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Egypt and Israel: rapprochement and ulterior motives

Charalampos Tsitsopoulos *

Recent years have witnessed warming ties between Egypt and Israel. Far from forging a deeper and more comprehensive relationship between the two countries, this rapprochement has successfully glossed over long-standing differences with an eye to addressing immediate geopolitical challenges. A natural corollary of converging strategic, economic and security interests and challenges, the rapprochement is likely to remain intact in the mid-term. It can thus be seen as a continuation of the 'strategic peace' established during the second decade of President Mubarak's rule.

*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese

The Egyptian-Israeli relationship has rarely been a non-controversial one. Although the two countries have seldom met eye-to-eye on everything, most obviously on the level of public opinion, their importance as paramount US allies has meant that painstaking efforts have always been exerted to keep them in—at least—nominal agreement. For two prominent Israeli scholars, the cold peace following the Camp David Accords of 1979 gave way to a ‘strategic peace’¹ during the second decade of President Hosni Mubarak’s presidency. This denotes a state somewhere between a cold and a warm peace (although closer to the former). Recent developments seem to make this type of peace if not deeper, then certainly more unstrained. In an almost serendipitous fashion, three intertwined domains have recently provided fertile ground for the intensification of Egyptian-Israeli collaboration.

Turmoil in the Sinai

The 2013 coup against Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammad Morsi unleashed a string of terrorist attacks originating in the Sinai but also spanning the country. The weapons made their way from Libya after the 2011 uprising in the country. Although Egypt repeatedly tried to clamp down on terrorists, it did so ineffectively. It was Israel’s late 2015 massive intervention via drones, jets and helicopters that seemed to turn the tide.²

Counter-terrorism collaboration in the Sinai is hardly surprising. For Egypt, the issue is indeed an existential one, extremist groups having killed hundreds of civil servants and civilians. Israel’s non-Egypt-related activities in the Sinai have been much less publicized. For Israel, the region has had broader strategic significance. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the beginning of the Israeli campaign commenced way before 2015: when in 2011 a cross-border attack killed seven Israelis, Israel’s Military and Border Police crossed into Egypt to hunt them down. In 2012, Israeli soldiers crossed into the Sinai to stem the flow of African refugees.³ In 2013, Israelis abducted a young Palestinian in the peninsula and then imprisoned him in Israel.⁴

The situation in Gaza is yet another factor: Gaza’s tunnel network has been a threat to both countries: for Egypt, it has served as a means of enrichment for smugglers on the Sinai, many of whom have ties to the local ISIS branch.⁵ For Israel, the tunnel’s implications are well known. Still, not everything is as prosaic; although their credibility has yet to be ascertained, recent reports have talked of the looming execution of mega-projects in the peninsula, involving possible land-swaps between Egypt and the Palestinians.⁶ The recent Rafah evacuation by the Egyptian army could be understood in this light, although such a project can hardly be construed as the only plausible rationale.

Egyptian mediation in the Palestinian issue

Egypt has been steadily pursuing a mediating role in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Although President el-Sisi first committed Egypt as a middleman in May 2016, followed by Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry’s visit to Israel in July of the same year, it wasn’t until September 2017 that the first public meeting between el-Sisi and Netanyahu took place. Even if one is unwilling to doubt the sincerity of these efforts, some obvious considerations should be borne in mind.

To begin with, Egypt has been experiencing a decline in regional influence, at the expense of other players such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁷ While it is true that the post-Arab spring environment has displaced the Palestinian issue from the heart of Middle Eastern tension, the Palestinian arena is still conducive to the regional competition for hearts and minds. This does not mean that Egypt is willing to throw its weight behind any agreement. Rather, Egypt seems to envisage the gradual emasculation of Hamas and the complete ascent of the more pliant Fatah (in this it can be seen as in harmony with Israeli interests). That’s precisely the reason why Fatah is only willing to accept a roadmap if it is officially

signed and carried out under direct Egyptian supervision.⁸ In the same vein, Egypt's Palestinian activism could well be located within even broader geopolitical trends. One Palestinian scholar has recently described the Egyptian-Israeli talks on Gaza as an effort to strengthen a regional 'moderate axis'.⁹ Whether this rapprochement has received the approval of traditional US allies remains to be seen, although most likely it has.

In its turn, Israel views its rapprochement with Egypt as a welcome opportunity to draw closer to Arab States. This could well be with an eye towards suffocating Iran by creating a basis for regional cooperation against it; one should not dismiss outright John Kerry's recent disclosures about Egyptian and Israeli exhortations to bomb Iran slightly before the concluding of the JCPOA deal.¹⁰ In the words of an Israeli historian, Israel might also be attempting to divert the Palestinian question by getting closer to Arab states, all while going through the motions of seeking a resolution.¹¹

An uncertain energy relationship

The two countries have also been strengthening their energy cooperation. For years Egypt had been a net exporter of gas, although domestic dynamics resulted in this not being the case anymore. In February 2018, a \$15 billion, 10-year deal was announced for the sale of Israeli gas to Egypt. On one hand, the deal is unambiguously important as it works in the direction of diversifying bilateral ties beyond security.¹² It is significant for Israel, like anything militating against its regional isolation. Indicatively, the Israeli Energy Ministry's strategic plan for Israel's economy through 2030 is based on the deal.¹³ On the other hand, its importance for Egypt might have been slightly overstated, as the country's reserves could soon expand significantly and its supply could meet demand in 2019-2010. Some technicalities also remained unresolved: while Israel's domestic capacity is 2-3 bcm/yr, exports to Egypt under the deal will be 3,5 bcm/yr. In addition, the Tamar and Leviathan fields from where the gas will be exported are not directly linked with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas pipeline (EMG). Israel will thus have to send some of its gas to the Pan-Arab Gas Pipeline (which does connect with the EMG), widen its existing domestic network, build a second parallel pipeline, or an undersea one.

Israel's gas moves vis-à-vis Egypt are less reciprocal than meets the eye. Delek's recent purchase of 39% of the EMG company that owns the pipeline is more than likely to set bilateral energy relations on a one-way path: although EMG's becoming bi-directional could help lower local gas prices, observers close to Israel's energy industry claim that the recent Delek purchase could potentially block the import of Egyptian gas.¹⁴

Egypt's international strategy and Israel

Obama's relationship with Sisi's regime was notoriously ambiguous. President Trump has signaled a desire to improve ties, although it is unclear how he plans to do so. At the same time two developments have had a direct impact on the Egyptian-Israeli security equation: since 2013, Egypt has been buying billions of dollars' worth of weapons from France, Russia and Germany; and the signing in January 2018 of a Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), which is bound to pave the way for the acquisition by Egypt of US-made high precision GPS-based air-to-ground weapon systems and components, as well as advanced air-to-air missiles. Defense experts warn that this deal could threaten Israel's notorious Qualitative Military Edge (QME).¹⁵ Although the United States is certain to think twice before compromising its ally's military advantage, the latter can by no means have missed Egypt's increasingly diversified foreign policy, with Russia¹⁶ also recently entering the fray.

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