

EGYPT'S ROLE IN THE ISRAELI-ARAB PEACE PROCESS

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Egypt's centrality in the Arab political system is a function of its historical, demographic, cultural and military weight, its close ties with the wealthy oil states of the Persian Gulf, its cordial relationship with the US, and its channels of communication with Israel. All these factors make Egypt a central element for Yasir Arafat in his evolving relationship with Israel. This is clearly reflected in Arafat's semi-permanent consultation with Egyptian President Husni Mubarak. However, frequent visits and intimate ties do not translate into Egyptian patronage of the Palestinian leadership, and when Egyptian and Palestinian agendas do not coincide, Mubarak's ability to influence Arafat is constrained by both domestic and regional considerations.

Since coming to power in 1981 following the assassination of Anwar Sadat, Mubarak has shown considerable sensitivity to the domestic resentment of and Arab opposition to Egypt's "separate peace" with Israel. His preferred method to deal with this has been to promote a more comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace. Setbacks in this effort confront Egyptian diplomacy with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, Mubarak needs to sustain the peace process in order to prevent escalation in the region, which would endanger Egypt's economic reforms and its relations with the United States. On the other hand, he needs to attend to domestic

opinion, with its strong anti-Israel sentiments, and to maintain Egypt at the center of the Arab consensus.

In recent years, the response to this dilemma has been a policy of dualism, that is, of promoting inter-Arab coordination in the face of Israeli government policies considered an obstacle to peace while at the same time persisting in efforts to promote additional peace agreements. This policy of dualism often provoked criticism by Syria, which demanded stronger collective Arab measures against Israel, but it enabled Egypt to project itself as the cornerstone of regional stability. This image was further enhanced with the deaths of King Husayn of Jordan and of King Hassan of Morocco in early 1999, which left Mubarak as the Americans' closest Arab partner.

The installation of a new government in Israel under Ehud Barak in July of 1999 provided Mubarak with an opportunity to resume his role as mediator. But while Egypt apparently believed that Barak's election created an opportunity to revive the moribund peace process, it continued to block Israeli and American attempts to reactivate the multilateral negotiations. Egypt also renewed its diplomatic campaign to force Israel to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Indeed, diplomatic confrontation has been a part of the fabric of Egyptian-Israeli relations during Mubarak's

tenure. Nevertheless, some degree of ongoing dialogue has been a constant feature of the Israeli-Egyptian relationship, since it serves the interest of both sides. Israel has used this track to help clarify and moderate disputes with the Palestinians. Egypt has used it to promote its position of seniority in the Arab system, its prestige in the international arena, its privileged relationship with the United States, and its goal of economic development and modernization.

Mubarak's policy is well reflected in the restraint displayed by Egypt following the outbreak of the *Intifada* in September 2000. Egypt has continued to portray the peace with Israel as a vital national interest that no other Arab or Muslim party has the right to undermine. Mubarak has faced down heavy pressure, not only from marginal countries such as Yemen, Libya and Iraq, which demanded a declaration of war against Israel, but also from major regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Syria, which pressed for a break in relations with Israel. Egyptian diplomacy resulted in the relatively moderate resolutions adopted by the Arab Summit in October 2000 and by the Islamic Conference Organization Summit in November, which left the decision to cut off relations with Israel up to each individual country.

Egypt views itself, not simply as a patron of peace in the Middle East, but also as the leader of the Arab world. This status obliges it to be attentive to local Arab public opinion and to make positive gestures toward the Palestinians. The most significant such gesture was the decision to recall the Egyptian ambassador in Israel for "consultations." The decision was prompted by domestic and Arab protests against Israel's response to the Palestinian uprising, with its graphic images of casualties among the civilian Palestinian population.

At the same time, Egypt has tried to persuade Arafat to curb the violence in the territories and reach an agreement with Israel. This pressure has intensified with the approach of the end of

President Clinton's term in office and the Prime Ministerial elections in Israel. Egypt's attempt to encourage acceptance of the American mediation proposal has focused on two of the main obstacles to a permanent status agreement. The first is the issue of Jerusalem, which is of particular concern to Mubarak and other Arab leaders because it has evoked outbursts of popular anger directed, at least in part, at the "passivity" of Arab governments in the face of the Israeli "threat" to al-Aqsa. The second is the issue of the borders of the Palestinian State, which, according to the American proposal, would include about 95% of the territories conquered by Israel in 1967, but also some territory transferred from pre-1967 Israel. This arrangement would satisfy the principle of "the return of all the occupied territories" advocated by Egypt ever since Sadat's peace initiative in 1977. But on the third and most sensitive permanent status issue – the "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees – Egypt has been less forthcoming. In contrast to Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, Egypt itself does not host a large population of Palestinian refugees, so any attempt to influence Palestinian decisionmaking in this area could be interpreted as illegitimate interference. Reservations about Egypt's "standing" on the refugee issue demonstrate the limitations of Mubarak's influence on Arafat.

Despite its disputes with Israel over the Palestinian question and other contentious issues, Egypt has continued to view the peace as a vital strategic interest and to use it as the foundation for a new system of relationships between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Still, Egypt does not function in a vacuum. Instead, it is an integral part of an Arab political system that it aspires to lead. This duality forces Egypt to maintain a delicate balance between its national interests, including its bilateral relations with Israel, and its broader inter-Arab and regional goals.