

The Future of Egypt-Israel Peace

The Muslim Brotherhood's victory in Egypt has stoked fear in some circles that Cairo might renege on its peace treaty with Israel. But another part of that reality is that Israel never fulfilled its commitment to withdraw from Palestinian land on the West Bank, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The outcome of the Egyptian presidential election has stimulated renewed hand-wringing over the future Egyptian posture toward Israel and the peace treaty between the two countries. What the winner of the election, Mohamed Morsi, has actually said on the subject does not seem to have reassured the hand-wringers.

The concerns, rooted in Islamophobia and stoked by innuendo associating the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood with extremists of the Al Qaeda ilk(notwithstanding the Brotherhood and Al Qaeda being adversaries of each other, with drastically different philosophies and strategies) have involved an image of the Brotherhood somehow being innately and irretrievably hateful of Israel.

All of this disregards the main reason that not just Morsi or the Brotherhood but also most Egyptians who have any opinion about Israel are critical of it. That reason goes back to the origin and context of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty.

Its American midwife, Jimmy Carter, knew what were the biggest issues underlying the hostility between Israel and its Arab neighbors. His goal was not just an Egyptian-Israeli treaty but a comprehensive peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

He realized that this required a satisfaction of Palestinian national aspirations and a resolution of the problem of Israeli occupation of land on which the Palestinians lived, a situation that already was a decade old when Carter became president.

Part of Carter's challenge was the reluctance of Arab leaders to risk getting a step ahead of their Arab brethren and being seen to make a separate peace with an adversary still occupying land inhabited by Arabs and seized by military conquest.

Even Jordan's King Hussein, who among the frontline Arab leaders had the closest relations with the United States, was unwilling to be the first to take that gamble. It required the audacity of Anwar Sadat and the shock of his trip to Jerusalem to break the impasse.

Egypt's weight as the most populous Arab state and one that had won its spurs in multiple rounds of fighting with Israel was a reason, along with Sadat's boldness, for it to be the one to take that gamble. But even for Egypt, it was still a big risk.

Menachem Begin and the Israeli government saw advantage in separating Egypt from the other Arab states and dealing with it one-on-one. For Egypt any such separation was clearly a hazard and a net negative. It would be worth accepting only if it led the way to a broader peace that did involve the other Arabs.

Thus when Carter convened Begin and Sadat for a fortnight of intense bargaining at Camp David in 1978, that broader peace, and the key ingredient of it, a resolution of the Palestinian problem, was necessarily as important as any bilateral arrangement governing Egyptian-Israeli relations.

Two documents emerged from the bargaining, with equal standing. One of them provided a framework for the bilateral relationship, leading to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed the following year. The other document was "A Framework for Peace in the Middle East," which provided for full Palestinian autonomy and a withdrawal of Israeli troops from Palestinian territory within five years. This and the peace treaty were all part of the same bargain.

Despite the inclusion of the framework document about the Palestinians, many Arabs outside Egypt and a good number inside it believed that Sadat had committed the sin of a separate peace and had been hoodwinked by Begin.

The largest of the frontline Arab states had been taken off the front line, with only an unenforceable promise about the future status of Palestinian land. (With occupying Israeli troops still in place 29 years after the projected five-year period, and hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers later, who can say that such concerns about the Camp David accords were without foundation?)

Egypt paid a price in the form of regional ostracism. It was suspended from the Arab League for ten years, with the Arab League headquarters moved from Cairo to Tunis. Three years later, Sadat paid the ultimate price at the hands of Islamist extremists within the Egyptian military who thought he had sold out the Arab cause.

A big difference between then and now, of course, is that for the most recent ten years, the Arab League has been on record as accepting a comprehensive peace with Israel, provided that the old problem of Palestinian rights and Israeli occupation gets resolved.

This constitutes a sort of vindication of Sadat's hope that his boldness would eventually lead the other Arabs to come along, and in this sense the ostracism

and associated costs to Egypt are now in the past.

But for Egyptians, the willingness of the other Arabs to make peace is all the more reason there is no excuse for not fulfilling the bargain that was reached at Camp David. Egyptians believe that they have lived up to their side of the bargain but that Israel has not lived up to a very important part of its side.

If you want to understand why Egyptians, in or out of the Muslim Brotherhood, have negative things to say about Israel, you need look no farther than this history.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
