From Hostility to Rapprochement: The Dynamics of Israel-Egypt Relations Since 1948

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ABSTRACT

Israel and Egypt are two regional powers and important countries in the Middle East. Relations between the two countries since 1948 oscillated between tension and cordiality. From 1948 to 1973, interactions between the nations were essentially confrontational due largely to the process that culminated in the establishment of the state of Israel, which was fervently rejected by the Egyptian's led Pan-Arabism. Israel considered the Egypt's position as repugnant, antithetical and contradicted the raison d'état for its existence. However, the post-1973 war ushered in an era rapprochement, which heralded the signing of the Camp David Accord and Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. This article examines the trajectory of continuity and change in Israel-Egypt relations as well as the motivations and developments leading to the peace treaty between the two countries. The article interrogates these issues and maintains that both countries have benefited tremendously from the 1979 peace treaty. It concludes that Israel and Egypt should expand their economic and security interest, as well as the advancement of democracy and good governance to enhance closer relations.

Keywords: Hostility, Rapprochement, Egypt, Israel, Governance and Democracy.

Introduction

Relations between Israel and Egypt since 1948 clearly demonstrate patterns of interactions among regional powers in the Middle East. Interactions between and among states or actors are either conflictual or collaborative. This is because conflict and cooperation are the dualities of interactions and are therefore inescapable, permanent and intrinsic characteristics of international relations (Adeleke, 2007). Indeed, relations between Israel and Egypt oscillated between confrontation and cordiality. From 1948 to 1973, relations between two countries were characterized by arms conflagration due largely to the establishment of the state of Israel, which was vehemently rejected and resisted by the Egyptians led Pan-Arabism. Israel considered the Arab position as repugnant, antithetical and contradicted the raison d'état for its existence.

However, after the 1973 war, interactions between Israel and Egypt culminated in the signing of the Camp David Accord as well as a Peace Treaty, which ushered in a new phase of rapprochement and détente between the two countries. Thus, the post 1973 war offers peaceful relations, which has endured up to the 21st century. This paper examines critically the trajectory of continuity and change in relations between Israel and Egypt and maintains that charismatic leadership, national interests, domestic politics as well as the structure of the international system have shaped and will continue to make rapprochement a cherish value between the two countries.

Israel-Egypt Adversarial Relations: A Brief Analysis

For almost a period of two and haft decades, relations between Israel and Egypt were characterized by unending arms conflict. The twenty-five years of hostilities was remarkable for the four major wars, with several other skirmishes and clashes that were serious but not as explosive and intense as the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 (Sherbok and El-Alami, 2015). Nevertheless, the skirmishes intensified tension, discord, animosity, mistrust as well as strain interactions between Israel and Egypt.

The first Israel-Egypt adversarial relations started in 1948, shortly after the creation of the state of Israel. Egypt in the period leading to the 1948 war and beyond has been at the cultural and political forefront of Pan-Arabism. As such, she was an active participant and equally led the Arab nations in its war against Israel (Williams and Piotrowski, 2005). Egypt's strategic location, economic development and military advantages offered her opportunity to lead other Arab countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq just

to mention but a few in supports for the Palestine, ended in the arms confrontation with the newly established state of Israel. The 1948 war, which last over thirty days was a disaster for Egypt and her allies. Their invasion was uncoordinated and ineffective. With catastrophic result, Israel became victorious and thereafter consolidated her gains with the annexation of more territories. The war produced 300,000 Palestinian in Arab refugees only (Williams and Piotrowski, 2007). The 1948 war was a bitter blow to the pride and national consciousness of Egypt as well as the weakness of the Egyptian military.

The frustration from the 1948 war inspired a palace coup in Egypt in 1952 that swept aside king Farouk and Muhammad Naquib, brought to power one of the ring leaders, Gamel Abdel Nasser, who promised regeneration in Egypt (Rutherford, 2013). Though relations between Israel and Egypt remained chilly and cold, there were attempt for improved interactions secretly. For example, there was a direct secret talk between Israel and Egypt. The secret diplomatic meeting took place in Switzerland in 1949 (Mustafa, 2003). Both Eliyahu Sasson, head of the Israeli delegation and Moshe Sharett, head of the Egyptian delegation dominated the proceeding of the meetings (Mustafa, 2003: 219). Thus, despite the 1948 war, attempts were made, though mostly secret to establish peaceful relations between the two counties.

The coming to power of Abdel Nasser after Muhammed Naquib did not improve interactions between Israel and Egypt. As the government of Egypt was determining to avenge the humiliation of the 1948 war. As such, in September 1955, Nasser announced a historic arm deal by which he became the recipient of Soviet made MIG – 15 fighter jet, bombers and tanks. In response, Israel renegotiated and signed a fresh arm deal with Britain and France (Bailey, 1990). As the arms race intensified so did the tension, calculation and miscalculation continued. The race was not too long before the guns began to sound. In July 1956, Nasser seized and nationalized the Suez Canal, thus eliminating British and French control as well as Israel's benefits from the canal (Roger and Roger, 1989). The result was the second Israel – Egypt War, with France and Britain supporting the latter. Britain and France air, naval and land forces joined the battle against the outgunned and outnumbered Egyptians forces (Oren, 2002). The battle was short but the defeat and humiliation of Egypt was total.

A truce was later reached following the intervention of the United States and the United Nations after Egypt agreed not to interfere with Israel shipping through the straits of Tiran, which gave Israel an access to the Red Sea (Lall, 1968). Yet both countries had no illusions that another arms confrontation was likely to happen and they took steps to prepare accordingly.

Although, after the 1956 war, Abdul Nasser did not want to get involved in a large-scale war but could not resist the temptation from Syria for a direct arms conflict with Israel. As a result, in 1967, Nasser, in attempt to undermine the consequence of the 1956 war, closed the Strait of Tiran to Israel shipping. An action the Israelis considered as an act of war. Within days, Iran, Jordan and Syria had joined pact with Egypt. Being aware of the fragile nature of the situation, Israel launched a surprised attack - a classic example of preventive war in June 1967 (Seibert and Wagner, 2006).

The attack was successful and destroyed the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian air forces. The Egyptian forces were defeated as well as the Sinai and the Suez Canal was also captured. It then turned against Syria and took from the country the Golan Heights, a 20-mile wide strategic plateau rising 600 feet above Galilee from which the Syrian army had fired continually on the Israeli settlements below (Schulze, 1999). Israel also took from Jordan, West of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, an area generally known as the West Bank. With it, Israel came into possession of the entire city of Jerusalem that immediately becomes the nation's new capital. The 1967 war, also known as the Six Days War rearranged the map of the Middle East and its political consequence still hunt the region until day. Although, the United States, United Nations and the Soviet Union brokered a peace deal between Israel and Egypt, which resulted to a

truce, relationships between both countries were still cold up to the death of Abdul Nasser in 1970 (Treverton, 1981).

Nevertheless, Anwar al-Sadat, who came to power shortly after Nasser's death, initiated diplomatic approach towards Israel. A disposition expressed by Sadat with the US congressmen who had attended Nasser's funeral in Egypt. It would be recalled that Sadat had stated in a speech shortly after he came to power, his commitment towards peaceful relations with Israel, if Israel would retreat from the captured territories of the 1967. It was hoped that such a move would appeal to Israel and her supporters for possible solution and improved relationships. To put pressure on the friends of Israel, Egypt encouraged other Arab countries to stop the supply of crude oil to the west. Yet, the no-war-no-peace situation continued throughout the early 1970s.

In fact, the relative peace between Israel and Egypt was once again shattered in October 1973, when the fourth major armed conflict, the Yom Kipper war broke out between the two countries with some Arab countries supporting Egypt (Farrar, 1973). Just as Israel had done in the 1967 war, Egypt initiated a surprise offensive attack against Israel. The attack was successful at the initial stage. The Egyptian captured the Sinai Desert from Israel. The Egyptian offensive proved to be the first time an Arab nation had been able to wrest any territory from the seemingly impregnable Israeli's forces. An Egyptian army had finally proven its battle worthiness (Heller, 1984). However, few days after the Egyptians success, the Israeli forces successfully counterattacked. Israelis achieved a considerable success and the situation changed in their favor. Hence, the fourth Israel-Egypt war resulted in the initial victory but later the defeat of the Egyptians. Despite this, however, the United States, the defunct Soviet Union and the United Nations had to intervene to prevent further escalation and destruction between the warring parties.

Hence, relations between Israel and Egypt from 1948 to 1973 were essentially hostile and confrontational. Despite the animosity, which characterized the interactions between the two regional powers, the post Yom Kippur War reality created the condition from a change from hostility to rapprochement in their relations since the late 1970 till date.

From Confrontation to Reconciliation: Changing Patterns of Relations after Yom Kippur War
The post 1973 war marked a new paradigm in relations between Israel and Egypt. The new patterns of relations were no doubt influenced, if not determine by the characteristic leadership, the domestic situations, national interests as well as the structures of the international system. Although, secret talks had been between Israel and Egypt as far back as our memory could carry us, the post 1973 war intensified efforts at initiating peaceful and enduring interactions by both countries. Efforts at establishing friendly relations have always been the desire of both the Israelis and Egyptians authorities.

For example, there is evidence to show how former Israelis Prime Minister Ben-Gurion requested meeting with Abdel Nasser via Richard Grossmen, the British Prime Minister's envoy. He also sent a delegation for the secret talks that were held with the representative of king Faruq in Switzerland in 1949. It was also in relation to the above that Sadat, before the 1973 war, expressed his desire to recognize the state of Israel, if and when Israel retreated from seized territories. And realizing how important it is for the Israelis to be recognized and accepted by the most influential Arab state, Egypt, Sadat seized the post Yom Kippur war opportunity to set in motion the basis for cordiality or rapprochement with Israel.

The forest most important factor was that the initial victory by Egypt offensive against Israel during the 1973 war. As earlier noted, it was a demonstration of Egypt credibility and worthiness among the Arab nations and respect within the state of Israel. As such, Sadat, felt he could now negotiate with Israel as an equal actor. With encouragement from the United States, he started to take steps to recognize the existence

of the state of Israel. In the way, he became the first Arab head of state to do so. Other factors include the domestic situation in Egypt, national interests and the structure of the international system.

Indeed, the domestic situation is very critical for our analysis. Egypt was confronted with huge economic crisis in the period after the war that required immediate attention and solutions. The economy was in recessions as the public debt rose to twelve billion dollars. In fact, the economy was only sustained by the generosity and subsidies from the United States, Saudi Arabia and international financial institutions. A development that came to affect the implementation of the country's national development plan of 1976. As a result, disquiet and agitation against food shortages, inflation and poor standards of living was a common feature. The suggestion for strict austerity measure by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), equally intensified the hardship by the majority of the citizens (Mohsen, 1978). The unbearable situation culminated in anti-government protest in early 1977. The government responded with the army handedness led to the death of seventy-nine people with over seventy left injured.

The government highhandedness nevertheless gives rise to the emergence of more opposition to the Sadat's regime. The opposing groups includes but not limited to: The Nasserites, the bourgeoisies' nationalists, the Islamic fundamentalist and intellectuals. All these groups were united in opposing the Sadat's regime in all ramifications (New African, 1978). In a simple term the opposition wanted a radical and improved economy, dismantle authoritarianism of the regime and any form of government action that was antithetical to the wishes of the people. In the midst of all these, relations with Libya also went soured in 1974 that led to an arms conflict. Egypt also had disagreement with Iraq, Syria, and Algeria shortly after the Sadat's regime signed the first Sinai Disengagement Treaty of 1974 with Israel. There was also attempt by some members of the Egyptian army to overthrow the Sadat's regime. But the Israeli intelligence got wind of it and communicated the United States which thereafter informed Sadat, who was able to truncate the attempt at the right time. All the aforementioned clearly demonstrate both local and foreign opposition against the Sadat's regime.

For Sadat, however, the solution to the socio-economic, political and external challenges confronted by Egypt was to first and foremost identify the roots of the problems. And as far he was concerned, the difficulty for him and Egypt was rooted in the previous series of arms hostilities with Israel. In other words, the concomitant consequences of the wars with Israel were the real and the sources of the socio-economic and political problems. This submission is aptly captured by Adisa (1981)

> "Sadat traced the roots of the problems to the conflict with Israel. In his view, it was the wars attendant upon that conflict that created the socio-economic problems. Historical evidence would tend to substantiate this perspective. Egypt losses as a result of the 1967 and 1973 wars alone were estimated as forty billion Egyptian Pounds (One Hundred billion dollars). Between 1967 and 1973 wars, annual growth rate was brought to a standstill after a six percent annual rate during the first Development Plan. High military expenditure was mostly responsible for this. Egypt's defense expenditure rose from 13.5 percent in 1967 to a crippling 34.1 percent in 1973-75. Military spending on this scale necessarily entailed corresponding sacrifices in other sector of the economy. Consequently, basic infrastructure such as telephones, water pipes, sewage, public transport, schools etc suffered. The war with Israel had therefore put Egypt in crisis and the only way to end the crisis appeared to be to end the war.

It is evident from the above that Sadat would do what whatever necessary to promote collaborative relations with Israel as opposed to conflictual interactions. Sadat, also knew that majority of his people

would enthusiastically support that. Indeed, the four wars with Israel had had material, human and financial burden on Egypt (Sela, 2002). The Egyptians were generally not happy with the small contributions from Arab nations compared with the Egyptians sacrifices during the four wars. Between the Khartoum Conference of Arab leaders of 1967 and that Morocco 1974, all the Arab states contributions was estimated at 10 percent of Egypt's losses. As such, Egypt was no longer willing to suffer for any Pan-Arab interest, while the oil rich Arab nations have chosen to keep the money in Western banks (Gazit, 2009).

Furthermore, Sadat, was also encouraged by the body language from the United States. Both the Nixon-Ford and Jimmy Carter's administration had pushed for possible peaceful relations between Israel and Egypt. More importantly, Sadat, was convinced that the domestic politics in Israel and public opinion would compel the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, to embrace any form of rapprochement with Egypt, because the Egyptian initial success during the 1973 war had shattered the Israelis thinking that they could forever secure their borders militarily. The Israeli government, particularly the administration of Yitzhek Rabin, had demonstrated commitment for friendly relations with Egypt after the war. It would be recalled that it was the Rabin's government that did not only signed the 1974 Sinai Disengagement but equally provided the intelligence that forestall the overthrow of Sadat. Hence, there was a basis for Egypt to think that Israel was and willing for peaceful relations.

With encouragement from Washington and Tel Aviv, Cairo began to take steps to recognize the existence of the state of Israel. In an act of supreme encourage, Sadat responded to an invitation from the Israeli government and flew to Jerusalem on 19th, November, 1977 to address the Knesset, Israelis parliament. The Israeli Prime Minister Begin reciprocated afterwards. The moves were remarkable diplomatic actions that set the stage for direct negotiations between Israel and Egypt. The two leaders, Begin and Sadat, together with US president Carter met from September 1978, and the three leaders signed the Camp David Agreement as well as the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt on March 27, 1979 (Quandt, 2003). The treaty ended the thirty years armed hostilities between Israel and Egypt. It marked the first time an Arab nation was able on its own to regain territory lost to Israel with diplomacy. The achievement culminated in Begin and Sadat's winning the Nobel Peace prize. And since then, relationship between Israel and Egypt have move from hostility to rapprochement.

Subsequent administrations from both countries have consolidated the gains of the Camp David agreement and the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. The assassination of Sadat on 6 October 1981 in Cairo did not derail the peace process. Sadat's vice president, Hosni Mubarak, who was wounded in the assassination process, consolidated the gains of the peace treaty with Israel as the successor to Sadat (Rutherford, 2008). Israeli Prime Ministers such as Began, Shamir, Peres, Shamir, Rabin, Netanyahu just to mention but a few, all equally worked with Mubarak for the intensification of friendly relations with Egypt. In many instances such as the Oslo Accords and the Gaza-Ariha Convention of 1993 between the Arab and Israel were guaranteed by Egypt.

Besides bilateral relations as well as the establishment of embassies in both Israel and Egypt, the peace treaty also made possible cooperation in economic and trade interactions. Between 1994 and 2000, Israel exported commodities worth over 800 million dollars to Egypt. Some of the items exported include fertilizers, oil products and chemicals. Egypt has also reciprocated. In June 2005 for example, Israel and Egypt signed a 2.5-billion-dollar contract for the export of Egypt's gas to Israel. In addition, Egypt also agreed to supply 1.7 billion cubic meters of natural gas over a period of 15 years through an undersea pipeline from the Egyptian town of el-Arosh to the Israeli city of Ashkelon (Policy Notes, 2015). There is also an agreement signed by Israel and Egypt in 2005, known as the Philadelphia Deal, in which 750 Egyptian security personnel were stationed in the border of Gaza to prevent smuggling of weapons to Gaza.

Thus, both Israel and Egypt have increased issues areas of interactions such that relations between both countries are such that the parties have now been involved in a web of collaboration.

The political ties between the two countries accounted for why Egypt has supported the Israelis attempt at degrading Hamas' capability. Egypt had also maintained that Hamas must be removed for the administration of Gaza. And with the support and collaboration with Israel, Egypt closed the Refat border crossing with Gaza and encouraged Israeli siege of Gaza in 2007. This is a clear demonstration of cooperation between Israel and Egypt over the security situation of the Gaza.

However, relations between Israel and Egypt in the immediate post Mubarak's periods were not largely remain the same. It would be recalled that President Mubarak was among the several Middle-East leaders who lost their position due to the Arab spring of early 2011 (Adetula, 2011). Many anticipated chilly and frosty relations between Israel and Egypt thereafter. For instance, Netanyahu expressed reservation over the fall of Mubarak and the possibility of Egypt being transformed into an Islamic state. And the emergence of Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim brotherhood, made Israel to prepare for the very worst.

To confirm the fears of the Israelis, the Islamic group in Egypt attacked the Israeli embassy and seized it under Morsi. Accordingly, Israel responded with airstrikes in the Sinai Desert, which left 6 Egyptians military officers, dead. Egypt thereafter recalled its envoy from Israel in 2011 (Policy Notes, 2015). Though Morsi pledged to honor the peace treaty with Israel in all ramification, but his alliance with Tehran was a bad signal to Israel. Thus, after the fall of Mubarak, Israel-Egypt relations experienced a series of shocks under the Morsi presidency (Hassan, 2011). For example, on 14 November 2012, Morsi sent a representative to Gaza for the support of Hamas. All these came to mar Tel-Aviv and Cairo relations even though Morsi had earlier promised to respect Israel-Egypt treaty.

However, the frosty relations that developed under Morsi did not last. During the first half of 2013, Egyptian popular opposition to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood grew in intensity, culminating in the 30 June 2013 mass street demonstrations, calling for Morsi to resign. After a series of warning, on 3 July 2013, Morsi was overthrown, and thereafter arrested by el-Sisi led military regime. Israel welcomes the fall of Morsi and supported the emergence of Sisi. By September 2013, Egyptian army was once again committed to counterterrorism with Israel on the Sinai to Gaza border. Israel provided extensive assistance, approving the deployment of Egyptian armor and helicopters even close to her border and sharing intelligence on Jihadists network and movement with Egypt. Indeed, even though the Israel-Egypt treaty does not allow Egyptian troops in the middle and eastern sections of the Sinai, but the Israelis approved of it in March 2015 (Policy Notes, 2015). Meaning the hostile mood and skepticism under Morsi have diminished under Sisi, who is very committed with peaceful relations with Israel.

Conclusion

Overall, the trajectory of relations between Israel and Egypt since 1948 clearly reveals the nature and patterns interactions among actors in the international system. The national interests, domestic politics, the personality of the leaders and the structure of the international environment often dictate them. The period from 1948 to 1973 could be described as the days characterized by wars and hostile interactions between Israel and Egypt. While the era of peaceful relations could be traced to the post 1973 war when Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, a feat that culminated in the rapprochement between Israel and Egypt. Indeed, the raison d'état of Egypt as exemplified by Sadat formed the continuity and change in Israel-Egypt relations during the years of Mubarak. Though relations between Egypt and Israel under Morsi, was frosty, the emergence of Sisi since 2013 clearly demonstrates that Israel and Egypt have moved from hostility to

rapprochement and strategic partnership. Democratic values and good governance will also foster closer ties between the regional powers.

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