



Between Paris and Cairo: Balancing Security and Diplomacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The measured Israeli reaction to the latest flurry of problematic diplomatic activity reflects Jerusalem's more central security imperatives, as well as its newly-discovered sense of being a significant regional player rather than a besieged small state in a hostile sea.

The loss of EgyptAir 804 on its way from Paris to Cairo – suspected to be an act of terror – happened to coincide with efforts by both France and Egypt to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. No causal connection should be imputed. But for both countries, their perceptions of broad regional security considerations play a significant role in driving their diplomatic initiatives. That insight should, and apparently does, inform Israeli policy responses.

Policymakers in Israel have ample reason to be apprehensive about French peace initiatives. For many reasons, most notably the pressure exerted by a large and vocal Muslim minority, French leaders have shown themselves ever more eager to endorse schemes in support of Palestinian demands. At moments of crisis, such as the internal EU debates during the Gaza fighting in 2014, it was France that took the lead in driving through to EU endorsement a position on permanent status that reflected Arab demands on borders, Jerusalem, and the interpretation of UN resolutions. This drive to impose "parameters" is inimical to Israeli interests.

France is planning to convene a conference on the Middle East peace process in Paris on June 3, to be attended by assorted international and regional players – though not by the protagonists themselves. Israeli reactions to this initiative have been subdued, and recent visits to Jerusalem by the French prime minister and foreign minister were amicable. To account for this, it is necessary to take a broader look at regional dynamics and at French policy responses, which tend to align closely with Israeli

positions on the issue that truly matters: the need to face up to the threat posed by radical Islamist totalitarianism.

On more than one occasion, French positions and actions on this subject have been more reassuring from an Israeli point of view than those of our American ally. For example, France served as the hard-line anchor of the P5+1 (or, as they prefer to count it, the E3+3). It was France that raised questions about reliability and implementation (even as it was French business interests that were among the first to bang on Tehran's doors).

In terms of action against Islamist terror groups, French forces have done more than most, including a dramatic campaign in Mali. Equally important is the French reluctance to buy into the illusion that the Muslim Brotherhood could be a stabilizing partner, as well as the ongoing relationship between France and the current regime in Egypt.

It is against this background that Israeli leadership has taken a cautious line in response to the French peace initiative. Israel did make the point repeatedly that the French initiative would prove counterproductive, insofar as it would move Palestinian leadership even further away from compromise at the negotiating table. But the point was not made aggressively, and French motives and friendship with Israel were never subject to question. The tempered Israeli response reflects, above all the importance of broader regional imperatives in Israel's current diplomatic calculations.

The same applies to Egypt, which on May 28 led the Arab League in endorsing the French initiative. From an Israeli perspective, there is little in recent history to commend Egyptian intervention in the Palestinian negotiations. Citing their "expertise" (*khibra*) in diplomacy with Israel, Egyptians have all too often helped harden Palestinian positions and demands. Egypt's role in the last territorial adjustment, the Hebron Agreement of 1997, was so problematic that King Hussein of Jordan had to be pulled in to mitigate the consequences of its involvement.

However times change. The regional realities in 2016 have generated a very different relationship between Israel and Egypt. The countries both face the same threats to their security – Iran, IS, and the Muslim Brotherhood – even if the Egyptian order of priorities is the reverse of the Israeli. The level of security cooperation is unprecedented, and President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi has said so explicitly to foreign visitors.

Energetic cooperation, including economic, is within reach, particularly in view of the easing of friction following the December 2015 release of Israeli Beduin Odeh Tarabin after a long and unjustified incarceration. Egyptian forces have acted

vigorously in Sinai and have executed a systematic campaign to eradicate the tunnel system supplying Gaza, operating well above treaty specifications and with Israel's explicit consent. Those forces have become an important part of Israel's security equation in the south.

In this context, it is easier to understand why Egypt's recent forays into the Israeli-Palestinian peace process have been greeted warmly by Israel. Sisi went so far, in a speech on May 17, as to openly intervene in Israeli politics, calling (upon request?) for the center-left to join a broad unity government. This move generated a strikingly positive response in Jerusalem. In explaining the choices he made in his recent cabinet reshuffle, Netanyahu spoke of intensive efforts underway for some time to revive peace efforts with the help of key regional players. This was a thinly veiled reference to Sisi, and probably also to the Saudis, whose close association with Sisi was recently cemented by the Egyptian decision to return the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi sovereignty.

In short, the measured Israeli reaction to the latest flurry of diplomatic activity reflects its security imperatives, as well as its newly discovered sense of being a significant regional player rather than a besieged small state in a hostile sea.

As to the forthcoming peace conference, there is little reason to be sanguine. As expected, Palestinian positions have been hardening in response to the diplomatic effort (and to what Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas views as cleavages within Israeli society, as his latest speech at the Arab League indicates).

The concept of compromise, raised once again by John Kerry in recent weeks, remains alien to Abbas's negotiating posture. Hence, Abbas' rejection of any recognition of Israel's identity as the embodiment of the right of the Jewish people to self-determination, and of any interim step short of "a Palestinian state on all of the land taken in 1967 with its capital in Jerusalem".

However, the true interests of France (and other Europeans) and Egypt (with her regional allies and sponsors) are not necessarily focused, at this stage, on permanent status. They are more interested in a practical mechanism that might engender eventual progress, as well as a sense of movement that will sap energy from the prevailing hostility and reduce the prospect of escalating violence.

Their broader agenda requires that regional and international attention not be diverted by Israeli-Palestinian violence, which always commands intense media coverage and prompts disproportionate emotional reactions. On this point, Jerusalem is in agreement with Paris and Cairo, and is therefore more willing to seek ways to work around their diplomatic positions rather than confront them directly.

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