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## **An Egyptian Take on the “New Middle East”**

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In a speech on May 17, 2016, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi proclaimed that Egyptian-Israeli relations would “grow warmer once the Palestinian problem is solved.” Ostensibly, there is nothing new in this statement, which was made against the background of preparations for the peace conference that convened in Paris on June 3, reports of contacts to convene an Israeli-Palestinian summit under Egyptian auspices, and efforts to bring the Zionist Camp party into Israel’s government coalition. Egypt has consistently made the improvement of relations with Israel conditional on progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, and the Arab Peace Initiative likewise linked normalization between Israel and the Arab states to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Nonetheless, Egypt’s current openness to “warm” peace emerges in a new geopolitical context bearing a meaningful message: normalization is no longer presented only as bait aimed at encouraging Israel to enter the peace process, but rather reflects Egypt’s genuine interests and those of other Arab countries in creating a “new regional order” that will include broader and more open cooperative efforts with Israel for the sake of security stability and economic welfare in the region.

El-Sisi’s declaration marked the culmination of a string of statements by former senior Egyptian state and military officials and independent publicists that appeared recently in the Egyptian press, calling for a reassessment, under certain conditions, of the traditional reservations regarding the “temperature” of the country’s relations with Israel. Articles appearing in pro-establishment Egyptian newspapers, including *al-Ahram* and *al-Masry al-Youm*, stressed that from the Egyptian perspective, the “warming” of relations with Israel fulfills a pragmatic need, and “does not mean hugs and kisses” with the Israelis. El-Sisi’s policy was compared to that of President Sadat both in terms of its goal to bring about a comprehensive peace between the Arab states and Israel and its ability to make the necessary adaptations to meet the needs of the time and the regional circumstances. Like Sadat’s historic peace undertaking, el-Sisi’s new initiative was presented as a strategic turning point going beyond the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the solution to the Palestinian problem. If in the second half of the 1970s peace with Israel was part of a broad Egyptian initiative to adopt a pro-American orientation, “warm” peace with Israel during the current period is actually meant to fill the vacuum left by the

reduction of US involvement in the region. It aims at doing so by establishing a new regional axis in which Egypt, the Gulf states, and Israel will join forces.

El-Sisi’s speech resonated of the Arab League’s initiative of 2002 and was meant to provide him with Arab legitimacy to expanded normalization between Egypt and Israel. At the same time, the geopolitical background of el-Sisi’s declaration departs substantively from that of the original Arab initiative. May Azzam, who published a series of articles in *al-Masry al-Youm* under the title “Are the Arabs Ready for Warm Peace?” addressed the differences between the 2002 initiative and the diplomatic efforts of the present. The Palestinian problem, she maintains, no longer heads the Arab public agenda; an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights is not currently a relevant prospect, in light of the war in Syria; and the “resistance” organizations of Hezbollah and Hamas are considered by some of the Arab states to be outcast terrorist groups. Consequently, as shown by the articles of Azzam and others, “warm” peace with Israel serves the fundamental strategic interests of Egypt in two realms.

*The security realm:* Closer relations with Israel will contribute to Arab-Israeli cooperation against the common enemies that currently threaten peace and stability in the region, most prominently Iran and the Salafi-jihadist and Islamist terrorist groups. According to Azzam, “most of the Arab governments already do not regard Israel as their most bitter enemy and rank other countries ahead of it on the hostility and hatred scale.” Publicist Muhammad Ali Ibrahim, who has also addressed the issue of “warm” peace, expressed hope that such a development would allow the clandestine relations that have long existed between Israel and the Sunni Arab axis to come to the surface, and help the sides form a joint regional front to serve as a fortified wall against the “the stormy sea whose waves are swallowing up states and peoples.” He also maintained that a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would be perceived as a slap in the face to Iran and its proxies, who have been exploiting the Palestinian problem in order to topple the secular Arab governments, divide the Arab states along sectarian lines, and fight Sunnis under the fictitious banner of a “jihad for the liberation of Jerusalem.”

*The economic realm:* The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was presented by publicists associated with the regime as a precursor to the establishment of a Middle East and Mediterranean frameworks to facilitate cooperation in the fields of energy, transport, and commerce. As explained by former Assistant Foreign Minister Muhammad Higazi, Israel could be integrated into the new economic order subject to the end of the occupation, the recognition of UN resolutions, the acceptance of the two-state solution, and a willingness to negotiate the establishment of a region devoid of weapons of mass destruction. In an article published in January 2016 in *al-Ahram*, he expressed hope that “the economic profits – along with the regional serenity, security, and stability that will be achieved by the regional cooperation initiated by Egypt – will serve as an incentive for

Israel to abandon its current regional isolation.” General Samir Farag, former head of the Department of Morale Affairs of the Egyptian Armed Forces, sketched horizons for cooperative efforts between Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus surrounding the gas discoveries in the Mediterranean Sea. In an article published in *al-Ahram* in February 2016, he assessed that “the Mediterranean Sea has become the most important arena that will impact on Egyptian national security in the near future” and recommended closer diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations with the neighboring Mediterranean states and the signing of agreements to ensure vital Egyptian interests.

The establishment of “warm” peace between Egypt and Israel has been presented as a qualitative change in the prevailing policy and not as a tactical step, as, according to Azzam, “normalization with Israel, finding a solution to the Palestinian problem, the stability and national security of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and the fight against terrorism are all interconnected.” She pointed to the Egyptian need and necessity for promoting “a turnover in the principles on which we were educated and that became part of our fundamental concepts,” in order to be adapted to the newly emerging order. In an article published following el-Sisi’s speech, a columnist in *al-Masry al-Youm* writing under the pseudonym “Newton” stated that after decades of living side by side with Israel, the time has come for Egypt to update its “operative program” to enable it to reap the fruits of peace between the two countries. He proposed replacing the “Preparation of the State for War Law,” which has been in force in Egypt since 1968, with a “Law for Preparation of the State for Peace, Revival, and Progress.” In his view, the new security understandings between Egypt and Israel regarding the deployment of forces in the Sinai Peninsula has proven “the existence of mutual trust and the coordination that serves the interests of both countries; both of these must be developed and their benefits fully exploited by putting an end to the state of not peace and not war.”

The voices of peace that were sounded recently in Egypt, which emerged from the inner circles of the Egyptian regime and beyond, attest to the fact that new winds are blowing in the Land of the Nile regarding true opportunities for changing Israel’s status in the region. Programs sporting slogans such as the “new Middle East” and “regional cooperation,” which sparked hesitation and suspicion in the Arab world when proposed by Israel in the past, are now presented to Israel as Arab initiatives.

Nonetheless, these programs are still the subject of fierce public debate in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, and the Arab regimes will find it extremely difficult to advance them if they are not accompanied by concrete steps reflecting significant progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. A freeze in settlement construction and the onset of serious negotiations for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within 1967 borders with its capital in Jerusalem have been stipulated in Egypt as preconditions for progress in the process of normalization. Achieving a permanent

solution to the Palestinian problem is perceived as a necessary step in a full future transition to “warm” peace, although the leadership crisis in the Palestinian arena and the split between Gaza and the West Bank constitute obstacles to the actualization of this goal. For its part, Israel should pay careful attention to the present opportunity to integrate itself as a legitimate partner in the newly emerging regional order, and at the same time, must fully internalize the costs of realizing this vision.

