



PERSPECTIVES

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Normalizing with Cairo Rather than Riyadh Could Be a Major Achievement

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Normalizing relations between the two veteran peacemakers, Israel and Egypt, rather than making peace with Saudi Arabia could be the crowning achievement of the Abraham Accords peace process. An official Egyptian approval of the normalization of relations between Israel and Sudan could be the harbinger of change.

It has become almost a mantra that the prime objective of the Abraham Accords is a peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. This overlooks an even more important Israeli foreign policy goal: normalizing relations with Egypt. This normalization has been a long time coming, as the states signed their historic peace treaty establishing full diplomatic relations in 1979.

The reason why this goal has been overlooked is probably the remarkable durability of 41 years of Israeli-Egyptian peace after 25 years of enmity and war. Given the bloodshed and the costs both sides incurred before the treaty compared to the relative calm they have enjoyed since, one might not be inclined to fret too much over the cold peace Egypt has imposed on Israeli-Egyptian relations.

Even less does one feel like quibbling over cold versus warm peace when everyone acknowledges that Egypt's departure from hot war meant the effective end of war-making between all the Arab states and Israel.

This is not to say no shots were fired. Israel faced the Syrian army during the first Lebanese war, and Syria is today a base for Iranian operations against Israel—either directly, in attempting to set up military installations in the country (especially in southern Golan), or in supporting its proxies in the area.

Iraq under Saddam launched two dozen or so rockets at Israel to divert attention away from its occupation of Kuwait. In neither case was there a deliberate attempt to engage Israel in a full-scale war.

Yet it is an undisputed fact in a region where even basic facts are hotly contested that ever since Egypt departed from its pursuit of war with Israel, no Arab state has dared challenge Israel either alone or in any alliance.

The best proof is the quiet that prevailed in the Golan Heights between 1974 and the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The most hostile Arab state preferred to work through proxies in Lebanon (in alliance with Iran) rather than challenge Israel on home ground, despite the considerable tarnishing of its reputation in the Arab world for such behavior.

In fact, the deterioration on the Golan Heights (limited so far) is due to the weakening of the Syrian state since the outbreak of the civil war, a cataclysm from which it never fully recovered and because of which it has significantly increased its reliance on Iran. As long as it was an ally of Iran's rather than its vassal-state (as it has become), Iran respected Syria's wishes to avoid direct confrontation with Israel.

All of this is very meaningful in terms of blood and treasure. Israel lost more casualties in its wars with Arab states in those 25 years than in the 47 years since the Yom Kippur War, and security expenditures as a percentage of Israeli GDP dropped from over 16% to just over one-quarter of that. The difference is greater than Israeli health expenditures in our pandemic age.

Nevertheless, there were hopes that a warm peace rather than a cold one would prevail. The peace treaty overwhelmingly focused on the military aspects of disengagement and non-belligerence, as both sides had serious doubts at the time about its durability.

Yet a considerable part of the treaty, to which both sides committed, focused on a warm peace. Annex Three includes articles that ensure complete freedom of movement for citizens of both states. This article has been flouted by the Egyptian state, which has harassed and even imprisoned Egyptians who dared to come to Israel. The intent to allow free economic interchange and cultural exchanges have all been consistently thwarted if not suppressed.

Egypt has prevented university exchanges and cultural venues from taking place, and no Egyptian soccer team has ever played in an Israeli stadium, let alone the other way round.

The limited nature of the interaction can be seen in the traffic between the two states (barring southern Sinai), the small distance involved, and the interest

Egypt would otherwise have in Israeli tourists beyond the Arab-Israeli citizens who visit Cairo in limited numbers. Just one flight takes off daily, and the buses that used to traverse northern Sinai ceased operations long ago.

The Abraham Accords process could make a dent in the cold peace. An encouraging sign is the official Egyptian welcome given to the normalization process between Israel and Sudan.

As Rami Ginat, a scholar on Egyptian-Sudanese relations, has noted, Egypt for a considerable period of time tried to persuade the British to accede to Egyptian-Sudanese unity and has always sought to protect its interests—especially the unhindered flow of the Nile to Egypt.

The prospect of an Israeli political presence in Sudan, which Egypt regards as its geostrategic backyard, has always alarmed Cairo. That President Sisi overcame, at least for the moment, inhibitions to welcome normalization of Israeli-Sudanese relations could be a harbinger of the much sought-for normalization of relations between the two veteran peacemakers in the area.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.