

INSS Insight No. 1153, March 27, 2019

Egypt and Israel:
From Peace between Leaders and Armies to Peace between Peoples
Ofir Winter and Udi Dekel

March 2019 marks the fortieth anniversary of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. This signed agreement affirmed peace as the strategic choice of both countries, and in turn distanced them from the danger of war. Over the years, the peace has survived challenges and upheavals, and provided tightened security cooperation around shared interests. However, relations between leaderships and security establishment are not enough, and the time has come to deepen the roots of peace between the two peoples. Reinforcing the civilian layer of the peace will benefit all parties: Israel will gain a closer bilateral axis with Egypt and deeper regional cooperation; and Egypt will reap the economic and technological fruits of cooperation with Israel. Although emotional and political barriers still exist on both sides, particularly in Egypt, there are signs of greater openness among the Egyptian public to relationships with Israel.

An assessment of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt from the perspective of forty years since it was signed paints a positive picture, notwithstanding some elements that require review, improvement, and updating. The peace is stable and strong, but it is based on one central pillar, security cooperation, and the other layers of peace – political, economic, and cultural – are less established. Although peace is a strategic asset of the first order for both countries, it is still far from reaching its full potential. Therefore, Israel and Egypt would do well to prepare a framework to cultivate their relations, focusing on nurturing the achievements of peace and addressing the lapses in its implementation, in order to turn a formal peace between leaders and security establishments into a real peace between peoples.

Achievements of the Peace with Egypt

Israel and Egypt can boast of a long list of achievements on the fortieth anniversary of peace. At the security level, which is the most important, the border between the countries is secure and quiet; coordination between the military forces in the struggle against terror in the Sinai Peninsula is closer than ever; smuggling from northern Sinai into the Gaza Strip has declined significantly; and the flow of infiltrators from Egypt into Israel has been stemmed. With Israel's consent and in coordination with it, and under the supervision of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai, Egypt, sends

forces into demilitarized areas of Sinai in numbers that exceed the restrictions defined in the military Appendix to the peace treaty. Moreover, in recent years Egypt has invested ongoing efforts to calm the situation in the Gaza Strip, and acts as a mediator between Hamas and Israel.

In the political sphere, diplomatic relations between the countries proceed well, there is regular dialogue between the leaders, and Israel and the pro-Israel lobby in Washington work to encourage the United States aid to Egypt. The institutions set up according to the peace treaty – embassies, consulates, and the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo – have survived periods of escalation and crisis between Israel and its neighbors, and changes of leaders and governments in both countries, including the short-lived rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In addition, freedom of navigation in the Suez Canal has been maintained, and transport and communications channels between the parties are open and functioning.

On the economic front, since 2005 the countries have implemented the QIZ agreement (which provides incentives for business cooperation between companies from Israel and Egypt by granting free trade terms, exemption from customs, and quotas for the export of finished goods from Egypt and Israel to the American market), although this does not sufficiently contribute to recognition by the wider Egyptian public of the material value of peace with Israel. In addition, since the middle of the current decade the countries have worked to promote gas-related deals, and this connection was formalized in January 2019 in the framework of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, the first regional body of its kind involving Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority.

These achievements are the direct result of hard-earned gradual processes that must be nurtured and preserved. They include building mutual trust at professional, military, and government levels, maintaining a continuous security and diplomatic dialogue, with ongoing diplomatic, security, and financial input from the United States. The achievements rely on shared respect for the foundations of the peace treaty, and use of its effective mechanisms to resolve bilateral disputes, such as the military liaison offices, the MFO, and the option of recourse to reconciliation and arbitration proceedings. In addition, the increasing convergence of interests since Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi took office, led by the common terror threats in northern Sinai and the Gaza Strip, and the development of the Eastern Mediterranean gas fields, help to strengthen ties.

Barriers in Implementation of the Agreement

The “full half” of the glass of peace is offset by the “empty half,” which is why it has been labeled almost from the start as a “cold peace.” The existing bilateral contacts are narrow, controlled, and limited, mainly on Egypt’s part. This format makes it impossible

to reap all the possible strategic benefits of peace. Moreover, it is not in line with some of the commitments made by the parties in their peace treaty on a range of issues, particularly:

- a. Resolution of the Palestinian problem: As Egypt sees it, Israel bears the main – although not exclusive – responsibility for the ongoing stagnation of the peace process, alongside the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. In Egyptian eyes, the ongoing status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a deviation from Israel's commitment, defined in the Camp David accords and mentioned in the preamble to the peace agreement, where both countries declared that they were “convinced that the conclusion of a Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel is an important step in the search for comprehensive peace in the area and for the attainment of settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict in all its aspects.”
- b. Promotion of bilateral relations: Over the years, the Egyptian regime – as well as Egyptian trade unions – have imposed severe limits on the promotion of ties with Israel, mainly in economic and cultural areas, in a way that contradicts the content and spirit of some of the treaty's articles, for example: “The Parties agree that the normal relationship established between them will include full recognition, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations, termination of economic boycotts and discriminatory barriers to the free movement of people and goods” (Article 3c).
- c. Freedom of movement between the countries: Both Israel and Egypt place bureaucratic restrictions on the movement of their citizens, largely due to the mutual – and often difficult - requirement for visas. In addition, an Egyptian citizen who wishes to travel to Israel needs a special security approval, which Egypt requires for travel to only 16 countries. This situation complicates implementation of Annex 3, Article 4: “Each party shall allow free movement of citizens and vehicles from the other party into its territory and within its territory, according to the rules applying to citizens and vehicles from other countries. Neither party shall impose any discriminatory restrictions on the free movement of people and vehicles from its territory into the territory of the other party.”
- d. Incitement: Notwithstanding the relative restraint recorded in recent years in the incitement against Israel in Egypt, compared to previous periods, hate speech against Israel and Jews still appears occasionally in the established media and the official education system in Egypt. This is contrary to Annex 3, Article 5: “The Parties shall seek to foster mutual understanding and tolerance and will, accordingly, abstain from hostile propaganda against each other.”
- e. Attacks in international forums: The peace with Israel is conceptualized in Egypt as a transition from conflict on the battlefield to conflict in the diplomatic arena. And indeed, Egypt has consistently worked against Israel in international institutions, whether in votes on Palestinian issues or through attempts to make it

subject to Israel's commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Although this policy does not constitute a breach of the peace treaty, Egypt's motivation to challenge Israel in international forums is perceived in Israel as a deviation from the spirit of the treaty, which stood for the promotion of "friendly relations" (Preamble).

Framework for Future Relations

Strengthening peaceful relations between Israel and Egypt in the coming years requires an action plan that has the goal of cultivating strong points in these relations and correcting and overcoming the defects that overshadow them, above all the political freeze between Israel and the Palestinians, and the restrictions on civilian contacts between the peoples. Its main components are:

- a. Further encouragement of security cooperation: Both countries must continue to implement the military Appendix to the peace treaty in a way that helps them deal with the challenges of terror in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Apart from that, granting of permits to breach the demilitarization agreements in Sinai should be linked to Egypt's willingness to consider Israel's concerns on the following issues: transparency regarding changes in the deployment and growing power of the Egyptian army in Sinai; ensuring the continued Egyptian struggle against smuggling from northern Sinai into the Gaza Strip; keeping migrants away from the border; avoiding indoctrination on the part of the Egyptian army that inculcates the view of the IDF as threat of reference; informing Egyptian public opinion of the positive role played by Israel in dealing with terrorism in Sinai. The greater the trust between the two armies, the greater their ability to draw up long term strategies for dealing with common security threats and terror in Sinai, the Gaza Strip, and the shared marine area. Moreover, tighter cooperation in the military sphere and the continuation of American aid to the Egyptian army should be considered in terms of deepening the roots of peace outside the military dimension. Progress in this direction will help both countries base their peaceful relations on bilateral foundations that will ensure their stability even if the United States distances itself from the Middle East and limits its involvement in relations between the countries.
- b. Striving for a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians: Egypt supports a solution of the Palestinian problem by virtue of its historic commitment and its Arab leadership, while seeing it also as a national Egyptian interest; on this basis, it plays an important role in mediating between Israel and the Palestinians. Therefore, Israeli overtures on this issue, above all, ratification of Israel's commitment to the two state for two peoples principle and practical efforts to promote a political settlement – subject to Israeli security concerns and finding a

Palestinian partner – would help to strengthen relations with Egypt and weaken the opponents of normalization.

Past experience shows that restricting relations is not an effective catalyst to promote an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. On the other hand, broadening the contacts between the two countries could help build a pro-peace atmosphere in the Israeli public and dissuade the Palestinians from retreating into uncompromising positions, based on an assessment that Arab countries stand with them. According to a December 2018 survey by the Washington Institute, 72 percent of Egyptians support granting incentives to Israel and the Palestinians to take more moderate positions, while about a quarter of them support cooperation with Israel irrespective of the negotiations with the Palestinians.

- c. Extending the scope of relations: Israel and Egypt must ratify the principles of normal and friendly relations between the countries anchored in the peace agreement, and create terms for implementing the articles that regulate relations in economic, commercial and cultural areas. Ventures in the fields of energy, water, and infrastructures will contribute through promotion in multilateral, regional frameworks – Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and African – as well as international frameworks involving world powers such as the United States, China, and India. Shared programs for students sponsored by an educational institution with a global reputation could also help to bring people closer together. In order to establish legitimate and free spaces for bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and to reinforce interactions among citizens, both countries must ease the bureaucratic restrictions on freedom of movement between them. Changes in the existing status of relations must be introduced gradually, considering the needs and sensitivities of both sides. While Israel is wary of an influx of migrant workers, and even more so – an entry of terrorists, Egypt is afraid of unsupervised encounters between its citizens and Israeli society, in view of the political, economic, and cultural gaps.

Conclusion

Peace is based on a strategic choice by both sides to remove the danger of war. Over the last four decades, the peace treaty has survived challenges and upheavals, and it seems to have passed the point of no return. Therefore, it is no longer enough to be satisfied with relations between leaders and security establishments, and the time has come to deepen the roots of peace between the peoples. Strengthening the civilian aspects of peace will bring benefits to both sides: Israel will tighten the bilateral axis with Egypt and achieve deeper regional cooperation; Egypt will reap the economic and technological fruits of cooperating with Israel; the United States, the sponsor of peace, will also gain from closer ties between its regional allies and from increased stability and prosperity in the Middle

East. The success of the framework will be measured by its ability to channel the mutual interests of the countries toward the creation of a warmer peace between the two peoples.