

Israel-Egypt Cooperation in 2019: Strategic Warming, Civilian Coolness?

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A. Introduction

Since President Abdel Fatah a-Sisi's rise to power in 2014, Israeli-Egyptian ties have been marked by defense-strategic cooperation. This is based on the shared perception of Iran and radical Islamist terror organizations as a threat, and the common interest in managing the Palestinian issue, in general, and specifically the Gaza arena. In the inherent tension between ideology and national interests, Egypt continues to strive for an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians (Fatah, Hamas and the other Palestinian factions) and seeks to bring about internal Palestinian reconciliation beforehand (between the leaderships in Ramallah and Gaza). Its role as a key mediator between Hamas and Israel is crucial, and is in line with Egypt's international standing as an important regional leader.

Egypt's role as a mediator acceptable to all sides allows it to ensure that the "arrangements" it helps broker serve its own interests as well, including its desire to pursue cooperation with Israel on strategic issues such as security and energy. Addressing the 2019 Herzliya Conference, Egyptian Ambassador to Israel Khaled Azmi [expressed](#) his country's key interest in preserving its stability as a nation-state in the face of regional challenges. He also emphasized the importance of providing a response to the aspirations of millions of young people in the Middle East (where [60%](#) of the population is below the age of 30).

Israel perceives its peace with Egypt as a highly important asset. Four decades of peace have proven its resilience in the face of changes and shockwaves, and have provided a potential platform for strategic cooperation. However, relations between Israel and Egypt are characterized as a "cold peace". Egypt is unwilling to fully normalize with Israel, despite crucial shared interests, as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved. Although this position has become somewhat muted considering the growing defense-strategic cooperation between Israel and the Sunni states in the region, it still dictates the nature and extent of relations. A 2018 [study](#) that examined existing cooperation between Israel and Egypt pointed to strategic cooperation between the states, as well as cool bilateral relations on all other fronts. This article follows-up and looks at the 2019 developments in the relations.

B. Details of the Cooperation

Israeli-Egyptian links are an asset to the region, especially to the states of the Arab Muslim Sunni axis, as well as to the US and other powers (Russia, the EU, China and India). All of

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them regard the ties as a boost to regional stability in light of a period of great upheaval. Throughout 2019, Egypt was a pivotal actor in ties between Israel and the Palestinians. All attempts to arrange ceasefires with Hamas were conducted in close cooperation with Egypt, as well as UN mediation and the help of Qatari funds. Israel and Egypt both sought to limit Iran's presence in the Middle East, to advance increased sanctions against it by diplomatic means, and to fight its various proxies. Israel and Egypt also worked, each individually, to limit Turkey's activity in the Eastern Mediterranean by nurturing alliances in the region. They also mounted campaigns against terror organizations, born of a joint perception of the threat they pose and the required responses. Israel and Egypt also share a similar view of the US role in the region, resulting in Israeli-Egyptian coordination in many fields.

Diplomatic cooperation between Israel and Egypt, and the mutual trust built between them, resulted in a 2018 Egyptian [request](#) that Israel mediate in its dispute with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam (the Nahda), which is of strategic importance to Egypt. Israel tried to help, raising the issue in talks with the Ethiopian government, after years of frequent Egyptian accusations that it was stealing water from the Nile. Along with such cooperation on the diplomatic front, 2019 saw continued security cooperation between Israel and Egypt, which has underpinned relations between them in recent years. At the start of the year, President a-Sisi [declared](#) in a CBS News interview that security cooperation with Israel was unprecedented, saying Israel had been helping Egyptian forces battle terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula.

The year 2019 marked the 40th anniversary of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. Given the level of cooperation between the two states, as described above, a high-profile celebration would have been expected. However, while Israel held academic seminars and various other events to mark the anniversary, and President Reuven Rivlin [hosted a ceremony](#) participated by Egyptian Ambassador Azmi, no similar events were conducted in Egypt. The only event in Egypt marking the anniversary was held by the US Embassy in Cairo, with the participation of Israeli Ambassador Govrin. The Egyptian ambassador to the US and his Israeli counterpart took part in [a ceremony](#) marking the anniversary held at the State Department in Washington. Ambassador Govrin completed his term at the end of July 2019, and Israel currently does not have an ambassador in Cairo. The ambassador-designee's October 2018 [appointment](#) has not yet been presented for government approval.

[Energy](#) was the most prominent new sphere of cooperation between Israel and Egypt in 2019, based on commercial-economic interests along with diplomatic-strategic ones. Significant steps were taken to promote cooperation allowing Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Greece (and perhaps Lebanon in the future) to form a regional hub of natural gas production as a basis for export to Europe. In January 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was launched in Cairo by seven Middle Eastern and European states, among them Israel and the Palestinian Authority (but without the participation of Turkey and Lebanon). Israeli Energy Minister Steinitz [met](#) with his Egyptian counterpart al-Mullah in full view of the cameras during the launch event. In January 2020, the EMGF ministerial meeting in Cairo decided to upgrade the status of the forum to a recognized international organization, which France asked to join, and which will include the US, EU and World Bank as observers. The boost to multilateral cooperation among the states of the Eastern Mediterranean also helped strengthen bilateral Israeli-Egyptian ties.

In September 2019, Israel's state-owned Eilat Ashkelon Pipeline Company signed a contract with the owners of the Egyptian EMG gas pipeline to allow the flow of gas from Israel's offshore Leviathan and Tamar gas fields to Egypt. The deal is expected to yield the

Israeli company an annual commission of NIS200 million. In addition, a compromise was reached between the Egyptian government and the Israel Electric Corporation (IEC), according to which the Egyptians would only pay the IEC \$500 million of the \$1.76 billion ruled in its favor in international arbitration several years ago. That compromise removed the remaining barriers to the supply of natural gas from Israel to Egypt, and in January 2020, Israel [began exporting](#) gas to Egypt from the Leviathan reservoir. As of 2021, the Tamar and Leviathan partnership is scheduled to export some 6.4 billion cubic meters of gas annually. None of the above would have been possible without intensive contacts between the Egyptian and Israeli governments and without a diplomatic umbrella for the deals.

Nonetheless, other than in the energy field, no significant changes occurred in Israel-Egyptian economic cooperation in 2019. The Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) continued to operate in their current format, as did agricultural projects. Unfortunately, there were no new initiatives in the spheres of solar energy, water desalination or green energy, which could have been very beneficial to the Egyptian economy. No progress was reported in scientific, medical, technological or academic cooperation, either. The Israeli Academic Center in Cairo continued to operate out of its offices in the Maadi neighborhood, attended daily by Egyptian students and lecturers. However, the center's series of lectures by Israeli writers, lecturers and intellectuals for Egyptian audiences has not been renewed.

One area in which progress was recorded was tourism, with hundreds of thousands of Israelis visiting the Sinai Peninsula and a few thousand touring Egypt itself. Positive developments occurred in the other direction, too – with the growth of Egyptian Copt pilgrimages to Israel, especially for the “Great Sabbath” and Easter holy days. Their numbers grew from some 5,000 in 2015 to about 7,000 in 2019. In December 2019, the annual World Youth Forum [was convened](#) in Sharm a-Sheikh under the auspices of President a-Sisi, who saw it as an opportunity to tighten cooperation among Mediterranean states in such fields as climate, science, illegal migration and counter-terrorism. Israeli attendance at the forum's activities could provide an additional channel for strengthening people-to-people ties between Israel and Egypt.

As part of Egypt's efforts to display more tolerant and liberal attitudes, especially toward religious minorities, among them Jews and Copts, progress was made in terms of Egypt's commitment to refurbish Jewish heritage sites. In 2017, a-Sisi announced that the Egyptian government would restore religious Jewish compounds. The restoration of Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria begun in 2018 and the site was inaugurated in an impressive January 2020 ceremony. Cairo's Bassatine Jewish cemetery compound was renovated in 2019 with Egyptian government funding. After years of ignoring the need for restoration, the Egyptians have even allocated government budgets to the projects (rather than seeking funding from world heritage foundations or Jewish communities around the world). Egypt's Antiquities Authority approves the registration of 13 relics, including Torah books, candlesticks and lanterns belonging to the synagogue in Alexandria and in other Egyptian towns, in preparation for their registration under the Protection of Antiquities Law. Mohamed Mahran, head of the Central Department of Jewish Antiquities at the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities said registering the Jewish relics was the first move of its kind. It should be noted that ambassadors from many countries were invited to the impressive synagogue ceremony, but the Israeli ambassador was not invited. The Egyptians framed the event as a Jewish rather than Israel-related occasion.

Along with Egypt's positive shift on the Jewish issue and progress in areas such as security and energy, "cold peace" characteristics continue to mark Israeli-Egyptian relations. Egyptian avoidance of cultural cooperation continues to pose a significant obstacle to the bilateral relationship. The trend of Mediterranean identity starting to take root in certain Egyptian and Israeli circles may generate a dialogue that will eventually yield more open cultural relations. Social media, which enable a direct and comprehensive discourse with significant swathes of the predominantly young Egyptian population, interested in the world outside their borders, constitute another arena in which Israel operates and which holds potential for civilian rapprochement. The [reactions](#) of Egyptian internet surfers to Arabic-language social media pages posted by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs express an interest in Israel, its culture, the role of science and technology in its fabric of life and lifestyle. Nonetheless, certainly compared with similar activity Israel has undertaken vis-à-vis Iraq and the Gulf States, reactions in Egypt are still negative, for the most part. Promoting the cultural aspects of the relationship, in combination with the potential of social media, is fertile ground for additional rapprochement between Israel and Egypt, requiring persistence and patience.

C. Summary

Over four decades of Israeli-Egyptian relations testify to continuity and change. The two states' mutual interests constitute the basis for their peace, despite the obstacles, disagreements, and tensions over the years. The emerging regional and international reality (especially since a-Sisi's rise to power) has increased cooperation but was not successful in thawing Egypt's cool attitude toward the peace with Israel. The "cold peace" persists in areas such as culture, science, medicine, agriculture and industry. Nonetheless, the regional coalition that views Iran as a threat and the radical Islamist organizations as terrorists who must be defeated adds a significant dimension to Israeli-Egyptian ties. The ties were further boosted in 2019 by bilateral and regional energy-related cooperation of strategic diplomatic and economic importance.

Also of importance to the relationship was Israeli-Egyptian cooperation on the Palestinian issue, especially as regards the situation in Gaza, in which Egypt plays a key role. The fact that Egypt sought Israeli mediation in its dispute with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam, a crucial issue for Egypt, is also important, and Egypt's commitment to restoring and preserving Jewish heritage sites is a welcome development. Perhaps the discourse (while still limited to certain circles) in Egypt and Israel regarding identification with Mediterranean culture will promote broader civilian cooperation in the future and a sense of regional partnership, which could also be fostered by new communications channels provided by social media. It is important that Israel quickly appoint a permanent ambassador to Egypt, one able to support and lead attempts to bolster ties between the two states and take advantage of new opportunities to forge warmer ties.