The American Interest

September 4, 2012

Israel and the New Egypt: Is it all bad news?

SHLOMO BROM, SHAI FELDMAN & SHIMON STEIN

Not surprisingly, Israelis are alarmed at the prospect that their southern neighbor will now be led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Israel lost "the devils it knew": not only Mubarak, but also his top lieutenants, such as General Omar Suleiman, head of Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate, with whom Israelis have been dealing for years. They fear that in the new Egypt it may no longer be possible to "close deals" with a very small number of individuals located in the Office of the President and in the security services. They also worry that public opinion will now matter more, and that Egyptian policy toward Israel will be affected to a far greater extent by the sentiments in the Egyptian street, whose hostility toward Israel was given expression by the ransacking of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo in September 2011. Finally, there is fear that Egyptian-Israeli relations will experience a sharp and rapid deterioration. This fear is understandable, given the Brotherhood's history of rejecting Israel's right to exist, as well as its formal and vocal opposition to the 1978 Camp David Accords and the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty.

President Morsi's August 12 sacking of the top commanders of the Egyptian Military and intelligence services only exacerbates these Israeli concerns. The sacking signaled a further tilt in the internal balance of power in favor of Egypt's new Brotherhood-dominated civilian leadership at the expense of security chiefs with whom Israel has had decades-long relations.

While these fears and concerns remain valid, the picture emerging some months after the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent is more complex, presenting risks but also opportunities. Israel and the new Egypt share some important interests that may help preserve the two countries' relations. These interests are important because Egypt's new leaders are likely to follow not only their ideological inclinations but also the geostrategic interests of the Egyptian state. (One such key interest is preserving Egypt's close ties with the United States.) Whether these opportunities will be utilized to preserve if not improve Egyptian-Israeli ties depends not only on the complexities of post-revolutionary Egypt but also on the manner in which Israel will conduct itself—in its relations with Egypt, as well as in other realms that affect Egyptian-Israeli bilateral relations.

The following are a number of key areas where an Egyptian-Israeli shared agenda may emerge.

Hamas in Gaza

Since Hamas was born as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, underestimating the importance of the ideological affinity between the two movements would be a grave mistake. However, the new leadership in Cairo shares with Israel a common interest in avoiding another violent explosion between Israel and Gaza. Israel's interest is clear: It wishes to avoid developments that endanger its citizens in the south and disrupt their daily lives. But Egypt also fears such explosions, because it seeks to avoid developments that might push the problems of Gaza and its population into its own lap. Egypt's concern is that such responsibility would pull it into an unwanted confrontation with Israel instigated by some Hamas action.

One important way to avoid such explosions is for Israel and Hamas to reach a tacit understanding on "rules of the game." This would minimize the danger that, by initiating terror and other attacks, small extremist groups would succeed in embroiling Hamas and Israel in an escalating conflict. Egypt's new leaders have an opportunity to play a positive role here. Whereas until now Egypt's mediation between Israel and Hamas has been limited to negotiating ceasefires and the Shalit prisoner-exchange deal, the new environment offers an opportunity for Egypt to help Israel and Hamas reach such broader understandings.

The understandings suggested here would need to include the creation of mechanisms that would allow Israel and Hamas to explain to one another the steps they may take in an evolving crisis, so as to avoid misunderstandings that lead to inadvertent escalation. Such escalation has occurred in recent past, when Israel reacted to attacks launched by small extremist groups in the Sinai by punishing elements of Hamas in Gaza.

Another important possible task for Egypt would be to play a more effective role in fostering internal Palestinian reconciliation. Playing such a role in a manner that does not clash with Israel's interests would require that both Israel and Hamas reframe their approaches to this issue. Israel would need to acknowledge that it has an interest in such reconciliation producing a single Palestinian address with which Israel can reach understandings, even if limited to practical matters falling short of full resolution of the conflict. Within this context, Israel should further liberalize the arrangements guiding movements of goods to and from Gaza.

In turn, Hamas would need to allow the creation of a new Palestinian government that would *not* be committed to implementing Hamas' ideology and would *not* include acknowledged members of the movement. In the latter case, Israel would need to reciprocate by accepting that the Quartet's three preconditions for engagement would apply to the post-reconciliation new Palestinian government, *not* to the Hamas movement.

The Sinai Peninsula

The chaos in the Sinai Peninsula challenges both Israel and Egypt. As has already been demonstrated, extremist groups exploiting the chaos in the Sinai to launch terror attacks against Israel can exact a heavy toll on the Jewish state. In addition, chaos in the Sinai invites human trafficking, thus exacerbating Israel's problem of rising illegal immigration. Yet such chaos also challenges Egypt directly, as was made clear by the August 5 attack on an Egyptian army outpost, which claimed 16 Egyptian lives. More broadly, Egypt's sovereignty over Sinai—the restoration of which cost the Egyptians tens of thousands of lives during the 1970 War of Attrition and the 1973 War—has now been compromised, surrendered to an odd amalgamation of Bedouin tribes, Palestinian extremist groups, and al-Qaeda affiliated cells.

Thus Egypt and Israel share an interest in preventing the Sinai Peninsula from becoming a base for, and a magnet attracting, radical groups. For this reason, Israel has a national security interest in Egypt's taking measures to restore and reassert its sovereignty over the Sinai. At the same time, Israel fears that an Egyptian deployment of forces in the Sinai that significantly exceeds the limitations stipulated in the 1979 Peace Treaty would be a slippery slope. Forces ostensibly deployed against radical groups in the Peninsula may "forget" to leave.

Muslim Brotherhood spokesmen have argued that, at a minimum, the security protocol of the 1979 treaty needs to be revised. This represents a turn to pragmatism, as the Brotherhood's leaders no longer call for abrogating the treaty. Yet Israelis understandably fear that opening up the treaty for revisions may prove to be just as slippery a slope.

A different Israeli approach might transform this risk to an opportunity. This could be the case if such a discussion would result in the new affirmation of the treaty, this time by an Egypt led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, the added legitimacy bestowed by the Brotherhood's tacit acceptance of the treaty may even be worth some Israeli acceptance of changes in its security protocol.

Syria and Iran

On matters related to Iran and Syria, the geostrategic interests of Israel and Egypt do not collide. In his inaugural address, and more recently in his August 30 speech at the Non-Aligned Movement in Tehran, President Morsi placed Egypt squarely with the opponents of Bashar Assad's regime and thus in opposition to Iran's efforts to save it. Indeed, with regard to the challenges that the civil war in Syria present, Israel and Egypt seem to share two important objectives: defeating Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the region, and avoiding Syria's

becoming even more chaotic than the Sinai and thus an even more dangerous magnet for the most extreme Islamist groups and cells, al-Qaeda-affiliated or not.

Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood leadership seems to view the Syria issue from two perspectives. As a leader of the Sunni Arab world, Egypt was clearly unhappy with the inroads that Shi'a Iran has made in the region, especially after the balance of power in the Gulf was destroyed by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Iran's support of Hezbollah was particularly troubling, culminating in the April 2010 discovery of a Hezbollah cell in Egypt. And Assad's Syria was seen as an indispensible transport route for Iran's support of Hezbollah.

Equally challenging are the prospects that post-revolutionary Syria would become a focal point for the region's Sunni Arab extremists in much the same way Iraq has experienced in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. The reemergence of such groups, this time in Syria, will challenge the Brotherhood as the leading authority in the world of Sunni political Islam. While Ennahada in Tunisia and the Brotherhood in Egypt have now come to represent one way to replace the old autocratic regimes of the Arab world, al-Qaeda represents the opposite approach.

These two critically important Egyptian interests are not incongruent with the manner in which Israel's view of the Syrian scene has evolved in recent months. In turn, this provides an opportunity for Israel and Egypt's new leaders to share their assessments, directly or through their respective professional bodies. While these shared interests would not necessarily translate into practical modes of cooperation, they at least point to the possibility that Israel and new Egypt may have common regional perspectives.

Palestinian-Israeli Peace?

Possibly the most intriguing question is whether Egypt can play a positive role in resuscitating the efforts to achieve Palestinian-Israeli Peace. The individuals handling the Palestinian file in Mubarak's Egypt were sensitive to Israel's concerns but not uncritical of Israeli policies. As noted earlier, the political leaders of post-Mubarak Egypt have very different sentiments.

While clearly problematic from Israel's standpoint, the Brotherhood's track-record also gives it an opportunity to play a positive role in an effort to rekindle the stalemated peace process. Enjoying a level of credibility and influence with Hamas that the Mubarak regime lacked, Egypt's new leaders can help renew the peace efforts by impressing upon Hamas the utility of joining such efforts instead of opposing them.

Yet for this more positive potential role for Egypt to materialize, Israel would need to adopt a more nuanced and creative approach. While not blind to the risks involved in trying to bridge or at least tactically bypass its ideological differences with Hamas and the broader Brotherhood movement, a new Israeli approach would need to recognize the enormous benefits of any

agreement with the Palestinians that would win the acceptance, if not endorsement, of the leading forces of political Islam.

The suggestions here point to the possibility that, despite the ideological gap dividing Israel and the new Muslim Brotherhood-led Egypt, they may have interests that coincide. This in turn opens new opportunities for preserving the two counties' relations, if not necessarily improving them. Due to the sensitivities involved, exploiting these opportunities would require that Israel approach this task with a great deal of finesse and a willingness to act quietly.

Brig. Gen. Shlomo Brom (retired) is a senior research associate at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv. He was head of Strategic Planning at the IDF's Planning Branch. **Shai Feldman** is director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University and a senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He was head of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University. **Shimon Stein** is a senior research fellow at INSS in Tel Aviv. He was Israel's Ambassador to Germany.

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