Reflecting on Israel-Egypt relations

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 10.02.2024

The Israeli-Egyptian relations met with a fair share of challenges, after the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979. It is interesting that precisely in the same year, the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran, and the deep and warm friendship forged between Israel and Iran instantly disappeared and was "replaced" by a cold, but strategic, peace with Egypt.

The lack of normalization that characterized the bilateral relations with Egypt from the very start, will continue to accompany the two countries throughout the next four decades, except for a brief respite after the signing of the Oslo Accords. Thus far, the Egyptian and Israeli interests, especially the ones pertaining to security, have prevailed. That is – despite a long series of military operations that Israel conducted against the Palestinians, two intifadas and many other obstacles.

They also managed to overcome the lack of basic affection inherent amidst the Egyptian public towards Israel in general and Jews in particular – a product of long years of indoctrination and the educational system in Egypt. Just this past year, we have witnessed isolated attacks by Egyptian soldiers and police officers against Israelis – one case along the shared border, where an Egyptian soldier attacked and killed two combatants while on guard duty, and another case that occurred immediately after the events of October 7, when an Egyptian security guard shot an Israeli man who was visiting as a tourist. Both countries, however, were quick to try and lower the public profile of the scandals.

Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, there has indeed been a welcome change in the textbooks in the elementary schools in Egypt. Definitive antisemitic and anti-Israeli messages were removed from the books as part of Egypt's effort to position itself as a responsible country that respects minorities in the eyes of the West.

This is not a given in a country where things change at an extremely slow pace, sometimes to the point of frustration, but the positive trend has stopped for the time being and has not yet extended to middle schools and high schools. In

practice, millions of Egyptians have been consuming antisemitic and anti-Israel information and messages for decades.

Every Ramadan month-long holiday, for example, Egyptians have become accustomed to watching anti-Israeli series dealing with espionage affairs in which the "evil" figure is always embodied by Israeli Mossad agents, while the Egyptian heroes prevail over them. That is, despite that in recent years, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made a certain effort to minimize these messages.

Nonetheless, these are just a few of the many examples which demonstrate how the Egyptian public is being nurtured with antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiments, messages and materials. In addition to this, there is the inherent compassion which the Egyptians have towards the Palestinian people and their suffering, as it is portrayed by the social media in the Arab world and in networks such as the Qatar-owned Al Jazeera, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya and the like.

Thus, a rather surreal situation has arisen in which the Egyptian regime, which fosters security interests that are by definition compatible with those of Israel and opposed to those of Hamas, is forced to take into account the very negative public opinion held by the majority of the Egyptian street towards Israel and its very positive attitude towards the Palestinians, and therefore to act almost contrary to its own self-interest. As far as Israel's current war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip is concerned, on the one hand, the Egyptian regime is adamant about preventing Palestinians from the Gaza Strip from entering Egyptian territory.

The Egyptian leadership knows very well why it does not want this and understands that the "temporary" arrival of Palestinians could become absolutely permanent, as can be seen in Jordan and other places where Palestinian refugee camps have existed for decades. Moreover, the Egyptians well understand the ambitions of Hamas – for them the Muslim Brotherhood – which will strive to take advantage of any Palestinians who will "temporarily" settle in the Sinai Peninsula in order to strengthen their own stronghold in that arena.

The Egyptians well understand the ideology that characterizes Hamas. It is not a national ideology, that attaches any importance to gaining independence in the Gaza Strip or Judea and Samaria or even from the entire State of Israel, but rather a religious ideology that strives to establish a worldwide Islamic caliphate, including Egypt as well.

On the other hand, the Egyptian public sympathizes with their Palestinian brethren in the Gaza Strip and expects the regime to help them. Hence, Egypt finds itself aiming arrows at Israel, encouraging the transfer of more and more humanitarian aid to the Palestinians in the Strip (although it is well aware that a significant part of the supplies is stolen by Hamas) and repeatedly states that the fighting in the Gaza Strip must stop, although in essence and behind closed doors, Cairo would not shed a tear in the face of the destruction of Hamas.

Even more dangerous now is the apparent rapprochement between Iran and Egypt. Although this is almost never discussed in the Israeli media, we must in no way take our eyes off Iran's tireless pursuit to buy influence in the region. It is perhaps critical to recall that Egypt's relations with Iran have always been accompanied by more than a tad of suspicion: Cairo remembers Tehran's efforts to spy on its territory and, over the years, there have been several incidents which included the removal of the Iranian ambassador from Egyptian soil.

While Iran has been working for years inside Jordan, in order to strengthen its positioning there, while taking advantage of the weakness of the Jordanian regime, its attempts so far to do the same in Egypt have come to naught. Therefore, the recent rapprochement between the countries is worrisome and raises questions about the baits offered by Iran to Egypt with regards to the activities of the Houthis against ships passing through the region.

Sisi's recent statement in this regard – "Attack only ships destined for Israel" – does not leave much room for doubt and is even more worrying since it is possible that it is an Iranian-Egyptian understanding not to damage Egyptian economic assets in exchange for systematic but consistent damage to Egypt's relations with Israel.

Iran also has great influence on the African continent, which is very important to Egypt, especially in Ethiopia, with which Egypt has a long-standing conflict regarding the Ethiopian dam built on the Nile River and the issue of water distribution – an Egyptian strategic interest. Iran, which has been strengthening its foothold in many countries on the African continent for years, is perhaps the only one that very wisely extends its hand to Egypt on an issue that simply does not concern any other party in the region or outside of it. Iran, of course, will not be satisfied with providing help in this or any other context without adequate compensation…

To add to the above, the relations between Israel and Egypt have indeed been based on excellent and ongoing cooperation in recent years, but mainly on the professional level. The political-strategic discourse is almost nonexistent and the vacuum thereof is astounding, mainly in light of the very high tensions that currently exist around the IDF's intended activity in the Philadelphi crossing.

Ongoing, high-level political and strategic talks, in which not only security issues will be discussed, but also the issue of decades-long incitement and indoctrination of the Egyptian public against Israel, must serve as an anchor to the relations. The latter is not merely a matter of being a nice-to-have issue resolved, but has far-reaching strategic consequences if not addressed.

Israel has its own leverages which it must exercise within the framework of the aforementioned strategic dialogue. This must be done within the framework of a broad and systematic analysis of the Egyptian and Israeli interests within the regional context of challenges and opportunities and not simply within a tactical framework, as is mostly the case at the moment. What is missing here is a broad and strategic view of the challenges facing Egypt and how Israel can assist it in creative ways. This should be seen first with a view to avoid Cairo from being tempted to rely on Tehran and secondly so that Israel will also benefit from regional inputs over time.

This strategic dialogue with Egypt must be institutionalized, with very senior representation on behalf of the Israeli government, accompanied with experts on Arab culture and language. We have already learned that every truth we were convinced of before October 7th requires a fresh look. A failure to do so vis-à-vis our relations with Egypt would be considered nothing less than pure negligence.

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