

INSS Insight No. 1114, December 5, 2018

Egypt's World Youth Forum and the Significance for Israel

Ofir Winter

The World Youth Forum (WYF), held in Sharm el-Sheikh under the auspices of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, injects new content to the leading international role that Egypt has aspired to play under different presidents. A primary focus of the Forum is the set of social and economic challenges facing Egypt's younger generation and their connection to similar challenges experienced by youth elsewhere in the world. The Forum also constitutes an inseparable part of the regime's efforts to harness the younger generation's support for the economic reform that Egypt has implemented in recent years. Discussions generated a list of recommendations in the realms of peace, development, and innovation. Israel was not excluded from the Forum's messages, which even hinted that Israel is invited to play a role in Egypt's vision of peace, stability, cooperation, and regional development. For its part, Israel can draw inspiration from several aspects of the Egyptian WYF model: putting greater emphasis on peace education for the young generation, as a means to enhance Israel's regional integration; encouraging meetings and discussions between young Israelis and young Egyptians and Arabs as a means to both mutual understanding and groundwork for cooperative efforts; and hosting visits to Israel by young public opinion leaders from Egypt and other Arab countries.

The World Youth Forum (WYF) was held in early November 2018 in Sharm el-Sheikh for the second consecutive year under the auspices of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The forum was attended by more than 5,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 40 from 145 countries; they were selected from a total of 128,000 candidates based on standards of excellence, suitability for the forum, geographic distribution, and diversity in comparison to previous conferences. The WYF represents an extension of the local youth conferences that el-Sisi has convened with the aim of cultivating Egypt's young generation, boosting its voice, and bringing them closer to the state establishment. The positive message that emerged from the Forum is the call to the countries of the world – without exception – to join Egypt's efforts to encourage dialogue among youth; disseminate the values of peace, brotherhood, and equality; and enhance the creation, development, and formulation of cross-border responses to regional and global challenges.

The forum comprised 43 sessions, with participants including President el-Sisi, Egyptian ministers, and representatives of government and civil society from around the world. Some of the sessions took the form of roundtables and smaller workshops, facilitating direct discussion among the participants. Discussions generated a list of recommendations in three realms: In the realm of peace: establishment of a European-Mediterranean Youth Forum; an Arab-African foundation for peace building and post-conflict reconstruction efforts; an Arab-African mechanism to fight terrorism; and a festival for peace. In the realm of development: a European-Mediterranean economic forum to examine investment opportunities in the region; improved economic integration in Africa; and establishment of an Arab-African foundation to support small and medium sized projects. In the realm of innovation: Improved awareness regarding cyber threats; establishment of a committee on the impact of the social media on the younger generation; and encouragement of Arab-African cooperation in science. In addition, el-Sisi has instructed state institutions to plan a strategy to increase awareness regarding water security and to take action to establish a center for regional entrepreneurial projects in Egypt to provide training for youth.

The Forum's Importance from the Egyptian Perspective

The World Youth Forum has injected new content to the leading international role that Egypt aspired to play under different presidents. In the 1950s and 1960s, Gamal Abdul Nasser led the struggle of the peoples of Asia and Africa to realize their right to self-determination. Anwar Sadat framed the peace treaty with Israel as an expression of Egypt's universal mission and integration within the détente between the superpowers. Husni Mubarak linked Egypt's orientation toward peace to global messages regarding nuclear nonproliferation, stopping the arms race, directing resources to development, and creating a comfortable climate for the advancement of Third World economies; he also sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace conferences. President el-Sisi initiated the World Youth Forum in the particular context of contending with the social and economic challenges facing Egypt's younger generation and their connection to similar challenges experienced by youth in many other parts of the world, such as the struggle against extremism and terrorism, job creation, the empowerment of women, water sources in light of climate change, and energy supply.

On the domestic level, the Forum constitutes an inseparable part of the regime's efforts to harness the younger generation's support for the economic reform that Egypt has implemented in recent years, which involves a reduction of subsidies, an increased cost of living, and deepening poverty – at least in the short term. The event was meant to convey to Egypt's youth that the regime is attentive to their difficulties, needs, and ideas, and wants to integrate them into a promising future for Egypt. The event also provided young Egyptians with an opportunity to meet with their counterparts from around the

world, exchange ideas, and acquire knowledge, experience, and connections that will benefit them in the future. Egyptians attending the Forum attested to the pride inspired in them by the success of their country – which, early in the decade was characterized by political upheaval, security instability, and deep economic crisis – in producing an event that attracted thousands of young people from around the world and cast Egypt in a positive light. The event also benefited tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh and the many workers who took part in the organization and management of the event.

On the international level, Egypt succeeded in assembling thousands of young adults in Sharm el-Sheikh, including representatives of government, academia, and civil organizations. Participants included shapers of public opinion and potential future leaders who can serve as Egypt's “ambassadors” and help it gain “soft power.” Their invitation to the meeting reflected Egypt's desire to strengthen its international branding as a political, economic, and cultural center, and as a leading international actor in the promotion of peace, stability, and religious moderation.

The Forum's main theme was “the seven pillars of Egyptian identity”: Pharaonic, Coptic, Greek-Roman, Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean, and African. This diverse mosaic of identities was highlighted by statues, pictures, and manifestos, and intended to position Egypt as a junction of continents, religions, nations, and civilizations by virtue of its historical heritage and geographical location. Despite the significant investment required for producing a conference of this scale, the fact that it served as a global showcase for Egypt and for tourist sites in the Sinai Peninsula could justify the endeavor, both politically and economically. In addition, the connection to “world youth” gives Egypt the image of a country that is eager to be at the forefront of global development, progress, and innovation, prepared to contend with the challenges of the future while assisting other countries in this undertaking.

In the long term, the Forum's achievements will depend on the ability of Egyptian, regional, and international bodies to infuse its recommendations with substance and translate them into concrete plans of action. In addition, some voices in Egypt are calling for integrating a more diverse population into future events, such as individuals from rural frontier regions and underprivileged urban neighborhoods.

Significance and Recommendations for Israel

Israel was not excluded from the Forum's messages, which even hinted that Israel is invited to play a role in Egypt's vision of peace, stability, cooperation, and regional development. President el-Sisi emphasized that Egypt's arms are extended in peace to all countries of the world; expressed his support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement that provides security for Israelis and Palestinians alike; and was critical of unrealistic

Arab perceptions that in the past have resulted in the loss of opportunities to resolve the Palestinian problem. President Sadat's legacy of peace was mentioned in a positive light, including in a movie that dealt with the role of leaders in building a sustainable peace. President el-Sisi himself praised Sadat for saving Egypt from wars and providing it with a stable peace.

In addition, statements regarding the religious tolerance that is part of Egypt's cultural identity did not exclude Judaism. President el-Sisi spoke positively of the possibility of establishing synagogues in Egypt, and the film *A Meeting Point*, which was screened during the opening ceremony of the Forum, contains Jewish symbols, including Hebrew letters and pictures of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, with a Menorah and a Star of David. An article in the Forum's official magazine dealing with art as a bridge between cultures maintained that King David played an Egyptian *Kenara* (harp) and that ancient Hebrew music was influenced by the sounds of Egypt, the Nile, and the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean. The positive attitude to Judaism underwrote the Forum's peaceful messages and provided them with cultural and historical depth.

The day following the Forum, Egypt's new ambassador to Israel, Khaled Azmi, submitted his credentials to President Reuven Rivlin. There, he declared that his country aspires to contribute to the achievement of peace and serve as a regional model for accepting the other, tolerance, and co-existence.

Indeed, Israel can draw inspiration from several aspects of the Egyptian WYF model: putting greater emphasis on peace education for the young generation, as a means to enhance Israel's regional integration; encouraging meetings and discussions between young Israelis and young Egyptians in particular, and Arabs in general, as a door to mutual knowledge and understanding, and groundwork for cooperative efforts; hosting visits to Israel by young public opinion leaders from Egypt and other Arab countries. These measures must be based on recognition, in Israel and neighboring countries that instilling the values of peace among the young generation constitutes a shared regional strategic interest.

The Forum's recommendations also addressed subjects of regional and global interest where Israeli input is essential, such as scientific innovation, solutions to the water problem, cooperative efforts in the realm of natural gas in the Mediterranean Sea, and the development of alternative energy sources. Official bodies in Israel would do well to set up teams on these topics and encourage them to take part in future bilateral, regional, and global forums in order to strengthen the fabric of Israel's relations with Egypt, as well as other countries in the region.