



# Handle With Care

**T**HE MINI-CRISIS IN EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS following the August 18 cross-border attacks in southern Israel by Palestinian terrorists and at least one Egyptian citizen, is apparently over.

Outraged by the death of eight Israelis and the wounding of 30, Israeli officials and commentators had angered Egyptians in pointing to the laxity of Egyptian security forces, a direct outcome, they said, of the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Still more disturbing for Egyptians was the death of five Egyptian soldiers on Egyptian soil at the hands of Israeli troops firing at the terrorists.

Thousands of noisy protesters gathered by the Israel Embassy demanding its closure and an end to the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and turned a 24-year-old carpenter into a media star, a momentary national hero for scaling the building and removing the Israeli flag. Numerous Egyptian politicians and commentators emphasized that Israel had trampled on Egyptian sovereignty, that the days of Israel's taking Egypt's alleged passivity towards its actions were over, and that Egypt's military presence in Sinai, limited under the terms of the peace treaty, needed to be reasserted.

A major Israeli military operation in Gaza being considered that August weekend would have undoubtedly exacerbated the situation. But cooler heads prevailed: Egyptian officials pressed Hamas and other Palestinian groups to cease their rocket attacks, and Israeli officials issued the appropriate statements of regret and almost apology for the death of the Egyptian soldiers, along with an eventual commitment to conduct a joint investigation of the incident with Egypt.

Still, the episode raised a number of questions: Had the fall of Mubarak fundamentally altered the strategic landscape in the region? Could significant changes in Egypt's regional and global orientation be expected? Would a post-Mubarak Egypt be less committed to maintaining its peace agreement than Israel? Would Egyptian public opinion play a greater role than previously in fashioning Egyptian foreign policy?

A brief analysis of Egyptian-Israeli relations over the last three decades provides important perspective. The peace treaty put a definitive end to the terrible cycle of violence, expressed in five wars over a 25-year period (1948-1973). It weathered numerous storms – Israel's bombing of the Iraqi reactor in 1981 just days after a Begin-Sadat summit; Israel's Lebanese wars (1982, 2006); the failure of Egyptian-Israeli negotiations in the early 1980s to produce an interim agreement for Palestinian autonomy, the two subsequent Palestinian intifadas and the 2009 Gaza war.

But there was always a basic asymmetry to the relationship, which prevented it from flourishing. While Israel embraced Sadat's proclamation to the Knesset that Egypt now accepted Israel as a legitimate member of the Middle Eastern family, much of the Egyptian elite remained Nasserist, and thus viewed the peace treaty grudgingly, at

best as a means to an end (the recovery of territory and much-needed Western aid) and as an acknowledgment of defeat, at worst.

Hence, although Israeli tourists to Egypt were generally welcomed by ordinary Egyptians, most of the Egyptian media and political and academic elites remained openly hostile to Israel, and the media was rife with anti-Semitic motifs. Notwithstanding their numerous common geopolitical interests, they tended to view Israel primarily as a strategic rival. Hence, for example, Egypt worked incessantly to bring international pressure to bear against Israel's nuclear capabilities, and took a dim view

of Israel's peace treaty with Jordan and developing ties with Gulf Arab and North African states. Egyptians who did desire to forge business and cultural ties were actively discouraged by the authorities.

One of the enduring features of modern Egypt's self-definition, regardless of the regime in power, is that it is the natural leader of the Arab world and in the top tier of regional states. Mubarak's first decade as president was marked by a series of achievements, which confirmed this image, to itself and others. But since then, and in spite of impressive macro-economic gains, Egypt has stagnated, politically and economically. As a result, its

status as a first-rank regional power declined, especially in comparison with Turkey, Iran and Israel.

The Tahrir uprising that toppled Mubarak was motivated by domestic, not foreign policy grievances. Rightly or wrongly, however, many Egyptians linked their domestic woes and regional decline to what they identified as excessive deference to Israeli and American interests. The new, democratizing Egypt, they proclaimed, would be stronger by taking a more independent foreign policy line.

Egyptian politicians, from presidential candidates on down, have found populist slogans of this type useful. With Islamist parties guaranteed to score major achievements in the upcoming parliamentary elections, Egyptian decision-makers are likely to play to the gallery even more when it comes to matters related to Israel and the Palestinians. Still, Egypt as a state has overriding strategic interests: preventing Sinai from becoming an ex-territorial haven for al-Qaeda-like elements and Iranian-backed weapons traffickers, maintaining aid flows from pro-Western Arab Gulf states and standing with them against Iran, and helping stabilize post-revolutionary Arab regimes in Libya, Tunisia and, with a look to the future, Syria.

All of these are shared by Israel. Conversely, an Israeli-Palestinian explosion would be an anathema to Egyptian interests, and cause a further fraying of the already delicate Egyptian-Israeli fabric.

Creative and sensitive behavior by both sides, beginning with achieving Gilad Shalit's release and a new level of security cooperation, is the order of the day. ●

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