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**Under Mediterranean Skies:**  
**Channels for Deepening Israel-Egypt Relations**  
**Ofir Winter**

**On January 15, 2020, Minister of Energy Yuval Steinitz and his Egyptian counterpart, Tarek el-Molla, announced that natural gas began to flow from Israel to Egypt. The joint announcement marks a milestone in relations between the countries, and gives further expression to the significant rise in the importance of the Mediterranean basin for Egypt’s foreign, security, and economic policy in recent years. This trend was also evident in the agenda of the World Youth Forum held in December 2019 in Sharm el-Sheikh and included discussions on a range of Mediterranean topics, from energy and climate, through unemployment and illegal migration, to the identity of Mediterranean peoples. Israel is not absent from the Mediterranean discourse promoted by Egypt, although it remains a marginal issue on subjects other than natural gas. Israel has an interest in broadening the range of its relations with Egypt, and it has the ability to promote this aim through the formulation of policies affecting various aspects of the Mediterranean region, increasing its involvement in Mediterranean regional frameworks, and nurturing an ethos of a “common region.”**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> World Youth Forum (WYF) sponsored by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, attended by some 7,000 young people from all over the world, met in Sharm el-Sheikh on December 12-17, 2019. This year the topic at the center of discussions at the Forum was how to strengthen the cooperation between countries around the Mediterranean in a variety of fields, and above all energy, employment, climate, science, illegal migration, and the war against terror. Forum sessions were devoted both to the concrete interests of the Mediterranean countries and to “softer” aspects, including the historical and cultural elements common to the local populations. The Forum’s agenda reflects the significant rise in the Mediterranean’s importance to Egypt’s foreign, security and economic policy, and the Egyptian attempts to position itself as a pivotal country in this region.

Israel was mentioned as an essential partner in the gas deal with Egypt and as a full member of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), established in Cairo in January 2019 with Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. However, Israel’s role remains marginal on matters outside the gas issue, and it should therefore

formulate a comprehensive Mediterranean policy that will enable it to realize other opportunities to develop its ties with Egypt in the Mediterranean basin.

### **Egypt as a “Mediterranean Country”**

Egypt has attached growing importance to the Mediterranean region in recent years in view of three main developments. First was the discovery of the Zohr gas field, which supplies most of Egypt’s gas needs. Second was the establishment in January 2019 of the EMGF, paving the way to Egypt’s becoming a regional energy hub, with the aim of establishing a regional gas market, developing resources and infrastructures, and increasing coordination and dialogue among member states. At the third conference of the EMGF ministers, on January 16, 2020 in Cairo, it was decided to elevate the forum’s status to that of an inter-governmental organization, as France applied for full membership and the United States for permanent observer status. The third development was the threat posed by Turkey to the progress of regional cooperation on the subject of gas, due to its refusal to recognize Cyprus’s maritime borders. The ongoing tension between Cairo and Ankara has increased since November 2019, following the agreement on a maritime border signed by Turkey and the Government of National Accord in Libya.

A special publication by the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS) for the WYF stated that the gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean created a new regional dynamic, including the formation of economic blocs, multilateral political relations, alliances, and counter-alliances. It was also explained that Egypt offered Israel and Cyprus the cheapest option for exporting gas to Europe and other markets, thanks to Egypt’s infrastructures for liquefying and transporting gas, which can be expanded at relatively low cost when necessary. Egypt for its part is interested in reaping a share of the profits and strengthening its regional status as the hub for gas exports to Europe.

The WYF simulated a model of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), an inter-governmental organization of 43 countries (including Israel), whose aim is to promote dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean region, and which since 2018 has been headed by Egyptian diplomat Nasser Kamel. Model participants discussed ways of coping with the job shortage in a region where 12.5 percent of the population are unemployed (mostly young people from the southern Mediterranean countries) and with environmental challenges that include a climate that is about 20 percent hotter than the global average. At the concluding session of the model, President el-Sisi announced Egypt’s intention to restore the five lakes along its Mediterranean northern coast. He also announced a plan to develop a Euro-Mediterranean region for higher education in New Alamein City, west of Alexandria, currently under construction and designed for about three million residents. Technological and tourism projects are planned for the city, as

well as a venture to encourage businesses under the supervision of UfM. It is also intended to be the venue for a Mediterranean youth forum in 2021.

Another regional challenge discussed at the WYF is illegal migration via the Mediterranean. Egypt stressed its success in preventing the passage of illegal migrants from its territory to Europe since 2016. At the same time, it was argued that more cooperation is needed between the “young” southern Mediterranean countries (where 60 percent of the population are under the age of 30) and the “aging” northern Mediterranean countries, to create an integrated response to the needs of the regional job market. In Egypt’s view, the response includes the regulation of legal migration from the southern countries to the north, as well as strengthening the security and stability of the southern countries to make it easier for them to attract investments and create domestic work opportunities.

In recent years Egypt has also worked on building a “Mediterranean identity,” presented to the younger generation as one of the pillars of the “Egyptian persona.” An exhibition on the margins of the WYF included a display of Mediterranean culture, with texts describing how Egypt’s historical contacts with 21 Mediterranean countries in three continents – on matters of trade, philosophy, art, and architecture – have shaped its image. At the Forum’s opening ceremony there was a musical that described Alexandria as a city that carries within itself the “memoirs of Egyptians and Greeks and the Romans too” and a symbol of the “strong ally between Europe and Egypt.”

Fostering Mediterranean identity expresses Egypt’s wish to reflect both internally and externally a regional ethos that will be the basis for reinforcing regional interactions and expanding its brand from that of an economic hub to a cultural hub – a place where continents, countries, religions, and civilizations meet. The Forum discussed the cultural and historical foundations that make the Mediterranean a “region” and its peoples a “community.” In this context, Minister of Immigration and Egyptian Expatriates Affairs Nabila Makram talked about the 2018 Roots Revival Week, a government initiative in which some 140 descendants of Greek and Cypriot families who once lived in Egypt were invited to a “return trip” to the places where they or their ancestors had lived.

### **Significance for Israel**

Israel is not absent from the Mediterranean discourse promoted by Egypt, but so far its position has been marginal on issues other than economic interests, and specifically in the field of gas. As Egypt sees it, there is a triangle at the heart of Mediterranean cooperation – Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus – with Israel a secondary partner with a limited role. An ECSS publication stated that Israel cannot participate in the periodic joint military exercises of Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus, although it shares with them the same security

vision, and it was hinted that Israel's presence makes it harder to upgrade the multilateral relationships in the region to "absolute alliances."

Notwithstanding the traditional political reservations that mark their relations, the Mediterranean offers Israel and Egypt some new opportunities to deepen their relations. First, Israel must continue working to expand cooperation with Egypt in the field of gas and energy through development of resources and infrastructures, bilateral and multilateral coordination in the EMGF framework, and promotion of a professional dialogue between elements in government, companies, and experts on both sides. The implementation of the gas deal and Egypt's invitation to join Israel, Greece, and Cyprus in setting up the gas pipeline to Europe ("East-Med") are steps in the right direction to establish the energy sector as a stabilizing element in Israel-Egypt relations, as well as in regional geopolitics.

Second, Israel must formulate a comprehensive Mediterranean policy in order to widen the range of its shared interests with Egypt and other states beyond the area of gas. For that purpose it should consider potential Israeli input into Mediterranean topics such as environment, renewable energy, desalination, emergency preparedness, education, science, and employment. The UfM could provide a constructive platform for Israeli integration into regional projects of this kind, and Israel must consider allocating greater resources and manpower to strengthen its influence in this framework (since 2016 Israel has chosen, for budget considerations, not to appoint a representative at the UfM headquarters in Barcelona).

Third, Israel – like Egypt – can benefit from fostering a Mediterranean identity that emphasizes common denominators among countries of the region and the values of mutual openness, tolerance, and acceptance of the other. It has the ability to work toward encouraging ties between Mediterranean peoples, encounters between young people, and cultural exchanges, which contribute toward shaping an ethos of a "common region" and help its integration into the area. Israel and Egypt, for their part, can consider promoting an initiative in the spirit of the Roots Revival Week, with the participation of descendants of the Jewish community of Alexandria, which at its height number 40,000 people. The renovation by the Egyptian government of the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria, which was reopened to visitors this month, is another inspiring example of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism and the possibility of translating it into a new policy on the ground.