



Mubarak's game

By Efraim Inbar

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At the end of the Sharm al-Sheikh summit, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert went out of his way to show deference to Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. He probably overdid it. Nevertheless, Egypt, the largest and most important Arab state, is a regional power that deserves Israel's attention and courtesy. Moreover, the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt constituted a turning point in the protracted Arab-Israel conflict. Without Egypt, it would be difficult to form an Arab military coalition strong enough to challenge Israel's conventional superiority. Preserving the "cold peace" with Egypt is an Israeli strategic interest.

Yet Egypt does not do Israel any favors. Its foreign policy is motivated by self-interest. President Anwar Sadat made peace with Israel because he realized that the decision--a wise one--to realign his country with the United States and subsequently become the recipient of generous American aid required a change in policy toward the Jewish state. Egypt has since benefited from billions of US dollars, as well as from the Israeli lobby occasionally hushing the growing criticism of Egyptian authoritarianism.

One of the reasons for the Mubarak-Olmert summit was probably the Egyptian dictator's desire to score points in Washington, where there is mounting criticism of Egyptian violations of human rights, by being nice to Israel. But it is certainly more than that. Egypt currently shares many of Israel's regional preferences. Both countries do not want to see an early withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, which would leave that country in chaos and embolden the hands of the radicals. Similarly, both welcomed a curtailed Syrian role in Lebanon as a result of international pressure. Jerusalem and Cairo also hope that Washington will eventually prevent Tehran from becoming a nuclear power, be it by diplomatic or other means. Egypt is scared of the increasing power of the Shi'ites in the Middle East and sees Israel as a potential ally to counter this trend.

Even on the Palestinian issue there is a partial convergence of interests. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Hamas' electoral victory created the conditions for further radicalization of Palestinian politics and the transformation of Gaza into a Hamastan. This is a dangerous development for both Israel and Egypt. Cairo, in particular, is threatened by the potential repercussions of an Islamic regime in Gaza, which would encourage Islamic opposition at home and provide a base for terrorism. Recent terrorist attacks in Sinai clearly indicate that Egypt's control over the peninsula is fragile. While Cairo prefers not to be drawn into Gaza, its presence there has acquired a higher profile. It was reported that Egypt is even ready to send troops to restore some calm to the conflict-torn strip.

Israel has come to see such an Egyptian involvement as suiting Israeli interests by gradually replacing the unworkable two-state solution with a different arrangement, temporary as it may be. Egypt, however, is loath to reoccupy Gaza and relieve Israel of the Gazan thorn in its side. It sees Israel as too strong a regional rival and does not mind allowing the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as long as the flames do not get out of hand. Unfortunately for Cairo, keeping



the flames under control requires some involvement in Gaza.

Indeed, the Egyptians face conflicting considerations on the Israeli-Palestinian front. The two-state paradigm is a good tool for continuing the conflict, denying Israel legitimacy and peace. Cairo has often encouraged Palestinian intransigence and turned a blind eye to the smuggling of arms from Egyptian territory to terrorists in Palestine. Yet it fears regional escalation. Similarly, Cairo wants a weak Palestinian Authority that can be manipulated, but not one so weak as to be taken over by the Islamists. Yet Egypt, in its attempt to play the historic role of patron, was partly responsible for elevating the status of Hamas in Palestinian politics, by extending an invitation to the organization to attend the hudna talks in Cairo and putting it on the same footing with the PA government.

Olmert is unlikely to get much support from Mubarak for the intended unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank. The Egyptians are again faced with a dilemma. They do not welcome a development that may alleviate Israel's situation in the international arena. Moreover, the Israeli move would benefit Hamas. On the other hand, they cannot oppose an American-coordinated unilateral withdrawal from "Arab lands" and the removal of Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria. Finally, Egypt understands that the Israeli step will not bring an end to the simmering conflict that serves Egypt's interest in weakening Israel.

Olmert hopefully understands the Egyptian calculations and will calibrate his expectations accordingly for a positive Egyptian role as matters evolve. He should also insist that the next summit meeting take place in Israel, refusing to go along with Mubarak's aversion to visiting the Jewish state. - *Published 5/6/2006 © bitterlemons.org*

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