Farrell and Isabel Kershner, "Egypt Disavows Threat to Recall Envoy to Israel," *New York Times*, August 22, 2011.
- <sup>16</sup> Zeinab Al-Gundy, "Egyptian Parties Criticise Attack on Israel Embassy, as Well as SCAF," *Abram Online*, September 12, 2011.
- <sup>17</sup> "Peace with Israel Not Sacred, Says Egypt PM," *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 16, 2011.
- <sup>18</sup> Yasmine El-Rashidi, "Egypt's Israel Problem," *NYR blog*, September 2, 2011
- <sup>19</sup> Article IV, paragraph 1 states: "In order to provide maximum security for both Parties on the basis of reciprocity, agreed security arrangements will be established including limited force zones in Egyptian and Israeli territory, and United Nations forces and observers, described in detail as to nature and timing in Annex I, and other security arrangements the Parties may agree upon."
- <sup>20</sup> Springtime in the Sinai, *The Economist*, August 27, 2011.
- <sup>21</sup> "Israel to allow more Egyptian forces into Sinai," *Israel Hayom*, August 26, 2011.
- <sup>22</sup> Ronen Medzini, "'Foreign Ministry summons Egyptian envoy,'" *Ynetnews*, September 16, 2011, available at <<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4123158,00.html>>.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Daniel Levy, "Can Tahrir Square Come to Tel Aviv?" *The Nation*, September 12, 2011.
- <sup>25</sup> Lead story, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, September 2, 2011.

