Egypt’s policy of dualism: Cooperating with Israel while spreading anti-Israel messages

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 04.06.2024

Since the 1979 signing of their peace agreement, Israel-Egypt relations have mainly been characterized by fruitful cooperation in everything related to military, security, and regional issues.

At the same time, there has been an almost total disconnect between the two nations.

In Egypt’s view, since the establishment of a Palestinian entity was significant pillar of the peace agreement, its lack allowed the Mubarak-led Egyptian regime to refrain from promoting bilateral cooperation with Israel in the fields of trade, culture, tourism and more.

Hence, most of the other pillars upon which the peace agreement was based, were not realized.

Egypt adopts anti-Israel rhetoric

Over the years, Egyptian leadership has permitted, and at times even encouraged, the adoption of distinctly anti-Israel rhetoric, as, among other things, a mechanism to distract public attention from internal hardships.

This trend has been reflected in all the newspapers and magazines published in Egypt, whether identified with the opposition or official government mouthpieces.

Beyond anti-Zionist rhetoric, the media often includes clear antisemitic messages, such as the use of cartoons and illustrations.

Israelis are not allowed to appear in the Egyptian media, resulting in all discussions on the subject of Israel taking place without any Israeli representation.

The Qatari-owned-and-controlled Al-Jazeera channel has been outlawed in Egypt

more than once – due to its harsh criticism of former president Hosni Mubarak and more recently of President Mohammed Al-Sisi. However, the general Egypt public continues to be exposed to other Arab social media sources providing a significant dose of antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment.

Israel has never insisted that Egypt change its syllabus and alter its negative messaging concerning Israel and the Jews.

Egypt's duality vis-à-vis Hamas

There is little doubt that official Egypt understands very well what Hamas is and the nature of its affiliation and kinship with the Muslim Brotherhood – the Islamist movement established in 1920s Egypt, that has been outlawed in the country for years.

The Egyptian constitution prohibits any organized political activity based on religion. Egyptian intelligence carefully monitors any hint of activity on behalf of Islamist organizations inside Egypt, its law enforcement agencies adopting an iron fist policy to contain it.

Egypt is doubtless worried about an influx of Palestinian refugees from Gaza due to the certain infiltration of Hamas operatives among them. In addition, it does not wish for the "temporary" sojourn of Palestinians to become a permanent settlement, as has happened with many Palestinian populations in Arab countries.

This weakened population is ripe for poverty, crime, extremism, and the potential for terrorist infiltration by radical Islamist elements, such as ISIS, Al Qaida, The Muslim Brotherhood.

What, then, caused official Egypt to turn a blind eye to the dozens of tunnels crossing from Gaza into Egypt that the IDF uncovered upon entering Rafah? Their existence must have sounded every single alarm.

Musa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas official, stated in a 2013 interview that the previous head of Egyptian Intelligence, Omar Suleiman, had assisted Hamas by preventing any attempt to dismantle the tunnels.

His words, of course, should be taken with a grain of salt, but the fact remains that the discovered tunnels exist. Their very existence has aided Hamas to arm

itself in a way that, after October 7, is hard to dispute.

Furthermore, and since 2017, there appears to have been an improvement in Egypt's relations with Hamas in Gaza, after its leaders published an updated version of the its charter, dissociating themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The considerable extent of the tunnels that were discovered is indicative of a strategic decision at a senior level, or at the very least, a deliberate "blind eye" at the highest level.

One can assume that Egypt sought to preserve its key position as a mediator between Hamas and Israel – thus ensuring its supremacy over Qatar, Turkey and other countries – by allowing Hamas this smuggling outlet as leverage. Cairo's pursuit of regional hegemony remains an important national interest.

Yet, can that explain Egypt's willingness to risk playing with fire, after, the 2008 Hamas intrusion into its territory and the murder of Egyptian officers? The characteristic duality of Egyptian policies serves to decipher this particular decision.

On one hand, Egypt signed a peace agreement with Israel and strives to create trade routes and cooperation with the US, on the other, it feeds the Egyptian public anti-West and especially anti-Israel messages.

It nurtures an abysmal hatred for Turkey and Qatar, whose rulers have humiliated and criticized Egyptian rulers over the years and supported the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement, which threatened the Egyptian regime; and at the same time it promotes paths of reconciliation and understanding with those countries.

[Egypt had demanded that Turkey and Qatar end their support of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as a precondition to normalizing ties.]

This Egyptian duality has cultivated a long-standing rivalry with and suspicion of Shi'ite Iran, where, for many years, one of its capital's main streets was named after the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's murderer – while Egypt buried the exiled Persian shah with great splendor in one of the most beautiful and impressive places in the center of Cairo.

Egypt recently hosted a senior Iranian delegation, producing a certain questionable rapprochement between the two countries.

Its sharp reaction in view of Israel's determination to operate in Rafah evidenced that it was not happy about exposing the tunnels crossing from Gaza to its territory. This discovery raises further questions about other potential revelations, such as the infiltration of senior Hamas officials into Egyptian territory; smuggling of hostages into Egypt; or even beyond.

In this context, Cairo's joining the South African effort at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague stands out.

Is this also an attempt to intensify pressure on Israel to prevent it from advancing into Rafah, while leveraging Egypt's power in the international arena?

Or is there more to it and like South Africa, whose ruling party, the ANC has "sold its soul to the Iranian devil" in exchange for clearing its accumulated debts, is Egypt also expected to reap some sort of reward from Tehran for its efforts? Assumptions should be examined more closely and one should not rely on speculations.

What is clear, however, is that official Egypt could not help but know about and/or allow what took place in the large-scale tunnels discovered in Rafah.

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