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Egypt–Israel–United States: Problems on the Horizon?

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From Egypt's signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 to the recent mass demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square, there has never been a question as to Egypt's commitment to the agreement. In spite of difficult tests over the years, including Israel's bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Baghdad (1981); the invasion of Lebanon and the IDF's continued presence there (1982-2000); two intifadas; and various operations in Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza, Egypt observed most of the articles in the military part of the treaty and helped lower the heat in the Arab discourse on subjects related to Israel, especially the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The exception to this general rule was Egypt's position on the Israeli nuclear issue.

Public opinion polls conducted in Egypt since the start of the recent demonstrations have addressed the question of Egypt's continued commitment to the peace treaty with Israel. In a telephone poll conducted among 615 respondents for the International Peace Institute (IPI) in New York, 46 percent of respondents stated that they would be "much more likely" to vote for a party that supports keeping the treaty with Israel, the Arab peace initiative, and the two-state solution. Another 17 percent said they would be "somewhat more likely" to prefer such a party. That is, 63 percent expressed willingness to support Egypt's continued commitment to the treaty (even though it is impossible to tell from the poll whether the support is conditional, for example, on achieving a solution on the basis of two states for two peoples).¹

Another poll conducted for the Pew Research Center in March-April 2011 among one thousand respondents presented more disturbing results.² Fifty-four percent of those polled stated that Egypt should cancel the agreement, while 36 percent replied that it should maintain it. Support for maintaining the treaty was greater among those with higher incomes and higher levels of education. (Since the IPI poll was conducted by telephone, the positive result is presumably misleading because of the greater weight given to those in possession of a telephone and capable of answering the questions without a face-to-face connection).

Along with other surveys, these two polls have pointed to former Foreign Minister and Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa as the leading candidate in the Egyptian presidential elections. Moussa's views on relations with Israel are important, as are the opinions of the current foreign minister, Nabil el-Araby. In a comprehensive interview with the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* on March 16, Moussa, responding to a question about his critical position towards Israel, stated, "Egypt fully supports the joint Arab position toward Israel. The Palestinians need their own, viable state, and Israel has to withdraw from the occupied territories. And as a very first step, the blockade of the Gaza Strip has to be lifted, immediately and in full." As to whether he could have a discussion with Netanyahu, Moussa stated, "First of all, Netanyahu would have to show that he is interested in a just peace. That would reduce the tensions in the region."³

In response to a question by Lally Weymouth of the *Washington Post* whether, if he became president of Egypt, he would keep the treaty with Israel, Amr Moussa replied: "The treaty is a treaty. For us, the treaty has been signed and it is for peace, but it depends also on the other side. If you asked me what kind of relations between the Arab world and Israel I would like, I would say that the Arab position – of which Egypt is a party – rests on the Arab initiative of 2002."⁴

Current Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil el-Araby, a seasoned diplomat who has a reasonable chance of keeping his position in a future Egyptian government, stated unequivocally (also in an interview to Lally Weymouth), "Egypt is going to comply with every agreement and abide by every treaty it has entered into. That is the goal of treaties...Once it is done and everything is signed, both sides abide and comply faithfully."⁵

The responses from el-Araby, a professional lawyer who worked as a lawyer during most of his years in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, and the statements by Amr Moussa show that in spite of the results of the PEW poll, a sweeping Egyptian decision to cancel the peace treaty with Israel is not expected. It is clear to both Egypt and to its future leaders that this would cause severe damage to Egypt and to its economy. However, on at least two subjects, deterioration is likely if Moussa and el-Araby continue to play a central role in Egypt's foreign policy after September 2011. These two subjects are the Palestinian issue and the nuclear issue.

It comes as no surprise that Amr Moussa, who until recently was the Arab League secretary general, speaks about the Arab initiative of 2002. For his part, El-Araby has made no secret of the fact that Egypt wholeheartedly supports a UN General Assembly decision to recognize a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with territorial exchanges, according to the Clinton parameters of December 2000, and that Egypt is pressuring Europe to support such a decision.

The convergence in September 2011 of elections in Egypt and the General Assembly discussion is likely to give rise to fiery statements from Egyptian presidential candidates. Israel has an interest in preserving the treaty with Egypt and therefore should refrain from hasty responses to the comments by the presidential candidates. These events may also become entangled in the issue of American aid to Egypt, and in this discussion too, Israel and its friends in Congress are liable to deliver hasty responses. The discussions in Congress about the 2012 budget will be most heated in September (the American fiscal year starts on 1 October). The administration's desire to aid Egypt was clear already at the start of the uprising in Cairo. Secretary of State Clinton raised the issue in her meeting with the Republican Speaker of the House on February 14,⁶ and four days later, Clinton announced aid totaling \$150 million to address the economic problems that resulted from the demonstrations in Egypt.⁷ In talks with President Obama, Prime Minister Netanyahu will likely and justifiably raise Israel's concern over changes in the Egyptian position, but it is important that his comments do not send any signals on the subject of American aid to Egypt. Against the backdrop of expected cuts in the overall American aid budget, there are a number of American legislators who would be happy to identify such signals, and therefore it is critical that Israel not involve itself in this discussion.

Indeed, Israel's hasty decision in the wake of the agreement between Fatah and Hamas to stop the transfer of tax money collected for the Palestinian Authority provides a negative example of potential fallout. The European Union responded immediately with a decision to transfer monies to the Palestinian Authority, which as such damaged Israel's position.

Relations between Egypt and Hamas will presumably thaw, even if the Muslim Brotherhood does not play a role in the Egyptian government after September 2011. If the hopes expressed by the Washington Post editorial⁸ – that Egypt will moderate Hamas positions – are realized, tension in the United States-Israeli-Egyptian triangle is likely to arise over disagreements regarding the extent to which Hamas has actually moderated its positions. Prime Minister Netanyahu should anchor this issue in the framework of the three Quartet conditions – recognition of Israel, acceptance of the agreements between Israel and the PLO, and renunciation of terrorism – and avoid reactions and chain reactions that will damage Israel's relations with Egypt in the post-Mubarak period.

This suggestion also applies to the Egyptian attempt to convene a conference on a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East in 2012, as was decided in the May 2010 NPT Review Conference. It was Amr Moussa who turned the struggle against Israeli nuclearization into the flagship of Egyptian diplomacy. In the interview with Lally Weymouth, Amr Moussa says that “the nuclear issue in the Middle East means Israel and then Iran.” Nabil Fahmy, who served as Egypt's ambassador to the United States between 1999 and 2008, reiterated his call to establish a nuclear free zone in the Middle East that will include Iran and Israel, with practical steps by Israel in this direction and a clear and defined timetable.⁹ The United States indeed supported the decision last year, but it is

doubtful that President Obama, whose high ranking officials – in spite of the American vote – repudiated the decision even then, will lend a hand, at the height of the US presidential election campaign and against the background of the developments in the Middle East, to a conference that will only add fuel to the regional fire. Thus it is preferable that Israel tackle this issue as well behind the scenes, and not be dragged into threats and drastic actions that will damage the delicate relations in the Israeli-Egyptian-United States triangle.

¹ <http://www.ipacademy.org/images/pdfs/egypt-poll-results-april2011.pdf>; *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703992704576305423166596598.html?KEYWORDS=poll+egypt>.

² www.pewglobal.org.

³ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,750969-2,00.html>.

⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/amr-moussas-vision-for-egypt/2011/05/09/AF36AxbG_story.html.

⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/egypts-foreign-minister-on-the-way-forward-after-mubarak/2011/05/05/AFRI3BCG_story.html.

⁶ U.S. State Department announcement, February 14, 2011.

⁷ See also Clinton's comments at the Brookings Institution on April 12, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/04/160642.htm>.

⁸ *Washington Post*, May 11, 2011.

⁹ Spring issue of the *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/CairoReview/Pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=26>.

