

Conference Summary

Between Jerusalem and Cairo: 40 Years to the Israel-Egypt Peace Agreement

On March 14, 2019, the Institute for National Security Studies, together with Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, the Menahem Begin Heritage Center, and the Foreign Ministry held a conference marking 40 years since the signing of the peace accords between Israel and Egypt. The conference focused on various aspects of the relationship between Israel and Egypt: the period of conflict between 1948 and 1973; the peace process led by Menahem Begin; 40 years of peace and lessons learned over these decades; Israeli and Egyptian viewpoints on the future of peace; and discussion regarding the cultural aspects of the relationship between the two countries.

The following primary insights emerged from the conference:

- The peace serves the interests of both sides and appears to have passed the “point of no return.”
- The peace relies heavily on security collaboration, but the time has come to collaborate on other areas of interest in order to strengthen its foundations.
- The Palestinian issue is an important component of the relationship between the countries and the associated challenges, although in recent years – in light of regional and internal Egyptian challenges – the importance of this issue has diminished.
- Peace with Egypt is of strategic importance to Israel from the political perspective (mediating with the Palestinians), the military perspective (keeping Egypt out of the circle of war), and the economic perspective (reducing the defense budget).
- Egypt’s diplomatic efforts against Israel’s nuclear capabilities do not stem from a sense of being threatened, but rather from its self-perception as the leader of the Arab world.
- There is much potential in expanded economic collaboration between the countries in a variety of areas. This falls under responsibility of both the governments and societies of Israel and Egypt.
- The difficulty in expanding collaboration between Egypt and Israel stems primarily from Egypt’s bureaucratic structure and the associated slow patterns of behavior.
- Despite shared interests and tightening of security collaboration in recent years, Israel should continue to watch the strengthening of Egypt’s military carefully.

The Conference in Detail:

Opening Remarks, Israeli Ambassador in Cairo, Dr. David Govrin:

The period of peace between the countries is longer than the period of war. The agreement has survived much turmoil. Its strength stems from addressing the interests of Israel and Egypt. The countries have passed the point of no return, and it is difficult to imagine a situation in which they will return to a state of war. Arab countries understand the advantages of collaborating with Israel, which is increasingly perceived as a legitimate regional player.

Session I: Israel-Egypt Relations, 1948-1973, with Prof. Avraham Sela, Prof. Motti Golani, Prof. Nahem Ilan, and Dr. Hagai Tzoref

Egypt's stance regarding the Palestine issue was affected during King Farouk's period by three primary issues: the internal political struggle between the Wafd party, the Royal Palace, and the Muslim Brotherhood; a deteriorating Arab-Zionist conflict; and Egypt's aspirations to become a regional Arab leader. Focusing on the Palestine issue was driven, inter alia, by the need of Arab leaders for legitimacy by connecting with religious symbolism and a struggle against a foreign power. Then-Egyptian Prime Minister, Mahmood al-Nuqrashi did not want to join the 1948 war, but was pushed to do so by the king, sighting considerations of regional prestige.

Israel engaged in the war in Sinai in 1956 as part of its desire to strengthen ties with France and Great Britain and against the backdrop of the challenges it faced in the early 50s, among them: economic distress; national distress; political and civil distress following the large wave of immigration and security distress; the threat of return of Palestinian refugees.

Although Prime Minister Menahem Begin played the most important role in the peace process with Egypt, he mainly continued policies of his predecessors – Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin.

Session II: The Peace Process in the Thought of Menahem Begin, with Prof. Gerald Steinberg, Adv. Daniel Reisner, and Judge Elyakim Rubinstein

Three central reasons can be cited for the inability of Israel and the Palestinians to recreate the success of Israel and Egypt in reaching a lasting peace: the lack of sufficient global support; the difficulty of both sides to reach peace from the position of power; the lack of at least one "great" leader with sufficient courage.

Session III: 40 Years of Peace between Israel and Egypt, and a Look Ahead, with Dr. Gershon Baskin, Dr. Haim Koren, Dr. Emily Landau, Col. (ret.) Orna Mizrahi, and Brig. Gen. (res.) Assaf Orion

The security value of peace: The peace agreement removed Egypt from the circle of war. Thanks to the agreement, Israel was able to reduce its defense budget so that while in 1973 it stood at about 25 percent of GDP, it is now only 5 percent. Existing collaboration between Israel and Egypt in combating terrorism in Sinai is a result of the reality on the ground, the gradual building of trust, and the success of military operations. This

collaboration is like a double-decker bus: while there are no broad relationships on the upper deck, there is a significant level of military collaboration on the lower deck, under the surface.

Strengthening of Egypt's Military: The Egyptian army is large and its power is aimed at fighting standing armies, including Israel's, which is why its buildup should be watched closely. At the same time, it is clear that war is not in Egypt's current interest considering the regional, environmental, and economic challenges it faces.

Political Aspect: Israel's Ambassador to Egypt is not isolated. While he faces security constraints, he is able to meet everyone, both in formal and social settings. Israel continues to advocate US support of Egypt.

Palestinian Aspect: Peace with Egypt has value with regard to the Palestinian issue, particularly considering the Egyptian influence on Gaza. The Palestinian issue has always been a central component of the relationship between Israel and Egypt, but it has witnessed changes for a variety of reasons, first among them a meeting of the minds around regional turmoil and the marginalization of the Palestinian issue. Egypt does not want to bear responsibility for Gaza. Nevertheless, recently Egypt has become increasingly involved in the issues surrounding Gaza, as part of its effort to address economic-military challenges in northern Sinai more broadly.

Nuclear Weapons Control: Egypt has been dealing with Israel's nuclear question since the 1960s. Nasser addressed it by building missiles and talked of the need to build an Arab nuclear capability. Egypt signed the peace agreement with Israel without demanding that it sign the NPT, and since the 1980s moved the struggle around Israel's nuclear capabilities to the diplomatic arena. It saw its first success in 1995, when the NPT Review Conference addressed the nuclear demilitarization of the Middle East. In 2010 the issue was raised again, and is expected to surface in 2020 as well, in the framework of the next follow-up committee, and will continue to be a point of contention between the countries. Egypt does not feel it is under direct threat by Israel's nuclear capability. Its actions stem from its self-perception as the leader of the Arab world.

Economic Collaboration: The peace is far from reaching the economic potential it holds, particularly in the current period where Egypt is undergoing construction efforts, growth, and improvements in personal safety (alongside suffering, poverty, and fragility). There is not much trade between Israel and Egypt, and an Israeli asking to do business will find it difficult to do so in Egypt. The most significant joint project between Israel and Egypt is the QIZ. There is also potential in such areas as solar energy, tourism, and agriculture. Israel is blessed with willingness and knowledge, but there are barriers that prevent cooperation.

Reasons for the narrow relations between Israel and Egypt:

- a. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The Egyptians are not fond of the Palestinians, but they like the Palestinian issue. Every escalation at al-Aqsa hurts the ability to advance bilateral cooperation between the sides. The Arab world also blames the

- Palestinians for the situation, but at the same time cannot tolerate Israeli occupation and killing of Palestinians.
- b. Peace-related gaps: There is a gap between Israel's expectations of peace and those of Egypt. Israel seeks a warm peace, while Egypt maintains a different stance. The Egyptian diplomatic campaign around arms control is an example of its efforts to return Israel to its "natural" size and reduce its regional prominence.
 - c. Character differences between the countries: There is a gap between the "fast" Israeli character and the "slow" Egyptian character. Egypt operates slowly, and moving a large ship with long traditions, such as Egypt has, takes a long time.
 - d. Bureaucratic barriers: Egyptians who are interested in reaching Israel and collaborating with it run into administrative challenges, such as the requirement to receive a special security clearance.

The affinity between all-encompassing peace and normalization: There is no need to link the Palestinian issue and progress with bilateral relations between Egypt and Israel. Linking normalization with overall peace has not proven itself as a catalyst that pushes Israel toward resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians. Normalization does not need to be a prize for Israel, but part of a process from which all sides benefit, including the Palestinians. Many in the Arab world do not understand why they should invest in the Palestinians, while the latter do not display any flexibility. Identifying opportunities for cooperation requires meeting and coming together.

New trends on the Egyptian street toward Israel: The young Egyptian generation did not experience war and exhibits great thirst for knowledge about Israel. The Egyptian public sees Israel in a more complex way than in the past and does not see it as the devil.

Venues of cooperation between Israel and Egypt: Recent years have seen a development of the Eastern Mediterranean bloc of countries, including Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and to an extent, Italy. Common to these countries are gas fields, alongside wide geostrategic relations in Israeli-Egyptian trilateral relations, with Greece and Cyprus.

Session IV: "How Can Israel and Egypt Reap the Most from the Peace?" Ambassador Oded Eran interviews Dr. Hesham Ashmawy, Chairman of Egyptian-American Business Association

There is a need for Israelis who believe in peace and are not afraid to act and do business in Egypt. If only one percent of the 100 million Egyptians would dedicate themselves to peace with Israel, it would change the reality of relations. The common Egyptian is first and foremost concerned with economic issues, but is also concerned with his Palestinian brethren. True peace does not require governments but people. In order to resolve the Gaza issue, Egypt, Israel and other countries should raise funds and technology, and build mechanisms that would enable the development of the strip.

Session V: "The Cultural Dimension," with Dr. Ofir Winter, Dr. Tamar Hess, and Haisam Hassanein

The Egyptian regime composed dozens of songs in an effort to prepare the Egyptian public opinion for peace with Israel, and in 1979 even replaced its old national anthem with a new one, which emphasizes the uniqueness of Egypt. Egyptian peace songs dealt with universal peace and not the concrete one with Israel, praised Sadat, and criticized forces that opposed peace. The most popular songs dealt with the economic benefits of peace. Most songs were forgotten for three reasons: President Mubarak marginalized songs from Sadat's period; the Egyptian holiday calendar ignored dates associated with the peace; and the songs were seen as conscripted art, which prevented their wide acceptance.

An encounter between an Egyptian student and Israeli society is tense, considering the national-Arab and religious-Islamic narratives that see Israel as a threat to its neighbors. Accordingly, the decision to study in Israel is not a simple one and incurs repercussions from family and the social environment. The first primary impression from encountering Israeli society was astonishment at how varied it is: both eastern and western Jews, Israeli-Arabs, and other multiple circles. The central problems around relations between Israeli and Egyptian societies are as follows: the negative attitude toward Israel in Egyptian media; limited Egyptian tourism to Israel due to stringent security clearance requirements; lack of incoming Egyptian students to study Hebrew in Israel; and limited joint economic projects such as QIZ.

Closing Remarks, Brig. Gen. (res) Udi Dekel, Managing Director of INSS

Security needs served as the foundation for maintaining Israeli-Egyptian relations even during difficult times, but these are not enough. There is a need to strengthen peace and interaction between the nations. As of now, the Egyptian side does not enable this interaction and the Israeli side is apathetic toward the situation. Israeli society is required to try and find ways to interact with the other side in order to build a wider base of relations. There are many fields around which cooperation could be built, such as water technologies, gas, agriculture, and more. The 40th year of the peace agreement is a good opportunity to change direction toward developing real peace between Israel and Egypt.