



PERSPECTIVES

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Israeli Attitudes Towards Egypt 40 Years After Sadat's Visit

by Prof. Efraim Karsh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Forty years after Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem, most Israelis view the attendant Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty as conducive to Israel's national security – yet they believe there are currently no leaders of Sadat's and Menachem Begin's stature on either side of the divide who are capable of effecting a similarly momentous breakthrough toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Forty years ago this month, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat landed at Israel's Ben-Gurion airport for a two-day visit to Jerusalem, at the official invitation of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. The entire world held its breath. Here was the leader of the largest and most populous Arab state, which had spearheaded repeated pan-Arab attempts to destroy Israel, visiting the contested capital of the Arab world's foremost nemesis in an apparent acquiescence in the legitimacy of the Jewish State's existence and its right to peaceful coexistence with its Arab neighbors. So profound was the general disbelief that the Israeli chief-of-staff, Lt. Gen. Mordechai Gur, warned the government that the visit was an Egyptian deceptive ploy, on the heels of the Egyptian-Syrian surprise attack of October 1973.

The visit proved to be the most important single political event in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, culminating in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of March 1979 and the attendant shattering of the Arab world's uniform rejection of Jewish statehood. And while Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, held a far more restrictive view of the agreement, the Israeli-Egyptian peace has successfully weathered many regional crises (from the 1982 Lebanon war, to the "al-Aqsa Intifada," to the 2014 Gaza conflict), paving the road to the

October 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty and the yet-to-be-completed Israeli-Palestinian peace process launched with the September 1993 Oslo Accord.

But how do Israelis view this momentous event from a forty-year vantage point? Do they appreciate its full historic significance and the impact it has had on their lives? Do they consider the price of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty worth paying?

A recent survey held by Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) shows a rather mixed picture. While 81% of respondents viewed the agreement as conducive to Israel's national security, 51% deemed the concessions made for its attainment (notably the evacuation of the oil-rich Sinai Peninsula and the demolition of the Yamit town) to have been excessive, compared to 46% of respondents who considered them commensurate with the agreement's mammoth gains.

This apparent contradiction seems to be a corollary of Israelis' keen awareness of Mubarak's lukewarm perception of peace. While one can only speculate about Sadat's own ultimate intentions – he was assassinated in October 1981 by an Islamist zealot – for Mubarak, peace was of no value in and of itself but was rather the price Cairo had to pay for such substantial benefits as US economic and military aid. As a result, Mubarak reduced interaction with Israel to the lowest possible level, while simultaneously transforming the Egyptian army into a formidable modern force and fostering a culture of virulent anti-Semitism in Egypt, a culture whose premises he himself evidently shared.

Though President Abdel Fattah Sisi has taken a different route, bringing Israeli-Egyptian relations to unprecedented heights, most Israelis seem to acknowledge the instrumental nature of the Egyptian perception of peace. Consequently, only 14% of the BESA survey regarded Egypt's attitude to Israel as friendly (of whom 37% thought Israel "overpaid" for the agreement), while 68% viewed it as lukewarm and another 18% as hostile (of whom 44% and 68% respectively deemed the concessions made for the agreement as excessive).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, support for the agreement was found to be strongest among center-left voters, though it was actually the rightwing Likud Party that made this historic breakthrough. Ninety-two percent of Hamahane Hatzioni and Yesh Atid voters, as well as 88% of Meretz voters, believed the agreement to have enhanced Israel's national security as opposed to 82% of Likud voters, 82% of Habayit Hayehudi's voters, and 67% of Israel Beitenu voters. Support for the agreement within the ultraorthodox community was even lower, with 64% of Shas voters and 68% of Yahadut Hatorah voters viewing the agreement as conducive to Israel's national security.

Likewise, the survey exposed the ambiguous attitude of Israel's Arab citizens to the agreement, or indeed to possible Israeli reconciliation with the neighboring Arab states. While only 68% of Israeli Arabs viewed the agreement as conducive to Israel's national security, compared to 83% of their Jewish compatriots, 17% of them deemed the price paid for its attainment to have been too low (compared to 1% of Israeli Jews). In other words, Israeli Arabs are more inclined than their Jewish counterparts (with the salient exception of Meretz voters) to have their state pay a higher price for a less favorable international agreement affecting its national security. This inclination is markedly higher among voters for the Joint Arab Party (compared to those voting for Jewish parties), with 22% of them considering the price too low.

The gap between Israeli Arabs and Jews notwithstanding, both communities are equally skeptical about the prospects for a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement, with over 80% of respondents agreeing that there are currently no leaders of Sadat's and Begin's stature on either side of the divide who are capable of effecting a similarly momentous breakthrough. Hardly a heart-warming prognosis after nearly four decades of Egyptian-Israeli peace.

Efraim Karsh, Director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is Emeritus Professor of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London and editor of Middle East Quarterly.

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