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POST-MUBARAK EGYPTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD ISRAEL

By Michael Sharnoff

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As the most populous and influential Arab state, Egypt had always taken the initiative in wars, many against Israel in 1948, 1967 and 1973. A historic diplomatic breakthrough occurred in 1979, however, when Egypt agreed to terminate its state of belligerency with Israel and recognize its right to exist. For its diplomatic efforts, Egypt reestablished control over the Sinai Peninsula. A new era of bilateral stability, security, and economic cooperation developed. In the past three decades, Egypt has received approximately two billion dollars in aid annually from the United States to preserve the peace.<sup>1</sup> Since 1981, President Hosni Mubarak's regime cooperated with Israel to maintain a quiet border along the Sinai, shared intelligence to curb the flow of illegal drug trafficking and migrants, and exported gas to energy dependent Israel.

In spite of these developments, bilateral relations have never been popular with the majority of Egyptians, who viewed the unilateral agreement as a betrayal of Arab unity and left the Palestinian issue unresolved.<sup>2</sup> Mubarak's regime frequently allowed the media to express anti-Israel sentiment to deflect attention away from cooperating with Israel. Although plagued by systemic government corruption, a lack of democracy, and human rights abuses, Mubarak never tolerated demands to terminate or amend the peace treaty with Israel and he prevented militants from targeting oil facilities in Sinai and from attacking the Israeli Embassy.

After weeks of massive popular protests against his rule, Mubarak resigned in February 2011. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), led by Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi and Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, replaced Mubarak as a transitional regime. Shortly after assuming power, the SCAF declared they would honor previous commitments, including the peace treaty with Israel.<sup>3</sup> However, with the rise of anti-Israel sentiments in the post-Mubarak era, the SCAF appears caught in a complex web of satisfying popular aspirations, which oppose or have reservations about the peace treaty with Israel, while not abandoning the strategic dividends the treaty has produced.

Anti-Israel attitudes reached a boiling point in July 2011 after Israel killed five Egyptian border guards while in pursuit of militants, who had entered southern Israel, killed eight Israelis, then smuggled themselves back into Gaza.<sup>4</sup> On August 20, *The Jerusalem Post* reported on Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak's, lament that "Israel regrets the deaths of the Egyptian officers that occurred during the attacks along the Egyptian-Israeli border."<sup>5</sup> However, two days later, Barak clarified on

<sup>1</sup> "Egypt," *USAID*, August 2011, [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/middle\\_east/countries/egypt/](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/middle_east/countries/egypt/)

<sup>2</sup> "al-tawattur al-misri al-isra'ili," (Egyptian-Israeli Tension), *al-Jazeera*, August 20, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/DDD4A9F2-8006-4C5D-AA71-113EC47CAC58.htm> (Arabic)

<sup>3</sup> "Army Council: Egypt is Committed to all Treaties," *Egypt State Information Service*, February 13, 2011, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Story.aspx?sid=53702>

<sup>4</sup> "Egypt Military Begins Operation to Close Gaza Smuggling Tunnels," *Haaretz*, September 4, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/egypt-military-begins-operation-to-close-gaza-smuggling-tunnels-1.382453>

<sup>5</sup> Yaakov Katz, "Barak Apologizes to Egypt over Security Officers' Deaths," *The Jerusalem Post*, August 20, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=234621>

Israeli television that this did not constitute an official apology: “I didn’t apologize to Egypt, I expressed regret.”<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of an official Israeli apology, the SCAF attempted to alleviate Egyptian anger by announcing on August 22 that its military junta remained in firm control of the security in Sinai and pledged it would do more to protect Egypt’s sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> However, this symbolic response did not satisfy the demands of the Egyptian people. On September 9, an angry mob of protestors chanting, *Allahu Akbar* (God is the Greatest), stormed the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. Israeli diplomats were evacuated and a definitive date has not been announced for their return.<sup>8</sup>

Secular and liberal Egyptians have tended to denounce the embassy attack as a violation of legal principles, while Islamist Egyptians have tended to justify and praise it. On September 10, the Egyptian journalist Issandr el-Amrani wrote on his popular blog, *The Arabist*, that while he continues to hold anti-Israel proclivities, he denounced the attack as “illegal,” which constituted a “poor sense of strategy and priority.”<sup>9</sup> The Egyptian political scientist, Amr Hamzawy, also condemned the attack as “unacceptable,” and asserted that violence against foreign diplomats—even of an enemy state—was counterproductive.<sup>10</sup> While most Egyptian political parties criticized the SCAF for failing to secure the border with Israel, most refrained from directly criticizing the attack against the Israeli Embassy. However, the Egypt Freedom Party (*misr al-hurriyya*), a social-democratic party formed in May, condemned the attack “for violating the principles of peaceful protests” and “demanded a full investigation” of the incident in compliance with the rule of law.<sup>11</sup>

Muhammad Salah Attia justified the attack in the *Egyptian Gazette* as a natural reaction towards Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s “hostile policies towards the Palestinians in particular and the Arabs in general” and after he “arrogantly refused” to apologize for the killing of five Egyptian soldiers in Sinai.<sup>12</sup> *Al-Dustour*, an opposition Egyptian newspaper, reported on September 14 that the Egyptians responsible for the attack consisted of socialists and Islamists, who issued a statement boasting of their actions as a response to “the Zionist enemy killing six of our soldiers and refusing to apologize.” The participants also urged Egypt to cut ties with “the Zionist gang,” “terminate the Camp David peace treaty,” and to halt the exportation of gas “to the Zionist entity.”<sup>13</sup> In a more extreme case of anti-Semitism, Helmi Muhammad Gaoud editorialized on the Muslim Brotherhood’s website, *ikhwanonline.com*, that Defense Minister Barak is a “Jewish Nazi” and that Israel, which Gaoud does not depict as a sovereign nation but rather as “the Nazi Jewish entity,” praised the Israelis who killed the Egyptian soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

In a radical shift from Mubarak’s policies, Prime Minister Sharaf issued a diplomatic threat on September 15, challenging Egypt’s relationship with Israel and the United States. Sharaf announced on Turkish television that the peace treaty with the Jewish state “is not sacred” and could be amended.<sup>15</sup> However, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry later reneged on Sharaf’s remarks, declaring that Cairo was committed to preserving the treaty “as long as the other party [Israel] was committed to its commitments in letter and spirit.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jordan Gerstler-Holton, “Israeli Defense Minister Denies Apologizing for Egyptian Deaths,” *al-Masry al-Youm*, August 23, 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/488978>

<sup>7</sup> “*al-majlis al-‘askari: sinai’ mu’ muna bil-kamil wa junudna saif ‘ala riqab min yuhadd aminuha*,” (The Military Council: Sinai is Entirely Secure and our Soldiers Sword is on the Necks of those who Undermine our Safety), *Masrawy*, August 23, 2011, [http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/august/23/sinai\\_safe.aspx](http://www.masrawy.com/News/Egypt/Politics/2011/august/23/sinai_safe.aspx) (Arabic)

<sup>8</sup> “*mughadrat baqiya a’da’ al-sifara al-isra’iliya bil-qahira ila tel-abib*,” (Leave the Remaining Members of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo to Tel Aviv), *al-Ahram*, September 15, 2011, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/Egypt/News/101265.aspx> (Arabic)

<sup>9</sup> Issandr el-Amrani, “On the Israeli Embassy Incident,” *The Arabist*, September 10, 2011, <http://www.arabist.net/blog/2011/9/10/on-the-israeli-embassy-incident.html>

<sup>10</sup> “*Hamzawy: ikhtiham al-sifara laisa miftah al-taghyir wa barlaman siy’ adalu ittifaqiya as-salam*,” (Hamzawy: Storming the Embassy is not the Key to Change and Parliament will Amend the Peace Agreement), *al-Dustour*, September 10, 2011, <http://www.dostor.org/politics/egypt/11/september/10/53887> (Arabic)

<sup>11</sup> Nora Fakhry, “*‘misr al-hurriyya’ yastankir al-hujum ‘ala ‘al-dakhiliya’ wa ‘al-sifara al-isra’iliya*,” (Egypt Freedom Party Condemns the Attack on the Homeland and the Israeli Embassy), *al-Youm as-Sabi’*, September 11, 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=490463&SecID=97&IssueID=0> (Arabic)

<sup>12</sup> Mohamed Salah Attia, “Opinion: Footnotes,” *The Egyptian Gazette*, September 13, 2011, <http://213.158.162.45/~egyptian/index.php?action=news&id=21027&title=Opinion:%20Footnotes>

<sup>13</sup> “*al-musharakun yutalaboun bil-tahqiq fi qatl al-mutazhahirina*,” (The Participants are Demanding an Official Inquiry in the Killing of Demonstrators), *al-Dustour*, September 14, 2011, <http://www.dostor.org/politics/egypt/11/september/14/54375> (Arabic)

<sup>14</sup> Helmi Muhammad Gaoud, “*ra’is ehud barak*,” *ikhwanonline.com*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?SecID=390&ArtID=91577> (Arabic)

<sup>15</sup> “*Essam Sharaf: ittifaqiya as-salam ma’a isra’il laisat muqaddisa*,” (Essam Sharaf: A Peace Agreement with Israel is not Sacred), *Bawwaba al-Ahram*, September 15, 2011, <http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/116191.aspx> (Arabic)

<sup>16</sup> “*al-kharjiyya: misr multazima bi-mu’ahada as-salam ‘thalima al-tazima al-tharif al-akhar bi-ta’ahhud nassan wa ruhan*,” (The Foreign Ministry: Egypt is Committed to the Peace Treaty ‘as Long as the Other Party is Committed to its Commitments in Letter and Spirit’), *Bawwaba al-Ahram*, September 16, 2011, <http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/116499.aspx> (Arabic)

