

# Egypt and Israel: Forty Years in the Desert of Cold Peace

## Moomen Sallam and Ofir Winter

On November 19, 2017, Israel and Egypt will mark the fortieth anniversary of Anwar Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem, when from the podium of the Knesset, the Egyptian President articulated his historic call for peace – “the last of wars and the end of sorrows...a new beginning to a new life – the life of love, prosperity, freedom and peace.”<sup>1</sup>

The fortieth anniversary of this seminal event, which was followed by drawn-out negotiations that ultimately concluded successfully with the signing of a peace treaty on March 26, 1979, invites a reassessment of the successes and disappointments of the Egyptian-Israeli peace thus far. The hope, particularly in Israel, was that the agreement would lead to warm, neighborly relations between Egyptians and Israelis based on coexistence, an acceptance of the other, and mutual cooperative endeavors. In practice, however, the peace between Egypt and Israel has remained “cold,” providing the two countries with more than the “negative peace” of an armistice but less than a “positive peace,” which in its broad sense includes reconciliation, mutual acceptance, and cooperative endeavors between the states and their peoples.<sup>2</sup> Israel and Egypt have limited themselves to tactical security coordination between their armies, correct diplomatic relations, and specific cooperative economic endeavors, while the cultivation of civic relationships between the two peoples, such as large scale economic interactions and the exchange of cultures, remains a far-off vision.

Early in the era of peace, following three decades of hostility and bloody wars, it was already clear that the mental, consciousness-based transition from conflict to peace would be no simple matter. President Sadat himself

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estimated that the processes of reconciliation, coexistence, and normalization between Egypt and Israel would be something experienced by future generations. In an interview with the Egyptian weekly *October* in February 1980, he explained that peoples could not be forced to expunge from their hearts feelings of bitterness that accumulated over many years of conflict. As a result, he did not urge the Egyptian people to establish normal relations with the Israeli people, and instead called on them to prepare the path to such relations, in hope that time would play its part in healing the wounds.<sup>3</sup>

Today, in the era of the “future generations” mentioned by Sadat, it is important to consider why the changes that were envisioned have yet to occur, whether the two sides can take action to promote them, and if so, how. These questions assume even greater importance under the rule of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in light of the close security coordination between the two countries in their fight against the common terrorist threats from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, as well as the relations of trust that have been established between Egyptian and Israeli officials working in parallel in the political and the military realms. In addition, it is important to consider the shared interest that has emerged in economic activity, particularly in the realm of energy, in light of the discovery of natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Also relevant is the decline in importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Egyptian public opinion – especially among the younger generation – against the background of the internal and regional unrest that has constituted the focus of the public agenda in recent years.

These circumstances present Israel and Egypt with a window of opportunity to begin a new chapter in their relations, although doing so will require the formulation of Egyptian and Israeli government policies that encourage the institutionalization and cultivation of inter-field cooperation between the civilians of both countries. It will also require renewing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

### **Roots of the Cold Peace: The Debate**

The peace between Israel and Egypt is perhaps best associated with the term “cold peace,” which was coined in 1982 by Egypt’s then-Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Boutros Boutros-Ghali to describe the limited, reserved, and at times hostile relations between the two countries. Historians, however, engage in a lively debate regarding whether the Israeli-Egyptian

peace can be characterized as “cold,” as well as the circumstances in which they became “cold.”

Over the years, the peace between Israel and Egypt has been characterized by many of the attributes of a “cold” peace as defined in the theoretical literature.<sup>4</sup> Amnon Aran and Rami Ginat, however, have argued that since the second decade of the Mubarak regime, the term “cold peace” has not accurately reflected developments in the bilateral relations, and should therefore be replaced by the term “strategic peace,” to express the gradual positive change on the scale between “cold peace” and “stable peace.” As they see it, this change took the form of evolution of relations of trust between the political and security institutions of the two countries, as well as *inter alia* the expansion of trade volume.<sup>5</sup>

We contend, however, that the term “cold peace” still characterizes Israeli-Egyptian relations accurately in the current period. The stability and the strategic weight of this peace should not be measured only by tactical security coordination, which by nature is circumstance-dependent, or by political and economic relations, controlled by high national and governmental echelons; it should also be measured by the nature of relations in non-government civilian realms. The validity of the term “cold peace,” therefore, derives from the narrow scope of the “normalization” (defined as “the imposition of an array of peaceful, cooperative relations, as opposed to relations that are conflictual and confrontational in nature, in a variety of fields – political, economic, and cultural – and among formal and informal echelons”<sup>6</sup>) that has occurred between the two countries since the signing of the treaty.

From the outset of the period of peace, Egypt has been careful to regulate and limit normalization with Israel by instituting a structured and defined framework of relations dictating the scope, depth, and permitted realms of relations from which no fundamental deviation, positive or negative, was to be made. This framework has safeguarded the invaluable national asset of peace by ensuring diplomatic and security-related channels of communication, free passage through the Suez Canal, unhindered air, sea, and land connections, well supervised minimal trade, and tourism (albeit with no active encouragement).<sup>7</sup> However, the framework of relations also limited non-government civilian interaction, narrowed the freedom of action enjoyed by companies and private businesspeople, and on a number of occasions, imposed sanctions on Egyptians who attempted to deviate from it. In practice, it prevented the travel of Egyptian citizens

to Israel without a special security permit,<sup>8</sup> and it thwarted the natural development of relations between groups and individuals in the economic, social, intellectual, scientific, cultural, and sports realms. This reality has made the development of narratives of reconciliation and good neighborly relations, which are essential for breaking the ice between peoples and establishing and augmenting the stability of peace, extremely difficult.

Egypt was the country that dictated the cooled relations, although there is some debate regarding the degree of responsibility each country bore for this process. Israel's ambassadors to Cairo between 1981 and 1988 and between 1988 and 1990, Moshe Sasson and Shimon Shamir, respectively, have testified that some of the actions of the Israeli government during the initial years of peace embarrassed Egypt in Egyptian and Arab public opinion. Most prominent were the annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, the expansion of the settlement enterprise, and above all, the outbreak of the First Lebanon War. From their perspective, these actions ridiculed Egypt's expectation of a broad regional settlement that would cast its pioneering agreement with Israel in a legitimate light; the result was a sharp decline in Egypt's willingness to promote normalization.<sup>9</sup> This explanation is consistent with Egypt's official position and its tendency to attribute the cooled Israeli-Egyptian relations to Israeli policy, which frustrated Egyptian hopes of turning the peace treaty into a cornerstone of overall regional peace and made thawed relations conditional upon a political breakthrough in the peace process.<sup>10</sup>

A competing explanation asserts that cold peace suits the ongoing strategic-regional, socio-economic, and cultural-psychological constraints that continue to affect Egyptian regimes, which as early as the Sadat era dictated a narrow framework of relations that was not dependent on Israel's actions. Proponents of this explanation include Ephraim Dowek, Israel's ambassador to Cairo between 1990 and 1992, and historian Elie Podeh. Podeh has argued that cold peace served the interests of the Egyptian governing establishment in an optimal manner, whereas the promotion of normalization would have seriously threatened its internal and external legitimacy. Egypt, therefore, had no interest in moving toward a warm peace.<sup>11</sup>

Egyptian liberals have highlighted Egypt's institutional interest in preserving the traditional foundation of hostility toward Israel from a different perspective: nurturing Israel's image as an "external enemy," even in the shadow of peace, they argue, has helped the Cairo authorities distract its citizens from domestic hardships, justify injury to the rights

of individuals (for example, through the application of the Emergency Law), and evade reforms that would endanger its status. Unsupervised close relations with Israel, on the other hand, could have disclosed and highlighted to the Egyptian public the political, economic, and scientific disparities between the two societies, fueled internal criticism of the regime, and encouraged demands for democratization.<sup>12</sup>

### **Egypt's Younger Generation and Peace with Israel**

Although many have long viewed the prevailing hostility of Egyptian public opinion toward Israel as a major obstacle to warmer relations, today this paradigm requires reexamination, particularly when it comes to the generation under the age of 30, which constitutes about 60 percent of the total population of Egypt. After his visit to Jerusalem, Sadat was forced to contend with fierce opposition on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nasserist and Marxist parties in Egypt, and the Arab "refusal front" led by Iraq, Libya, Syria, and the PLO. His conciliatory policy unified opposition within Egypt and abroad, which based its stance on pan-Arab nationalist ideology and Islamist religious ideology and which operated under a banner of opposition to peace and normalization with Israel. The Egyptian regime tried to defend the peacemaking measures using the diverse information and propaganda mechanisms at its disposal. However, the challenge created by the longstanding incitement against Israel proved massive, and virtually no independent parties or intellectuals in Egypt were willing to support it openly.

Since the 1990s, peace with Israel has become the acknowledged strategic choice of the PLO, most of the Arab states, and the Arab League. Still, Egyptian public opinion has remained hesitant about changing its attitude. With the exception of a handful of liberally oriented or left wing writers and thinkers who have been willing to pay a personal price and risk being sanctioned by the professional unions, no significant political or social force has agreed to embrace peace with Israel, confront the opponents of normalization, or take action to disseminate values of conciliation, coexistence, and acceptance of the other. The reason is twofold. First, the Egyptian regime has prevented the evolution of a popular independent peace camp operating outside the monopoly of the regime establishment. Ironically, the same regime that signed the peace treaty with Israel permitted the opponents of peace to harass individuals who spoke out openly in favor of peace and normalization and attempted to build autonomous channels

of communication with Israel. Second, many of the activists and thinkers who belonged to the liberal stream of Egyptian society, who were the most natural candidates to lead an Egyptian camp promoting democratic peace, chose the opposite position: that is, instead of speaking out in favor of peace, they argued that an elected democratic regime would enable Egypt to stand strong against Israel with greater resoluteness than a non-elected regime.<sup>13</sup>

The revolutions in Egypt on January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013 created a new dynamic with the potential to bring about historic positive change in Egyptian public opinion with regard to peace and normalization with Israel, especially among the younger generation. Although the revolutions had only limited success in instituting political reform, they did manage to create a deep cultural revolution in Egyptian society. An article published in *Foreign Policy* pointed out three manifestations of this revolution: the removal of the *hijab* in Egyptian society, an increase in the number of atheists, and the coming out of the closet of homosexuals.<sup>14</sup> Also relevant are phenomena such as the collapse of Islamic Arab identity in favor of Egyptian and humanistic identities; the liberation of young men and women from the dictates of their families; pre-marital sexual relations; and most importantly, the collapse of the social, political, and religious aspects of patriarchal rule.

The revolutions sprouted a young Egyptian generation with a secular-liberal orientation – a generation that does not shy away from confronting its parents and critically examining the hegemonic national, religious, and social conventions of the past. In an article published in *al-Ahram* in September 2017 under the title “The Young in Egypt Do Not Like the Old,” Ahmed Abu Dawh argues that the revolutions changed the Egyptian state beyond recognition, and that the state is currently divided between two generations that speak two different languages and have trouble communicating with one another. The older generation adheres to the values on which they were raised during the 1950s and 1960s, whereas the younger generation has adopted new values and is calling for fundamental change. This intergenerational divide is not characteristic of cities alone; it exists in villages as well and is undermining Egyptian society at its foundations. Equipped with smartphones, young Egyptians today insist on reexamining “every truth” and argue with their parents, typically leaving them embarrassed and unable to respond. According to Abu Dawh, “In another decade, Egypt will not be the Egypt we know today. The state,

society, religious leaders, intellectuals, and the young and old need to prepare themselves.”<sup>15</sup>

These deep sociocultural processes have implications for the way in which Egypt’s younger generation views its country’s relations with Israel. Their parents’ generation imbued them with hatred for Israel through the repetition of Arab nationalist slogans that were disseminated by the Nasserist propaganda mechanisms of the 1950s and 1960s, and they accepted it without argument out of respect for parental authority. This has changed, however, since the deterioration of the social, economic, and political situation of the younger generation, which watched as their parents surrendered to the regime, refrained from all confrontation with it, and even joined it, in opposition to their children. The younger generation rebelled against the regime establishment and its supporters, even when this meant rebellion against their own parents. This intergenerational clash relegated all elements of their heritage, their hostility toward Israel included, to the status of issues demanding reexamination.

On this basis, members of Egypt’s younger generation are adopting views that are more rational than those of their parents, whose views were fueled by false and inciting propaganda. Most are no longer subject to the intoxicating influence of pan-Arab and Islamist propaganda; they formulate their views on Israel in accordance with Egypt’s pragmatic interests and oppose a war that would destroy the Egyptian economy and result in bloodshed. These young Egyptians, who receive their information from the internet, have started asking new questions: Is the hostility for Israel real or imagined? Does this hostility serve or harm Egypt’s interests? What is better for Egypt – a state of war or a state of peace? Who is the enemy – the states that support political Islam and the terrorists in the Sinai Peninsula, or Israel, which aids the Egyptian army in its fight against terrorism? Such questions have created a new discourse, for example, a July 2014 article by Muhammad al-Shimi, a member of the Free Egyptians Party, titled “Israel Is Not the Enemy.” According to al-Shimi, the real enemies threatening the wellbeing of Egypt include “the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, ISIS, Qatar, Turkey, and all those that support the values of backwardness and terrorism within Egypt or along its borders.”<sup>16</sup>

The younger generation in Egypt does not suffer the scars of violent conflicts and wars, which occurred before their time. Rather, young Egyptians observe the close cooperation between the regime and Israel, and naturally wonder why civilians are prohibited from what is permissible for the

government. This approach was evident in the sympathetic responses received by one of the authors of this article on the social networks in light of a post he wrote in January 2017 after he was denied permission to accept an invitation to a conference in Israel.<sup>17</sup> Despite the absence of public opinion surveys on the subject, conversations with hundreds of young Egyptians – particularly liberals – reveal that the majority of them support peace and normalization.<sup>18</sup> These new forces have yet to be represented in a broad movement or a political party due to the limitations that are in place in Egypt, and it is therefore difficult to estimate their number accurately. Translating their positions into electoral power and ultimately political power will require a climate of democracy and freedom of expression.

### **Today's Stumbling Blocks on the Path to Warmer Relations**

The rise of a liberal and secular younger generation in Egypt that rejects pan-Arabism and Islamism and applauds peace with Israel brings with it an opportunity for warmer relations between the Egyptian and the Israeli peoples, and for the addition of a civilian dimension alongside the close security coordination that has long existed between both countries. However, establishment of this generation as a dominant and influential camp still faces three primary obstacles in Egypt and Israel that must be overcome in order to take full advantage of the current opportunity to shape a new configuration for peace based on coexistence, acceptance of the other, and people to people relations.

The first and foremost significant obstacle stems from the Egyptian establishment's persistent tendency, for political and economic reasons, to maintain a monopoly over peaceful relations with Israel. On the political level, limiting the civilian expression of peace helps strengthen the regime's international image as the only political force in Egypt that is committed to preserve the peace treaty with Israel, whereas any democratic alternative would result at best in the termination of the peace treaty, or at worst, in the outbreak of an Israeli-Egyptian war. On the economic level, peace with Israel provides the business elite with a narrow, exclusive opportunity to amass capital in sectors such as natural gas, maritime trade, and textiles (by means of the QIZ Agreement), whereas only a small portion of this revenue actually trickles down to the general Egyptian population.<sup>19</sup> This economic reality has a detrimental impact on the image of peace with Israel among the Egyptian people, who see it as a "corrupt peace." It also links Israel with phenomena associated with the internal corruption of Egypt,

deprives rank and file Egyptian citizens of the sense that peace benefits them directly, and denies them a sense of enthusiasm for peace that would otherwise encourage them to deepen its roots.

In order to preserve and tighten its monopoly over peace, the Egyptian establishment does not hesitate to tarnish the names of civilian elements seeking their own share of relations with Israel. Past experience shows that Egyptian thinkers and activists who dare try to build bridges of cooperation with Israel outside the institutional umbrella risk sanctions, which make the price of speaking in favor of normalization and highlighting its benefits for the Egyptian people too heavy to bear and deter political and civic voices from engaging in the issue of peace. In this context, consider the dismissal of Egyptian parliament member Tawfik Okasha after he hosted former Israeli ambassador Haim Koren in his home in February 2016. The prevailing propaganda disseminated by the media outlets of the Egyptian establishment regarding Israel's "plots" against Egypt and the countries of the region<sup>20</sup> also inhibit advocates of peace. It exacerbates the incitement against Israel and delegitimizes Egyptian elements that attempt to promote "positive peace" and take action toward further coexistence outside the institutional monopoly.

A second obstacle to the advancement of peace between the two peoples is the continued sense of solidarity with the Palestinians. The past few years have witnessed less interest among Egypt's young generation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a trend that is not unique to Egypt. A survey conducted in early 2017 among young adults in Arab countries, including Egypt, ranked the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the eighth greatest threat, far below threats such as unemployment, terrorism, and the cost of living.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, from a pragmatic Egyptian perspective, the establishment of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders is an Egyptian national interest. This reality has become even clearer since Hamas's seizure of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and its transformation into a stronghold that supports the Salafi jihadist terrorist groups in the Sinai Peninsula, thereby posing a threat to Egypt's national security. The absence of a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians strengthens Hamas and intensifies the threat to Egypt from the Gaza Strip. Moreover, the Egyptian people cannot ignore the human tragedy caused by the continuation of the conflict with the Palestinians. This does not mean that the Palestinian issue constitutes the single, or even the primary reason for the "cold" nature of Israeli-Egyptian peace. However, its resolution will strengthen those in

Egypt who support peace and will strip the opponents of normalization of the most important card they currently hold.

A third obstacle to warmer relations is the deep political and ethical abyss that currently separates the liberal peace camp in Egypt and the right wing government in Israel. The new generation in Egypt is liberal in orientation, and those among them who have adopted Egyptian nationalism emphasize its human dimension as opposed to its chauvinist-nationalist one. They oppose the killing of Israeli children and civilians by Palestinian terrorist groups just as they oppose the killing of Palestinian children and civilians by the IDF. Many of them also express an understanding of Israel's security needs. However, they view the measures taken by the Israeli government – such as the expropriation of land for settlements in the West Bank, the use of collective punishment against the families of terrorists, and the use of excessive force against the Palestinian civilian population – as acts of racism and rejection of the other that run counter to universal values. Moreover, extremist elements in Israel breathe life into national-religious extremist counterparts in Egypt, which is used by opponents of peace in Egypt to stir up hostility toward Israel and prove that Israel's hand is not extended in peace, with an eye toward shared living. For example, statements by right wing politicians regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Sinai Peninsula and threats to blow up the Aswan Dam have been used over the years to incite anti-Semitism and justify the assertion that Egypt should regard Israel as an enemy state.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, one trait of the new liberal camp that emerged in Egypt against the background of the recent revolutions is its insistence on the secular nature of the Egyptian state and opposition to any kind of mixture between religion and state. This camp opposes the establishment of states on a religious basis, regardless of whether the state in question is Islamic, Jewish, or Christian. On these grounds, what is sometimes perceived as a mixture of religion and state in Israel creates significant difficulty for the young generation in Egypt, which asks itself how it can oppose a religious state in Egypt yet at the same time enter into partnerships with another state of a nationalist-religious character.<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Forty years after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the Israeli-Egyptian peace remains "cold." However, the current circumstances present the sides with an opportunity to update its configuration. Prospects of a warmer

peace are supported by shared regional interest and threats, the intimate counterterrorism security coordination, the relations of trust between the working echelons of government and military officials in both countries, and the potential for economic cooperation, particularly in light of the discovery of natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean. Also important are the positive changes in the views on Israel of young Egyptians following the upheavals of the past few years.

These trends have created a window of opportunity for the warming of relations between the two countries and peoples, although doing so will necessitate groundbreaking measures on both sides. The Egyptian regime, which shaped the spirit of the cold peace, is not working effectively to refute the negative myths about Israel and Jews that are embedded in the discourse of the Egyptian establishment, and to disseminate messages of peace and reconciliation. In addition, on a practical level, the Egyptian regime continues to limit expressions of normalization that deviate from the formal framework of relations between the two governments and does not permit sufficient freedom of action to groups and individuals in Egypt and Israel interested in developing mutual relations in the realms of the economy, civil society, science, and culture. In this sense, it is deviating from the original vision of President Sadat, who in one of his later interviews expressed hope that “through direct and daily free interactions, relations between Egypt and Israel will gradually assume their natural scope and weight.”<sup>24</sup>

A significant obstacle facing Israel today, though less important than it has been in the past, is the ongoing stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Egyptian regime and the Egyptian people still feel a sense of solidarity with the Palestinians and their suffering. More significant, however, is the fact that they regard a solution to the Palestinian problem as an Egyptian national interest. Large circles in Egypt consider the establishment of a Palestinian state, or at least progress toward it, as a measure that would help address the threat of the spread of Islamic radicalism within Egypt and throughout the region. The nationalist extremist voices of elements in Israel also serve to exacerbate parallel trends within Egypt and to perpetuate the demonization of Israel in Egyptian public opinion.

Both the Egyptian and Israeli governments now have the opportunity to leverage the relations of trust that have developed in the realm of security into other arenas, and encourage the establishment of legitimate spaces of extra-governmental cooperation that could develop naturally and authentically

between the two peoples. To do so, the official echelons will need to relinquish the monopoly over managing the relations of peace they have appropriated and allow interested civilian parties to establish interactions based on mutual desire and interest. A number of measures could inject new life into the economic relations between the countries, which have thus far alienated the broad Egyptian population and been viewed as corrupt. Such measures could include the provision of freedom of action to companies and businesspeople from both countries; the promotion of cooperative technological endeavors in relevant fields, such as water desalination, desert agriculture, renewable energy, and medicine; the development of joint tourist projects; the establishment of professional advanced education programs and student exchanges; and reduced bureaucracy on travel between the two countries and acquisition of employment permits. These measures could be woven into future regional Middle East and Mediterranean integration plans. The desired economic cooperation is what will provide concrete benefits to both Egyptian and Israeli citizens, make peace present in their lives, and establish it in their hearts and minds.

An important constructive role is also reserved for civilian elements on both sides, which can join together in promoting a new kind of peace, based on a desire for shared lives and mutual recognition of the values of peace and reconciliation. The contemporary new media, including the internet – which is particularly popular among the young generation – has overcome many of the obstacles and limitations dictated from above. Peace activists can meet, have discussions, disseminate their ideas via online conferences, and make use of the platforms offered by the social media. These platforms have become stronger and more effective than the traditional media outlets, some of which are controlled by opponents of normalization. If the willingness of the younger generation in Egypt to cultivate Israeli-Egyptian peace relation is legitimized by the Egyptian establishment and met with an outstretched arm by the Israeli public, these responses will help accelerate the transition from the formal peace that already exists to a longed-for civil peace.

The historic peace that the Egyptian and Israeli nations inherited from Sadat and Begin constitute a strong basis that must be nurtured and developed. The “future generations” to which the Egyptian President referred forty years ago are already here, but the potential they bear for Israeli-Egyptian peace has yet to be realized. They have the capacity to leave a new kind of mark on the relations between the two countries.

However, today – as in the past – these generations are in need of resourceful leadership with a vision in order to remove the obstacles from their path, open the gates before them, and encourage them to break through to the next stop in history.

## Notes

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- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 134-39.

- 14 Koret Debeuf and Ayman Abdelmeguid, "Egypt's Quiet Social Revolution," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/18/egypts-quiet-social-revolution>; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "The Coming Islamic Culture War," *Foreign Affairs*, March 4, 2017, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-03-04/coming-islamic-culture-war](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-03-04/coming-islamic-culture-war).
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- 17 See Moomen Sallam's Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/moomen.sallam](http://www.facebook.com/moomen.sallam).
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