



The Plight of Egyptians Living in Israel

by Dr. Edy Cohen

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,731, September 6, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Decades after the achievement of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, the peace remains cold. Egypt continues to be institutionally hostile to Israel. Egyptian citizens who reside in Israel, be they students or small business owners or simply spouses of Israeli Arabs, face discrimination and suspicion at home.

Israelis often say, “There is peace between the governments of Egypt and Israel, but not between the peoples.” I beg to differ. Many Egyptians have no problem with Israel, and a few thousands of them even live in Israel, peacefully. Egyptian citizens are deterred from visiting Israel and establishing any kind of warm relationship with it for fear of the wrath of the government, which views any such attempts as potentially traitorous.

Forty-one years have passed since the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord between Israeli PM Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. The agreement established certain guidelines, including mutual non-aggression in the media and reciprocal visits by tourists.

Article 3 of the peace treaty says:

The Parties agree that the normal relationship established between them will include full recognition, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations, termination of economic boycotts and discriminatory barriers to the free movement of people and goods, and will guarantee the mutual enjoyment by citizens of the due process of law.

Article 3 encourages normalization of relationships between the two nations:

The Parties agree to establish normal cultural relations following completion of the interim withdrawal.

They agree on the desirability of cultural exchanges in all fields, and shall, as soon as possible and not later than six months after completion of the interim withdrawal, enter into negotiations with a view to concluding a cultural agreement for this purpose.

Unfortunately, none of that happened. In the 41 years since the agreement was signed, not a day has gone by in which Israel or Jews in general have not been attacked in the Egyptian media. For many deeply rooted reasons, Egypt has the most antisemitic media of any Arab country. No matter what the peace treaty says, the Egyptian leadership did not and still does not want to normalize relations with Israel, and it punishes anyone who tries to do so.

Thankfully, there is no open military hostility between Egypt and Israel these days, and there are some economic and diplomatic relations. Egypt also helps mediate between Israel and Hamas. According to several media sources, Israel is helping Egypt to eliminate ISIS in Sinai. That would testify to political security coordination existing between the two countries.

However, there is still no cultural relationship between the two countries, nor freedom of movement. On the contrary: there is discrimination and punishment for anyone who tries to normalize relations, and it does not come from the Israeli side.

Egyptian PM Mustafa Madbouli, who is in charge of the Citizenship Law, recently revoked the citizenship of three Egyptians who live in Israel. Their only crime was having received Israeli citizenship. The official reason given for the revocation of their Egyptian citizenship was that they had not sought prior approval, but there is no such requirement for Egyptians seeking to attain dual citizenship with any other country. The more likely reason is found in the Egyptian Citizenship Law, which stipulates in Section 16, Subsection 10 that Egyptian citizenship may be revoked if the person has been identified with Zionism.

Most Egyptian citizens who receive Israeli citizenship are not Zionists. Many are married to Israeli Arabs and live a normal life in Israel. They do not work for the Israeli security services or the civil service. The revocation of their Egyptian citizenship is simply punishment for their living a normalized life with Israel.

The Egyptian model for Israeli-Egyptian relations is a cold peace between governments and no peace at all between the peoples. Every Egyptian who wishes to visit Israel as a tourist must first contact Egyptian intelligence for permission. He will then be humiliated, warned, and—if he made the mistake of contacting the Israeli embassy beforehand—possibly even jailed on suspicion of espionage.

There is a phobia among Egyptians when it comes to relations with Israel. It is not acceptable to have cultural connections, tourist visits, or any form of relationship with Israelis. The only Egyptian allowed to be in contact with Israel is President Sisi.

Four years ago, Egyptian MP Tawfiq Akasha visited the home of the Israeli ambassador to Egypt. Following the visit he was attacked in an unprecedented [commotion](#). He was even physically assaulted in parliament.

As for Egyptians living in Israel, they are reluctant to return home to visit family because of the harassment they will inevitably receive from the Egyptian authorities. They would also be subjected to long delays when they tried to return to Israel. In conversations I had with Egyptian citizens, I learned that they need a special permit to return to Israel, even though they live there.

The special permit is often delayed for many months, which is a serious problem for Egyptian citizens who have jobs, businesses, or studies to return to back in Israel. They also have to put up with daily interrogations throughout the time they are in Egypt. All this harassment stems from the government's fear that the citizen in question might be an agent of the Mossad.

The Cairo government has a deep fear that Egyptians might spy for Israel. The recent book *The Angel* documents the story of the number one Egyptian spy, Ashraf Marwan (it has been made into a Netflix movie). He was no less than the son-in-law of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Egyptians deny to this day that Marwan was a spy.

Over 6,000 Egyptians live in Israel. Most are married to Israeli Arabs and work in Israel. Most have legal visas, pursue business or studies, and have children or grandchildren. However, they do not live normal lives. They live in distress, as they are effectively barred from their home country.

The Egyptian treatment of its citizens who associate with Israel echoes that of Saudi Arabia. Saudi journalist Abdul Hamid -Ghabin was [arrested](#) in Saudi Arabia because he crossed "red lines" by appearing in Israeli media. Egypt is no more tolerant of any sign of accommodation by an Egyptian citizen with the state of Israel.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on August 11, 2020.

Dr. Edy Cohen (Ph.D. Bar-Ilan University) is fluent in Arabic and specializes in inter-Arab relations, the Arab-Israeli conflict, terrorism, Jewish communities in the Arab world. He is a researcher at the BESA Center and author of the book The Holocaust in the Eyes of Mahmoud Abbas (Hebrew).