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Israel's Empty Embassy in Cairo

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Normalization between Israel and Egypt has always been limited, but even during periods of crisis, both countries were careful to preserve the fundamental assets of the peace between them, particularly the existence of functioning embassies in Tel Aviv and Cairo. The Egyptian embassy remained active even when Egypt recalled its ambassadors to Cairo for consultations in 1982, 2000, and 2012, in protest over Israel's policies. The Israeli embassy in Egypt did indeed limit its activity after it was invaded by demonstrators in September 2011, but the institution was preserved within the American embassy compound, and then in the residence of the Israeli ambassador. The only time that the Israeli presence in the Egyptian capital was cut off completely came in late 2016 – during a period that many consider to be one of the best in the history of relations between the two countries – when the Israeli ambassador and his staff returned to Israel due to security warnings. Months have passed since then, and the temporary is becoming permanent. Meantime, both sides have not rushed to find a formula that will enable the Israeli delegation to renew its work and restore proper diplomatic relations between the countries.

The Egyptian Viewpoint

The relationship between Israel and Egypt during the el-Sisi presidency can be described as close but narrow. According to press reports, it is characterized by intimate contacts between the leaders, but focused primarily on security coordination around shared challenges in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Security contacts take place directly between the armed forces, and therefore the absence of an ambassador does no damage on this score. Moreover, although Egypt does not oppose the return of the ambassador to Cairo, the prevailing situation of the last seven months has some advantages for it. It has removed the security burden of guarding the embassy, and saved the regime from the traditional criticisms from opponents of normalization about "the Israeli flag flying in the Egyptian capital." Over the years, Egypt has seen normalization as more of a burden than

an asset, although in the Peace Agreement both countries explicitly undertook to develop "friendly relations and cooperation" (preamble); bring about "diplomatic, economic and cultural relations" (section 3); and "exchange ambassadors" (Appendix 3, section 1). Accordingly, the embassy in Cairo was perceived as a "necessary evil" imposed on Egypt, and the Egyptian regime worked persistently to restrict its movements.

The controversial status of the Israeli embassy among the Egyptian establishment and public was handled comically in *The Embassy in the Building*, a movie starring Adel Emam that was released in 2005 and became a hit. The main character, who owns an apartment in the building where the embassy is located, finds himself at the center of a political row around the call to remove the facility, and becomes an unwilling national hero. In reality, however, serving in the Israeli embassy in Cairo was always a complex task. For example, Eliyahu Ben Elissar, Israel's first ambassador to Egypt, wanted to place a paid notice in the daily *al-Ahram* regarding public hours in the Israeli consulate, but the newspaper refused to accept it. The second ambassador, Moshe Sasson, dealt with a boycott and isolation, and not a single official representative of the Egyptian government attended a reception he held in honor of Israel's 40th Independence Day. Ephraim Dubek, the fourth ambassador, complained to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry about the strict "security arrangements" imposed on the embassy in order to reduce the stream of visitors and make life harder for residents of the street.

The Egyptian attitude to the current Israeli Ambassador, Dr. David Govrin, who took over the job in August 2016, was no different. A special supplement of the establishment journal *al-Ahram al-Arabi*, published on October 24, 2016, complained about Govrin's efforts "to leave the traditional ghetto of the Israeli ambassadors in Egypt" and accused him of "crossing red lines and deviating from diplomatic conventions." His "deviations," according to the supplement, included meeting with the heads of the Jewish community in Alexandria (where he allegedly offered assistance for renovation of the local synagogue); attending a performance of *A Thousand and One Nights* at the National Theater of Cairo (with a ticket purchased like any other member of the audience); and engaging with businessmen and civil society activists (who met with him of their own accord). These and other allegations stopped as soon as the ambassador returned to Israel.

At the same time, publicity surrounding Govrin's return to Israel was perceived as damaging to Egypt's image as a country that can cope with terror threats and guarantee the safety of foreign delegations on its soil. The crisis with Jerusalem regarding the embassy joined the voices of disappointment in Egypt over Israel's failure to respond to its efforts to restart the peace process with the Palestinians, following the secret summit meetings between el-Sisi, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and later with both Netanyahu and the Chairman of the Zionist Union Isaac Herzog in February and April 2016, respectively. In an article in *al-Ahram* on April 1, 2017, Dr. Ahmad Fuad Anwar of Alexandria University expressed anger at a breach of the undertaking given by

Netanyahu to the Egyptian President to set up a "dovish," pro-peace government. According to Anwar, whose academic expertise is Israel, Egypt expected the Israeli Prime Minister to work to bring the "Israeli left" into the coalition, but received the exact opposite, when Netanyahu added "more right wing extremists" to his government. In an article of April 29, Anwar added that "Egyptian-Israeli relations have not known such tension since the first Separation of Forces Agreement was signed on January 18, 1974." It is possible that this charged atmosphere was reflected in the way Egypt handled Israel's demands regarding the security issues involved in renewing the embassy's activities.

Importance of the Embassy in Cairo

Responsibility for the fact that the Israeli embassy in Cairo is not active does not rest solely with Egypt. Israel must do everything in its capacity to find a formula that can balance security needs with political considerations. Establishing the first Israeli embassy in the heart of the Arab world was and remains one of the most important achievements of the peace agreement with Egypt. It is not reasonable for Israel to accept continuation of the existing situation and be content only with political-security ties conducted through direct channels between the Prime Minister's and the Ministry of Defense's offices in Jerusalem with their counterparts in Cairo, thus limiting the role of the Foreign Ministry in the bilateral relations. This approach enables Egypt alone to benefit from the advantages of having a functioning embassy in Tel Aviv, while Israel cedes even the few signs of normalization it received in the past.

Despite the well known limitations, there is no substitute for an Israeli ambassador and an Israeli delegation in the most important Arab capital, which are important for Israel in several respects: first, to promote Israeli-Egyptian contacts and collaborations outside the security sphere, for example between civilian and economic ministries. An embassy operating on Egyptian soil can promote mutual interests in areas such as energy, water, agriculture, tourism, and trade. It can also play a vital role if and when a political process begins with Cairo's involvement. Second, it can build and reinforce contacts with representatives of Egyptian civil society. Third, it can form a direct impression of public opinion in Egypt, which is an essential element in the general situation assessment in Israel regarding the political, economic, and security stability in the Land of the Nile. Fourth, it demonstrates a physical and symbolic Israeli presence in the Egyptian capital. Fifth, it can channel messages to Egyptian public opinion and improve Israel's image among it. Indeed, an embassy has a central role in an environment where the widespread perception of Israel continues to demonize it with plots and conspiracy theories. The activities of the ambassador and his staff are widely covered in Egyptian media. Particularly in the current era of independent internet news portals and social networks,

this can be very helpful in countering prejudices, in humanizing the Israeli "other," and in promoting Israeli regional integration.

With Israel and Egypt soon marking four decades since Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, it is desirable for the two countries to reaffirm the foundations laid in the Camp David Accords and later anchored in the Peace Agreement. Israel must ensure that the terms of the peace between the two countries are honored to the letter, by implementing the principles of mutuality and equality. The establishment of "normal and friendly" relations (section 1), and the recognition of the "mutuality of interest in good neighborly relations" (section 5) are not just recommendations derived from shared interests or good will, but part of the contractual obligations accepted by both parties in the peace agreement. The return of the Israeli ambassador to Cairo as soon as possible is a basic prerequisite for maintaining and cultivating this framework of relations.