President Morsi and Israel-Egypt Relations:
Egyptian Discourse on the Social Networks, July 2012

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Against the backdrop of the complex situation on the Israel-Egypt border, an internal Egyptian discussion is taking place among intellectuals (both men and women) on social networks, as well as in the official press, concerning the future of the Israel-Egypt peace agreement. The discourse focuses on five key issues.

Challenges in Sinai

According to the discussion, the greatest security challenge currently facing Egypt is the spread of terrorism and crime in Sinai due to ineffective governance and the lack of integration of the Bedouin tribes in the greater Egyptian society. The Sinai problem has intensified, due to the neglect of the Bedouin tribes over many years, the declining volume of tourism, rampant unemployment, and the burgeoning crime rate – human trafficking, growing, trading, and smuggling illegal drugs, weapons smuggling, smuggling of goods to Gaza, and kidnapping of Western hostages for the purpose of freeing prisoners. Network users are aware that Islamic jihadist groups, apocalyptic Salafist groups, and al-Qaeda elements are consolidating terror cells in the Sinai area. People are worried that extremists will spark an escalation against Israel through terrorist activity or surface-to-surface missile fire from Sinai, leading to an Israeli military response and ensuing hostilities that run counter to current Egyptian interests.

There is awareness that Israel is not interested in escalation, and is therefore strengthening its defenses. According to the network discourse, however, escalation seems almost certain, given the Egyptian military's inability to control Sinai and contain the extremist elements, and because there is no long range strategic plan for solving these problems in Sinai.

The Peace Agreement: Changes in the Military Appendix

The prevailing opinion on the Egyptian social networks is that it is necessary to review the military appendix to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and remove restrictions on the

deployment of the Egyptian army in Sinai – an idea that clearly ignores the fact that Israel did not oppose reinforcement of Egyptian military forces in Sinai beyond what is permitted in the treaty, and that the Egyptian military itself did not authorize the deployment of additional forces that was coordinated with Israel. Instead, many hypothesize that the main reason the military has inadequate control in Sinai lies in the restrictions on the Egyptian military deployment dictated by the peace treaty. In their opinion, President Morsi will act to review the treaty in order to bolster his popularity, and also in order to embarrass the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), whose position on the issue is unclear.

There is no clear evidence of any Egyptian desire to have relations with Israel deteriorate to a state of military confrontation. There is great appreciation of the fact that "an entire generation has known no war." At the same time, the consensus opposes closer relations and normalization with Israel, and includes calls for canceling visas to Egypt for Israelis, confining official dialogue to the lower echelons, and banning Israeli tourism.

Opinion makers believe that in practice the Egyptian military is the main beneficiary of the peace agreement. It does not have to deal with serious military challenges, and it can shirk responsibility for the security situation in Sinai on the grounds of the restrictions in the peace treaty. In practice, Israel is the one policing the common border and investing in a security fence and other measures. Furthermore, the Egyptian military also benefits from large scale US military and economic aid, which enables it to focus on internal politics and economic affairs, instead of on national security (40 percent of Egyptian industry is in SCAF hands).

The Egyptian Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
According to the discourse on the networks, President Morsi will have to choose between populism and pragmatism – between reinforcing his support among the Egyptian masses and the practical measures required by the complex reality, including in the Gaza Strip and Sinai. They presume that Morsi will try to maneuver between the extremes, without harming the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood or his own.

Accordingly, Morsi has three potential policy directions:
  a. The pragmatic option, with Egypt in the role of mediator, i.e., mediating between the Palestinian groups as well as between the Palestinians and Israel. Egyptians believe that in the 18 months since Mubarak was overthrown, this policy, supported by SCAF, has proved effective. At the same time, discussion indicates that a policy of mediation could arouse tension within the Muslim Brotherhood and possibly lead to a confrontation with Hamas in Gaza. Even if Hamas responds positively to mediation, problems with jihadist groups will arise.

b. The populist option, with Egypt in the role of Hamas patron. In this scenario, the Muslim Brotherhood will have to provide comprehensive support for Hamas in Gaza in place of Iran, both in the supply of weapons and in economic and logistical aid, in exchange for a commitment by Hamas to refrain from challenging Egypt in Sinai. This policy has much potential for deteriorating into a direct confrontation with Israel.

c. The failure of pragmatism and a transition to populism. Due to its commitment to the US to honor the agreements signed by Egypt and the pre-election political promises made by the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi will attempt to maneuver between these two extremes. He will start with internal mediation between the Palestinians, and mediation between Hamas and Israel (when necessary), while simultaneously continuing the popular incendiary rhetoric. If the mediatory efforts fail, he can blame SCAF, which holds responsibility for defense and foreign policy, thereby promoting the latter's delegitimization.

Policy towards Hamas
The prevailing sentiment is that President Morsi should draw red lines for Hamas, focusing primarily on keeping Egyptian territory, i.e. Sinai, from serving as a platform for attacking Israel. They hold that in exchange, Morsi will agree to open the Rafah border crossing and remove the blockade of Gaza, conclude a free trade agreement, provide economic aid, and supply fuel and gas to Gaza. This would eliminate the smuggling industry, which developed mainly as a result of the prolonged blockade on the Gaza Strip, and create a balance of give and take with Hamas. Despite Egyptian anxiety about taking responsibility for the Gaza Strip, the Muslim Brotherhood government will likely be unable to adhere to the Mubarak policy of closing the Rafah crossing and cooperating with Israel in its blockade of Gaza.

Annexing Gaza to Egypt
Given the absence of any expectation of a political process between Israel and the Palestinians, the lack of an internal Palestinian rapprochement, the anticipated opening of the Rafah border crossing and the removal of the blockade, the special relations between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and the flying of the Egyptian flag in Gaza when Morsi was elected, there are hints of a trend towards annexing Gaza to Egypt. This opinion is strengthened by the desire of Gaza residents to be part of Egypt as a practical solution to their problems.

Conclusion
The Egyptian discourse on the social networks highlights the challenges in Egyptian-Israeli relations following the victory of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi in

the presidential elections. The prevailing view is that confrontation between Israel and Egypt is almost unavoidable, even though neither party wishes it, both because of the expected change in Egyptian policy towards Hamas and as a result of Egyptian helplessness in dealing with the challenges of government, terrorism, and crime in Sinai, as well as the current paralysis in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, where there is currently "no peace, no *muqawama* (resistance), and no war."

Israel must act wisely to neutralize signs of an escalation in relations. One of the issues expected to emerge in the near future is the change in Egyptian policy towards Gaza, with an emphasis on the Rafah crossing and the blockade. Israel can preempt this measure by coordinating the opening of the border crossing and the removal of the blockade with Egypt, thereby preventing a situation in which these measures are forced on Israel.