

The Egyptians at Philadelphi: Regional Interests, Local Challenges

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Israel's announcement of the unilateral disengagement plan forced Egypt to reexamine its policy regarding the Palestinian issue. Critical to Egypt was the ability to prove that it remains a strategic asset to the United States and a key to implementation of American foreign policy in the Middle East, even in post-war Iraq and in face of Washington's determination that Egypt undertake far-reaching economic and political reforms. At the same time, the growing prospect for the establishment of a viable sovereign Palestinian entity confronts Egypt with challenges and dangers. Egypt is aware that its ongoing conduct along the border will be scrutinized in light of its past ideological declarations. Yet on the more tangible level, dissolution of the partition furnished by the Israeli presence in Gaza reconnects the Palestinian and Egyptian populations that were hitherto set apart by the Israel-Egypt peace accord, with a host of resulting economic and security implications.

Egypt's firm, unflagging tactical interest has been stability on the other side of its border, on the assumption that the lack of law and order in the Gaza Strip, in particular failure to monitor the terror organizations' activity, would likely overflow into Egypt – into Egyptian Rafah and onward to El Arish and its environs, and from there into the heart of the country. Moreover, Egypt worried that the chaos weighing down the civilian population in the Gaza Strip would realize its longstanding fear of Palestinian refugees knocking en masse at its door. Among Egyptian decision-makers, no doubt influenced by security elements that have designed Egypt's pos-

turing on the Palestinians and Israel, there has been increasing recognition of the many common or at least bordering Egyptian and Israeli interests. Chief among these was Egypt's desire to help the Palestinian Authority (PA) foster conditions that would allow the PA to establish a stable administrative grip within the Gaza Strip, and thus reduce the imminent dangers posed to Egypt by the spillover of Islamic violence into its territory.

The October 2004 terror attacks in Taba and Nuweiba were explained by Egypt as an extreme emotional reaction to the suffering inflicted on the Palestinians by Israel. This explanation was intended mainly for internal propaganda purposes, among others, in order to divert attention from the international media's focus on the resurrection of Islamic terror in Egypt, which the regime boasted as suppressed since the mid-1990s. Egyptian security elements understood, however, that the realities were more complex. After years of Israeli protests that Egypt was not doing enough to prevent smuggling over its border into the Gaza Strip, the attacks in Sinai were proof not only that the impetus to violence could easily cross the border, but also of the possibility that traffic within the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt was two-directional.

At the same time, Egypt embraced the Palestinian view that Israel must commit to a comprehensive and complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, including from the border line itself, the Philadelphi route. Nonetheless, the Egyptians appreciated the Israeli assertion full well that the Palestinians alone could not control the unrestricted traffic along the border and prevent terror elements from breaching it. This understanding revalidated Egypt's demand,

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voiced even before the disengagement plan was announced, to ease what it considered the draconian restrictions imposed by the military addendum to the peace accord with Israel, which limited Egyptian presence along the border with Israel to a police force only. Hence Egypt signaled its readiness for an immediate deployment of its forces along the Egyptian side of the Philadelphi route within days of signing the bilateral understandings with Israel. It was then that Egypt also began to train Palestinian security personnel in Cairo and in the Gaza Strip, with Egyptian security experts dispatched to the area especially for that purpose.

When Egyptian involvement first began in the form of the "Mubarak Initiative" (see box), Egypt rejected any attempt to impute to it a change of the government position adopted during Israel's Operation Defensive Shield, to freeze all intergovernmental relations with Israel with the exception of those channels serving Palestinian concerns. Gradually, due to Egypt's mounting economic difficulties, bilateral ties increased, first in December 2004, with the official signing at the ministerial level and under media spotlight of the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) agreement. Half a year later, in June 2005, a deal was signed in Cairo, again in the presence of ministers, for the sale of Egyptian natural gas to Israel. In March 2005, Egypt returned an ambassador to head its delegation in Tel Aviv, four and a half years after Ambassador Bassiouni was recalled to Cairo for consultations following the outbreak of the second intifada. The succession of Egyptian gestures, which signaled a *de facto* change in Egyptian policy, did not stop there; hence, for example, the release of Azam Azam eight years after being arrested on charges of spying for Israel.

As the disengagement grew imminent and the regional arena became more turbulent, Egypt's standing in the US continued to deteriorate. Unrelenting US pressure for extensive reforms and mounting hardships in the Egyptian economy joined Cairo's realization that there was no alternative in the near future to an Israeli government headed by Ariel Sharon. Against this backdrop, Egypt reformulated the

The Mubarak Initiative

In April 2004, President Mubarak visited the US and was received at President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. At their meeting, Mubarak detailed his decided opposition to the disengagement, announced one month earlier by Prime Minister Sharon, explaining that the plan was a unilateral one, lacked any basis of negotiation with the Palestinians, ignored the needs of the Palestinians, and was destined to put an end to any chance for progress in the foreseeable future towards establishing a Palestinian state within the framework of the roadmap. While Mubarak continued his visit in Texas, President Bush met with Prime Minister Sharon in Washington, and to Egypt's utter surprise the president announced the US agreement to the disengagement plan, accompanied by a letter of understanding that touched in part on the question of a permanent settlement. A few weeks later, at the end of May 2004, the head of Egyptian General Intelligence, Omar Suleiman, arrived for a visit in Israel and met with senior officials. Shortly thereafter (on June 1, 2004), the official Egyptian daily *al-Ahram* published the main points of the messages relayed by Egypt to Israel and the Palestinians, coining them the "Mubarak Initiative."

The initiative was designed to improve the readiness of the Palestinians in general, and Arafat in particular, ahead of the implementation of the disengagement, in order to compel Israel to have the plan coordinated with the Palestinians, and to assist the Palestinians to prepare to assume responsibility in areas departed by Israel. From the start Egypt did not see its role as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians, but rather as a facilitator, furthering the interests of the Palestinians by helping them to be ready for the Israeli withdrawal. This in turn would serve as a springboard for proving Palestinians' ability to manage themselves, i.e., a sort of "pilot" towards the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. In exchange for the Egyptian effort to reorganize the Palestinian arena by obtaining agreement between the various factions and the Palestinian leadership – and among the factions themselves – to

cease the "illegitimate violence," Israel was required to commit to halting its actions against the Palestinians even before withdrawing its forces from the Gaza Strip, as a preliminary step to a comprehensive withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 line and the gradual implementation the roadmap. Additionally, Israel was asked to activate the safe passage to the West Bank as a preventive measure against the isolation of the Gaza Strip. The Egyptians promised Arafat they would try to influence Israel in order to arrange his freedom of movement.

In practice the Mubarak Initiative, contrary to the initial Egyptian opposition to the disengagement, displayed a new model of Egypt's grappling with the plan, in an attempt to minimize the negative impact of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal. The essence of the initiative strove to establish parameters for Egypt's active involvement in the disengagement plan: Egypt would train and ready Palestinian security forces so they could assume full control over the Gaza Strip; Egyptian involvement would be launched only after the beginning of the Israeli withdrawal, since at that time Egypt did not consent to endangering its training teams (since then, Egypt changed its stance and dispatched security teams to the Gaza Strip prior to the Israeli withdrawal); the Egyptians would equip the Palestinians with light equipment, small arms, communication facilities and vehicles, and assist them in the construction of buildings and detention facilities in cooperation with the donor countries. Egypt continually made clear its determined and principled restriction that Egyptian forces would never enter the Gaza Strip in order to enforce order.

The timing of the Mubarak Initiative was not incidental. In June 2004 the G-8 summit convened in the US, with the focus of discussion on the American demand for extensive economic, political, and cultural reforms in Arab countries. In May, at the Arab Summit in Tunis, Egypt failed to formulate a response to the external challenge and reorganize the Arab

League in such a way as to empower Egypt's leadership capability in the regional arena. Due to the Egyptian sense that it had reached an impasse in its relations with the US and had now to fashion a new strategy befitting changing realities, the Mubarak Initiative was intended, at the strategic level, to signal to the Americans that despite Egypt's poor performance in domestic reform and its deteriorating inter-Arab status, including regarding the political process, Egypt retained its unique role as the "go between" in the Middle East. Therefore, Egypt sought to demonstrate its active determination, in coordination with the US, to extricate the Palestinian issue from its deadlocked state, while hinting at its expectation that when conditions would be ripe and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would be supported within the framework of consultations with the US, Egypt must be included as a full fledged member.

In the weeks following the proposal, an Egyptian pose took shape whereby the more the Palestinians faltered in meeting timetables set by the Egyptians and the more Arafat parried the Egyptian demand that he relinquish part of his authority, the more the Egyptians would send the ball into the Israeli court and increase their demands from Israel. Similarly, Egypt's attempt to convene a dialogue of Palestinian factions in Cairo in September 2004 was repeatedly rejected. In fact, despite the visits of the Omar Suleiman to Israel and Ramallah, no meaningful achievements were attained through Egypt's activity until Arafat's death in November 2004. Egypt's hosting of the funeral in Cairo and the high level escort granted to Arafat's coffin on its way to the Muqata'a were meant to signal to the post-Arafat Palestinian leadership that Egypt was intent on taking custodianship over the advancement of the Palestinian issue and that it was worth heeding Cairo's advice. And indeed in March 2005 Egypt managed to convene a special dialogue of the factions, which resulted in the Cairo Declaration (March 17, 2005) on the *tahdia*, the calm vis-à-vis terror activities.

linkage between the Palestinian issue and its relations with Israel.

Specifically, Egypt reasoned that its relations with Israel would be measured by the US according to its willingness to contribute to the success of the peace process in the Middle East and especially the disengagement (even though Egypt's involvement has not in fact granted it immunity to US demands for expanding domestic reforms). Therefore, Egypt adopted an instrumental approach motivated by genuine Egyptian political and security interests; yet as a result Egypt gradually found itself increasingly involved with the Palestinians – perhaps even more than it intended when the Mubarak Initiative was launched – before and during the disengagement. What is required of Egypt following the transfer of the Gaza Strip to Palestinian hands stands to be even greater, extending to the realm of its bilateral relations with Israel.

Prior to the disengagement, Egypt was credited with certain key achievements, including coordinating the move to a degree with the Palestinians. The Palestinian factions reached an understanding that was generally regarded as a conditional "calm" (*tahdia*). Yet the supreme efforts demanded of Egypt for each and every achievement and the fragile survivability of these achievements prove indeed that the Egyptian commitment to assuring the success of the disengagement presents Egypt with no small number of opportunities, but also burdens it with no small number of challenges and risks.

The Achievements of Egyptian Involvement

First and foremost, Egypt has in its own view breathed new life into the "Egyptian role" (*Dawr Misr*); this oft-repeated slogan embodies Egypt's self-image of its vitality and leadership within the Arab world. Within the changing circumstances of the decentralization of the Arab collective and the ebbing of Egyptian pretension of regional

hegemony, Egypt's involvement in preparations for the disengagement distinguished it from all other Arab states – including those whose financial contributions exceeded Egypt's. As long as Arab countries cling to their insistence on resolving the Palestinian issue, Egypt's regional prominence is assured, since as far as Egypt is concerned, it is the only one that has evidenced its willingness to "get its hands dirty" in order to promote Palestinian interests.

Egypt is certain that its active involvement in the disengagement will once again confirm its regional weight and importance as a strategic asset to the US. Egypt's commitment to the move, it presumes, will be credited with points in Washington's open notepad, which registers each instance of Egyptian willingness or refusal to cooperate with American regional policy. Hovering in the background over the past two years has been the threat of translating bad marks into a cutback in American aid, promised to Egypt since the peace agreements with Israel, as well as the prospects of any reward in the form of accelerating the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US.

The deployment of quantitatively and qualitatively upgraded forces along the border with the Gaza Strip improves Egypt's security presence and military capability in Area C of the Sinai, and corrects what is seen by Egypt as an injustice imposed by the peace accord with Israel. This upgrading is significant to Egypt's image, as indeed the regime can present it as a reassertion of Egyptian sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula and as improving its defense capabilities against any imminent threat from Israel. However, the more important implications are interceptive. The Taba and Nuweiba (October

2004) and Sharm el-Sheikh (July 2005) attacks demonstrated the powerlessness of Egyptian security control in desert areas and over the Bedouin population. In recent weeks, Egypt has been in persistent hot pursuit of members of the terror cell that perpetrated the recent attacks, which



L-r: Mahmoud Abbas, Ariel Sharon, Hosni Mubarak, in Sharm el-Sheikh, February 2005

is suspected of connection with last year's attacks. Field commanders have explained more than once that they have failed to capture criminal elements turned terrorists in Sinai due to the quality of personnel and resources at their disposal. The deployment of Egyptian Border Guard forces would represent a first step in the Egyptian effort to channel better quality resources towards tightening security control in the Sinai desert.

Egypt's looming fear is that the disengagement will be the first and last move of its kind, and will not position Israel on the path of renewed dialogue.

Senior Egyptian officials, headed by President Mubarak, have repeatedly made it clear that it is impossible to block smuggling across – or under – the border with the Gaza Strip unless Egyptian forces are stationed there shoulder to shoulder. Indeed, the utter failure of the Egyptian police, charged with responsibility for the border ever since the peace treaty with Israel, to prevent its breach immediately after the withdrawal of IDF forces from Gaza and the subsequent inrush into Egypt of Palestinians, including members of Hamas and other armed organizations, supported the Egyptian claim that only by upgrading and fortifying their forces along the fourteen kilometers of the Gaza Strip could they dam the leakage of extremist Islamic elements, all the more so militant ones, into its territory. Egypt's efforts to restrain Hamas activities and contain the organization within the PA institutions were indeed meant to prevent the creation of a "Hamaстан" at its border. However, if the situation becomes unbearable and Islamic organizations overpower the Palestinian Authority, Egypt is prepared to block their entry forcefully in order to prevent them from joining hands with Islamic elements active within Egypt. The issue is especially sensitive since historically, Hamas is the offspring of the Egyptian Muslim

Brotherhood, and the Palestinian version of Islamic Jihad was inspired by the Egyptian organization bearing the same name.

According to Egyptian political thinking, Egypt's involvement in the disengagement provides proof of the effectiveness and advantages of negotiated agreements in the Middle East. Egypt portrays the disengagement as a direct continuation of the Camp David accords and the peace agreements with Israel. From this aspect, the ability to alter the application of the peace treaty, twenty-six years after its finalizing, justifies Egypt's measures and demonstrates that any settlement reached between Israel and the Palestinians is not necessarily the last word. From Egypt's standpoint, deploying 750 Egyptian border guards through the signing of a military protocol not in breach of the peace agreements is perceived as an achievement, especially since Egypt is not required to pay any price in return – for example in the form of an Israeli claim of breach of other bilateral agreements, or the implementation of existing but obsolete agreements in order to improve Israel's benefit from them.

Old and New Challenges at Egypt's Doorstep

Against these achievements lie a host of challenges and risks. Renewed coordination and cooperation with Israel constitutes a propaganda burden on the Egyptian regime, especially in an election year. The regime succeeded in avoiding the subject of thawed relations with Israel as well as the Palestinian issue in its propaganda before the September presidential elections, but when the new national council is elected (in November-December), it is doubtful that the opposition will remain silent regarding the rapprochement with Israel.

The reinforced presence of border guards along the Gaza border is likely to increase the level of imminent danger to Egyptian security forces from the Palestinian side, as long as the armed conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues. The unintentional firing by Israel on three Egyptian police officers (in November 2004) is still fresh in the

memory of the Egyptian regime, which fears that a misguided Palestinian adventure, such as launching rockets or initiating attacks, would draw an Israeli military response that could hit Egyptian border forces or security and intelligence personnel instructing Palestinian security forces. Such a mishap would almost certainly inflame the passions of the Egyptian masses and give rise to a tide of opposition against relations with Israel, interpreting Egyptian involvement in the Gaza Strip and along its border as a pro-Israel gesture.

An obligatory step, then, is to strengthen security coordination between Egypt and Israel, and increase Egyptian influence over the heads of Palestinian security mechanisms on the one hand, and over armed organizations on the other. Thus far Egypt has avoided demanding the confiscation of arms in Palestinian organizations or the dismantling of their infrastructures, and has preferred the path of dialogue in an attempt to monitor their responses. In the Egyptian view, derived in no small measure from an analysis of the causes of terror within Egypt, it is preferable to reach an understanding with the leadership of organizations within the Palestinian Authority rather than attempt to reach an understanding with leaderships abroad, supervised and under the influence of intractable countries such as Syria. Still, Egypt backs up its efforts aimed at heads of Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip by lobbying the Syrians, in exchange for serving the latter's interests. Yet despite Syria's troubles in the international arena, Egypt places no high hopes on the goodwill of the Syrians to commit itself to easing tensions in the area.

Once the disengagement was already underway, Egypt exhibited demonstrable statesmanship towards the Palestinian Authority, for instance in opening an Egyptian embassy in Ramallah; in Abu Mazen's traversing the Rafah border crossing on his way for talks with President Mubarak, with Egypt's insistence that no Israeli presence be allowed at the passage; and in the support conveyed by General Omar Suleiman, on behalf of President Mubarak, in his speech before the Palestinian Legislative Council in Gaza. After years of voicing slogans over the cen-

trality of the Palestinian problem to the Arab world, Egypt is the first Arab country to share a common border with a Palestinian entity having the trappings of sovereignty and self-rule. In the past, Egypt avoided linking itself to the Gaza Strip through political tethers (contrasted with the Jordanian policy of annexing the West Bank). Now, Egypt understands that its openness or lack thereof to the Palestinians will be closely scrutinized by the rest of the Arab countries, and perhaps also Islamic countries, which are liable to demand that Egypt dedicate more input towards the Palestinian good than it had calculated in its original plan.

The true test for Egypt will be the extent of its ability over time to block smuggling – of goods, people, and weapons, under and over ground.

Egypt's looming fear is that the disengagement will be the first and last move of its kind, and will not position Israel on the path of renewed dialogue with the Palestinians towards implementation of the roadmap and establishment of a Palestinian state. In the Egyptian view, this amounts to severing the Gaza Strip from the bulk of Palestinian territory and the majority of the Palestinian population, depositing it into Egyptian hands as a ticking bomb. The resentment of the Palestinian population regarding the impotency of its leadership to provide for the needs of the people may spark a third intifada that, while surely injuring Israel if occurring in the West Bank, would translate into an Egyptian problem if it erupted in the Gaza Strip. Hence the urgency broadcast by Egypt to the Quartet to exert sustained pressure on Israel to create a "safe passage" between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; to cease expanding the settlements and erecting the security/separation fence; and to rush to adopt additional positive measures for the Palestinians, such as accelerating the opening of the Rafah crossing without an Israeli

presence, in order to spur dialogue with them. At the same time Egypt is working with the Palestinians, both the leadership of the Palestinian Authority and heads of the organizations, to unite behind one single legitimate Palestinian leadership and to update the Palestinian political agenda and working plan for 2006, on the assumption that no significant progress can be expected in the political process over the coming months in light of the fluidity of the political situation in Israel.

Egypt fears that the crux of the isolation of the Gaza Strip is its transformation into a Palestinian enclave – or, as the Egyptians describe, a huge prison camp fenced in by Israel, with a population density among the highest in the world and oppressive hardship brought on by the lack of infrastructures and by unemployment. Accordingly, Egypt is obligated to mobilize the donor countries for rehabilitating Gaza's infrastructures and employment opportunities as well as for building its naval and air ports, which will widen Gaza's exposure to economic opportunities. The nightmare scenario, no doubt haunting senior Egyptian officials and which partly materialized in the first days following the Israeli withdrawal, is of multitudes of Palestinians beating down the gates of the Rafah crossing and begging to enter Egypt to find work. Egypt, it should be remembered, has an unemployment rate of approximately 20 percent and lags in its task of finding 600,000 jobs for Egyptian citizens per year. One-fifth of Egypt's population lives below the poverty line, which is less than two dollars a day.

If the threatening scenarios materialize, they are likely to cause monumental damage to Egypt's image. The failure to set into motion the political process within a reasonable period of time is liable to be perceived by domestic opposition and other elements in the Arab world – countries, shapers of public opinion, and the mass media – as assisting Israel in pushing aside the Palestinians as a player

with legitimate rights in the region. Moreover, a constant onrush of Palestinians towards the Rafah crossing is likely to compel Egypt to open its doors to the Palestinians; this after the long years ever since the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, in which Egypt avoided granting them legal status within its borders, made sure their numbers did not exceed several tens of thousands, and denied them basic civil rights. Hovering above all is the specter of satellite TV station cameras, recording the images of Palestinian refugees and their outcries, this time with no option to blame it on the Israeli occupation.

At the end of the day, the true test for Egypt will be the extent of its ability over time to block smuggling – of goods, people, and weapons, under and over ground. The inclusion of a review mechanism for the validity of the deployment of Border Guard forces among the eighty-three articles of the military protocol, signed on September 1, 2005 by the Israeli and Egyptian chiefs of operations, submits Egypt to a continuous test of upholding its promise to "deliver the goods" – or, more precisely, to *prevent* their delivery. . . .

The spectacles from the first days following the disengagement, explained by the Egyptians as resulting from Israel's advancing the schedule so that the designated border security forces, along with their special equipment, weren't able to deploy in conformity with the military protocol, demonstrated just how sensitive and problematic the Egyptian-Palestinian border is destined to be if the Egyptians do not promptly establish strict criteria for its administration. Israel's withdrawal from the Philadelphi route, while viewed by parts of the Israeli public as a threat to Israel, is in Egyptian eyes an appendage of the threat of Palestinian terror to Egyptian territory – without the presence of a buffer to absorb bullet fire or the ricochets of a failure to seal off the unfettered accessibility of terrorist or criminal elements.