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The Case of the Missing Missive: Principle and Pragmatism in Egyptian-Israeli Relations

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Many years ago, when it was still considered indelicate to ask whether a woman colored her hair, an American hair products company ran an advertising campaign with a picture of a handsome blonde lady and underneath it the caption “Does she or doesn’t she?” Such a question no longer excites much attention in the West, although until 2011, Egyptians were still hesitant to ask publicly whether their President, Husni Mubarak, colored his hair. Now that Mubarak has left the stage, the issue of hair dye is no longer on the agenda, but observers may well wonder, in a similar vein, about a letter that President Mohamed Morsi allegedly sent to Israeli President Shimon Peres, “Did he or didn’t he?”

According to Peres’ office, the Egyptian Embassy in Tel Aviv forwarded a letter from Morsi thanking Peres for his good wishes on the occasion of Ramadan and stating that he looks forward “to exerting our best efforts to get the Middle East peace process back to its right track in order to achieve security and stability for all peoples of the region, including that [sic] Israeli people.” The conciliatory tone of the letter prompted even some Israeli skeptics to express the hope that “things might work out after all with the Islamists.” However, Morsi’s spokesman immediately denied having sent the letter, claiming that media reports did not correspond to reality.

It is unlikely that this incident is a mere fantasy of the Israeli President. After all, the letter, along with an official cover letter on the letterhead of the Egyptian Embassy, was made public, and Peres has no obvious interest in fabricating the correspondence. So it is probably safe to conclude that he did receive something from the Egyptian Embassy. On the other hand, neither the cover letter nor Morsi’s attached letter (which was printed on plain paper) bore a date or a signature, and professionals in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry are normally sticklers for diplomatic protocol. Conspiracy theorists may therefore be tempted to believe that the letter may well have been sent, not by Morsi but by someone

else in Egypt (perhaps the SCAF) eager to embarrass him. After all, there are no political points to be scored in Egypt by being congenial to Israelis.

The absence of any evidence to substantiate such a theory will in no way discredit it in the eyes of true devotees of conspiracy. Others are most likely to conclude that Morsi did indeed send a message – perhaps at the prompting of recent high level American visitors such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta – but that he did so in such a way as to leave him some room for plausible deniability.

No one apart from Morsi himself and a few of his closest aides can be absolutely certain about the accuracy of this version, but if it is true, it seems to provide more evidence for the widely held assumption that power imposes moderation even on the truest of true believers – which Morsi, a long time senior figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, undoubtedly is. However, there are a number of reasons to doubt the general validity of this assumption, and certainly of its applicability in this case. First of all, the historical record of ideologues in power is mixed, at best. Many have jettisoned their ideological baggage and demonstrably moderated both their rhetoric and their behavior. Perhaps the most prominent example in recent Middle Eastern history is Anwar Sadat, who was transformed over time from radical nationalist/Islamist sympathizer to advocate of peaceful coexistence. But many others have occasionally shown tactical flexibility when circumstances required it while never renouncing their belief system or their determination to make manifest their ideologies, even when circumstances seemed to militate against that choice. Iranian Supreme Leaders Khomeini and Khamenei seem to be cases in point.

Second, Morsi does not yet have power. His authority remains obscure pending the formal clarification of the constitutional division of powers in Egypt and the practical resolution of the political struggle between the armed forces and the Muslim Brotherhood. There is little doubt, however, that everything he does is geared toward enhancing the movement's power, and that does not preclude seemingly pragmatic action needed to reassure both domestic audiences and foreign actors essential to its success. After all, the Brotherhood initially promised not to compete for more than one-third, and later one-half of the seats in parliamentary elections before eventually running a full slate, and it promised not to put forward a presidential candidate before proposing a candidate and then another – Morsi – after the first was disqualified. Such flexibility, like the ideological flexibility implicit in Morsi's inauguration speech and in the makeup of the first Cabinet approved under his Presidency, is permitted and even encouraged by Muslim Brotherhood ideologues, who draw their reasoning from the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Still, pragmatic flexibility is not necessarily tantamount to ideological moderation. Neither the Brotherhood nor Morsi himself – who has ostensibly left the Brotherhood and its Freedom

and Justice Party offshoot – has advocated removing the two crossed swords from the Brotherhood's emblem or renouncing its motto: "Allah is our objective; the Quran is our law, the Prophet is our leader; jihad is our way; and death for the sake of Allah is our highest aspiration."

It is possible that the Brotherhood will eventually internalize that sort of moderation implicitly and perhaps even endorse it explicitly. But there is nothing inevitable about such an outcome and much reason to remain skeptical.

Finally, whatever analytical conclusion may be warranted, it has few near term implications for Israeli policy. As long as the prospect of moderation has not been visibly precluded by the actions of a Muslim Brotherhood that has not yet taken total power in Egypt, and especially as long as other major international actors continue to believe that Islamist pragmatism may yet prevail over Islamist principle, Israel needs to go on pursuing a policy of prudent accommodation and willingness to cooperate, lest it contribute – or be seen to be contributing – to the very outcome it most wants to avoid: an Egyptian government dominated by a Brotherhood bent on proving that its motto is not just a collection of empty words.

