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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Egyptian Foreign Minister Visit to Netanyahu was Never About the Palestinians

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | July 2016

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Shoukry's Visit: the Timing and Motives	1
Egyptian-Israeli Normalization Crosses a New Milestone	2
Confused Aims	4
Conclusion	6

Introduction

A July 10 visit by Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry to Occupied Jerusalem, where he met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has left many questions without a satisfactory answer. While the stated aim of the trip was, according to an Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman, to boost Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, this alone cannot explain the timing of Shoukry's meeting, coming on the same day in which Netanyahu announced that his government would expand settlement activity near the West Bank city of Hebron. In fact, Netanyahu's outright and adamant dismissal of the Arab Peace Initiative is further proof of the fact that the Israeli premier never even took this ostensible reason for the visit seriously¹. One thing the visit does highlight, however, is Israel's ongoing preference for Egyptian proposals for peace, which lack any concrete, tangible ideas and refuse to deal with questions of international legitimacy, over those formulated by France.

Shoukry's Visit: the Timing and Motives

For Israel, the visit by Shoukry was an opportunity to highlight its support for Sisi's regime and to try and gain traction on a number of key issues, such as the release of Israeli soldiers detained in the Hamas governed Gaza Strip and the freeing of the remains of others. This would not, of course, compel Israel to involve itself in a genuine peace process, which would necessitate Israeli concessions on a number of fronts, including the settlement project in the West Bank and the status of Jerusalem.

These Israeli motives appeared to be at the heart of Shoukry's visit, who was prepared to propose Egyptian mediation to help achieve Israel's goals. In the proposed confidence-building measures, the Israelis and remains held in the Gaza Strip would be released in exchange for a small number of the many thousands of Palestinians imprisoned by the Israeli occupation authorities. Yet the timing of Shoukry's arrival and the way in which it was announced hint at an additional and less obvious rationale for Cairo's foreign minister to scramble to meet with Netanyahu.

Shoukry's plane landed in Lod only shortly after the announcement of his visit and meeting with Netanyahu was officially announced—more significantly, it came on the

¹ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Israel will Never Accept the Arab Peace Initiative as Basis for Talks with the Palestinians", *Haaretz*, June 13, 2016, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.724725>

heels of a July 4 summit meeting which the Israeli premier had with the heads of state of seven countries along the Nile Basin in Entebbe, Uganda. Netanyahu declared at that meeting his readiness to offer Israeli support and know-how to help these “upriver” countries enhance their use of irrigation and other water management concerns, a red flag for Egyptian national security concerns.

Most worrying for Cairo is the growth of relations between Israel and Ethiopia, the latter involved in an intricate water rights dispute with Egypt centered on the issue of the Al Nahda Dam, and who has so far refused to make any concessions to calm Egyptian fears. Given that Shoukry never explicitly touched on the topic of Netanyahu’s African summit the week preceding his own visit, it is quite possible that the Sisi government is looking to secure Israeli mediation in its discussions with Addis Ababa.

Egyptian–Israeli Normalization Crosses a New Milestone

A change of tone from Egypt towards Israel has been perceptible since Sisi took power, and the Egyptian-Israeli relationship is orders of magnitude warmer today than it was under Mubarak. Indications of this acceleration of bilateral relations can be seen in the official statement which the Egyptian foreign ministry released during Shoukry’s visit, as well as a statement by General Sisi himself, which coincided with the 68th anniversary of the Palestinian *Nakba*, in which he spoke of a “warm peace” between the Arab states and Israel, contingent on a peace with the Palestinians².

The new Egyptian-Israeli entente goes much deeper than the new-found mutual flattery between Netanyahu and Sisi³. The Egyptian side has gone out of its way to assure Israel that it is committed to peace, including most visibly the appointment of veteran Egyptian diplomat Hazem Khairat to an ambassadorial position in Tel Aviv in mid-2015—the first time this post had been filled in three years⁴. More strikingly, Cairo has opted

² “Egypt’s Sisi lends backing to Israel-Palestinian peace efforts”, *Reuters*, May 17, 2016, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-egypt-idUSKCN0Y81FQ>

³ See reports on Egypt’s Sisi meeting with the leaders of Likud-aligned Jewish groups in the United States, where he spoke effusively about Netanyahu’s leadership abilities, for example: “Sisi praises Netanyahu during meeting with Zionist organizations”, *Middle East Monitor*, February 15, 2016, at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160215-sisi-praises-netanyahu-during-meeting-with-zionist-organisations/>

⁴ “Egypt appoints first ambassador to Israel in three years”, *Reuters*, June 21, 2015, at: <http://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFL8N0Z70MC20150621>

to release an Egyptian national condemned for spying for Israel more than 15 years ago⁵. For its part, the Israeli Embassy in Cairo has also moved to new, illustrious premises while the Ambassador, Haim Koren, fills up an active roster of engagements in the Egyptian capital. So active, in fact, that Koren scandalized one member of the Egyptian parliament known for his links to the Sisi regime by visiting him in his constituency in the Nile Delta⁶.

This new love-in between the Egyptian and Israeli governments began almost immediately after General Sisi came to power in the coup which Amos Gilad, the Director of the Political-Military Affairs Bureau at the Ministry of Defense, described as “a miracle” for Israel. Although the two leaders only met face to face on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Summit⁷ in August, 2015, joint coordination between the two sides began in the first days following the coup which ousted Mohammed Morsi. By August 2013—just over a month after Sisi had declared himself president—an Israeli delegation visited the Egyptian capital to meet with the Egyptian chiefs of staff, hoping to chisel out a deal on security cooperation between the two countries⁸. Later on, Israeli media reports would indicate that Sisi is one of the foreign leaders with the most frequent telephone communication with Netanyahu, albeit usually unpublicized⁹.

⁵ Gili Cohen and Jack Khoury, “Israeli ‘Spy’ Released After 15 Years in Egyptian Prison”, *Haaretz*, December 10, 2015, available online (paywall): <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.691102>

⁶ See, for example, “Israeli ambassador to Egypt ‘can go to all kinds of places’ after reopening of embassy”, *Ahram Online*, Thursday, September 10, 2015, at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/140126/Egypt/Politics-/Israeli-ambassador-to-Egypt-can-go-to-all-kinds-of.aspx>

⁷ See Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu and Egypt’s Sisi Shook Hands in Paris for the First Time”, *Haaretz*, December 3, 2015, available online (paywall): <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.68992>

⁸ The sensitivity of security cooperation with Israel and the potential fallout this would have for Egypt’s ruling junta has led to stringent Israeli military censorship on the topic. Media reports indicate that Israeli journalists are frustrated with the conditions of this censorship, brought in at the Egyptian government’s request, which has made it nearly impossible to learn any of the details of Israeli-Egyptian cooperation.

⁹ Israeli and Egyptian media reports indicate that Sisi’s working relationship with the Israeli leadership is rooted in the personal rapport he had with leading Israeli officers during the period when Egypt was run by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—February, 2011-June, 2012—and extended to his tenure as Minister of Defense under Mohammed Morsi’s short-lived presidency.

Confused Aims

According to Knesset member Yair Lapid, a member of the *Yish Atid* political party, Egyptian-Israeli relations should be understood in the context of “an axis of ‘moderate’ countries across the Middle East” who have a “shared interest in fighting terrorism”. Lapid, whose party focuses on the settlement of the Palestinian question as a means of preserving Zionism, was using the occasion to tout the idea of an alliance which binds Israel to a group of “moderate” Arab states, all of which could benefit from a global consensus on the need to tackle terrorism¹⁰. Here, Israel will want to recreate the events surrounding the peace talks in Madrid during the 1990s, when it appeared that global security concerns provided the backdrop for a peace settlement. As on every occasion since, Israeli objectives were met and the world community was appeased. The Palestinians, meanwhile, were left to muddle through the endless minutiae of the agreements, as Israel went on to create facts on the ground with its settlement expansion and demographic altering of the West Bank.

The Egyptians, for their part, stand to gain from their perceived alliance with Israel. A relationship with Tel Aviv will allow Sisi’s junta to position itself as part of a moderate bulwark against the ‘Islamist terrorism’ sweeping the region. Specifically, a strong relationship with Israel could provide Cairo with the support of Israel’s strong Washington lobby, thus helping to allay some of the damage done to relations with the US following the derailing of Egyptian democracy with the coup that brought Sisi to power. Indeed, since that coup, Israel has been an ardent cheerleader for the new regime in Cairo, which it paints as an important ally in the struggle against the threats facing Israelis today¹¹. Israel’s advocacy for the Sisi junta has already proven effective, by ensuring that Washington did not designate the events of June 2013, which removed the elected Mohammed Morsi from power, as a military coup, which would have triggered a legal end to US assistance to Egypt¹².

¹⁰ Yossi Melman, “Three’s company: Israel, Turkey and Egypt”, *Jerusalem Post*, May 2, 2016, at: <http://www.jpost.com/International/Balancing-Egypt-and-Turkey-443943>

¹¹ See details of a January, 2016 visit to Washington of an Israeli delegation led by Likud MK Tzachi Hangebi, for example: <http://www.themedialine.org/our-partners/are-israel-and-egypt-getting-closer/>

¹² See Barak Ravid, “Israel Urged US Not to Halt Aid to Egypt”, *Haaretz*, July 9, 2013, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.534651>

Sisi, for his part, has been quick to show his appreciation and gratitude for Israel's support in US and Western venues. Part of this has been the willingness of Egypt to cooperate with Israel on security issues in the formerly occupied Sinai Peninsula as well as the uniformity of the two countries' approaches to the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip. The intensification of this relationship has been so great that Egypt even moved on to destroying tunnels which tie the Gaza Strip to the outside world via the Egyptian controlled Sinai Peninsula. Commenting on these developments during a lecture in the city of Beer Sheva in the Negev, Yuval Steinitz, the right-wing Israeli minister of infrastructure and a veteran of the Israeli military-intelligence establishment, described present-day Egyptian-Israeli relations as the best they have been since the Camp David Agreement was signed in 1979¹³.

One further example of this was the way in which Egypt allowed Israeli participation in the investigation that followed the crash of a Russian civilian airliner over the Sinai Peninsula in October 2015—even after it emerged that the Israelis had intercepted radio chatter which ultimately led US and UK teams to include that ISIL was responsible for downing the jet, and that they therefore could have prevented the bombing of the plane¹⁴. Marking a break from the past, this new arena of Egyptian-Israeli cooperation has not been hidden from view: neither Israeli support for the Egyptian military in the Sinai Peninsula—including the deployment of surface-to-air missiles—nor Egyptian cooperation in ending the shipment of military equipment to Gaza, are denied now. Indeed, Egypt has even acceded to the use by Israel of its drones to strike at extremists in Sinai¹⁵. Egypt's enthusiastic embrace of Israel reached a crescendo when the Sisi regime decided to support, unprompted, Israel's bid to join the United Nation's Committee for the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.

¹³ See Shlomi Eldar, "Israeli Slip of the Tongue Embarrasses Egypt", Almonitor, February 10, 2016, at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/gaza-strip-tunnels-egypt-abdel-fatah-al-sisi-yuval-steinitz.html>

¹⁴ Reports suggest that this radio espionage was the duty of Israeli Army Unit 8200, which works side by side with the Israeli internal security agency (also known as the "Shabak") to intercept and decipher radio communications in the Sinai Peninsula. Details are also given in Gili Cohen, "Israeli Army Offers Egypt Help in Russian Plane Crash", *Haaretz*, October 31, 2015, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.683382>

¹⁵ See Judah Ari Gross, "With Egypt's blessing, Israel conducting drone strikes in Sinai", *The Times of Israel*, July 11, 2016, at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/with-egypts-blessing-israel-conducting-drone-strikes-in-sinai-report/>

Conclusion

The Palestinian cause and wider Arab-Israeli peace was never more than a fig leaf used by Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry to provide an explanation for his politically risky visit to occupied Jerusalem. Nor was it ever feasible that Shoukry's mission could have furthered the prospects for peace in Palestine: the imbalance of powers on the ground; intra-Palestinian division; and American preoccupation with the November presidential ballot all combine to make the idea of Shoukry's visit being motivated by Palestine unfeasible. Perhaps one limited gain would be the release of Palestinian prisoners in return for the bodies of dead Israeli soldiers and detained prisoners in the Gaza Strip, something which would provide Netanyahu with immediate political gains while allowing Egypt to offer its services in the battle against Islamist extremism—an attractive and lucrative prospect in today's world.

For the time being, this is perhaps the most ambitious role which could be expected of Egypt, whence Cairo will be expected to try and redress an imbalance with expansionist non-Arab regional powers, and to protect Egypt's national security interests. Even the effectiveness of the Sisi regime's newfound willingness to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be constricted by regional realities outside of its control, such as the recent rapprochement between Israel and Turkey.