

Egypt- Israel: Aiming for Rapprochement

By Youssef Tobi

Summary

This Policy Brief attempts to analyze the rapprochement between Egypt and Israel in the context of geopolitical changes in the region. The analysis is divided into two parts with the aim of demonstrating the bases of rapprochement. The first part looks at the rapprochement around important discoveries of gas in the Mediterranean and the second part is about the military cooperation between the two countries in Sinai. More broadly, this Policy Brief contextualizes this relationship in a broader historical and geopolitical context: that of the evolution of geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East.

Introduction

The Egypt-Israel relationship follows a historical pattern of confrontation that transcripts the rivalry between the Arab countries and the Jewish state. Since the end of World War 2 to the present day, this relation has been characterized by what Israeli diplomats had described in the early 80's as the "cold peace". However, the changing geopolitical map in the region and the rise of terrorism changed the nature of the interactions between the two countries. Despite the existing interdependency between Israel and Egypt, the two parties seem to move further towards an assumed cooperation, shaping consequently a new geopolitical landscape in the Middle East.

The decision of President Donald Trump to move the American embassy to Jerusalem provoked massive

reactions in the Arab world. The official reaction of Egypt has been, when we know how much Egypt is embedded in the israelo-palestinian conflict, opposing yet surprisingly measured. The common enemies draw Egypt and Israel closer. Indeed, Iran is the corner stone of the geostrategic rapprochement not only between Egypt and Israel, but also for almost all Sunni dominated States. Moreover, the terrorist threat that looms on their common borders encourages the two countries to cooperate on the military front. Even if there is still a "psychological barrier"¹ on the social and cultural level, Egypt and Israel have sealed, in the past years, a solid geopolitical understanding.

¹. Term used by Mohammad Anouar el Sadat (nephew of the former president Anouar El Sadat) to the French newspaper La Croix <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1151589/relation-egypte-israel-sissi-brise-un-tabou.html>

On the bilateral level, Egypt and Israel share high strategic interests. The two countries are dependent on fossil energies and aim, in light of new discoveries in the Mediterranean Sea, to attain energetic independence and become, in the near future, exporting powers. The cooperation on the energetic front constitutes the sticking point of what seems to be a new strong alliance. On the counter-terrorism dimension, Israel and Egypt work together intensively to eradicate the threat in the Sinai.

The point of this Policy Brief is to first address the historical aspect of the relationship to understand not only the sources of distrust between the two countries, but also the pillars of a strategic interdependency. Secondly, we will analyze the recent rapprochement of the two countries in light of the energetic cooperation and the counter-terrorism efforts that the two countries undergo.

The weight of History

Since the creation of the Israeli State, Egypt has been involved in the Arab war against Israel and sent expeditionary forces. Cairo finally signed the Rhodé Armistice in 1949 and took control of the Gaza Strip. The defeat of the Arab armies definitely convinced Jamel Abdel Nasser of the power of the Israeli state and, thus, the Egyptian government began efforts to reconcile with the new Jewish state. However, Israel gave little credit to these efforts, so when Egypt tried to get closer to Israel in 1953 to obtain the retreat of English troop for the Suez Canal, Israel did not respond. Moreover, the Gaza Strip is already a zone of confrontation and Cairo supports the Palestinian insurgents against the Israeli army that took note of that support and attacked the Egyptian army headquarters in Gaza in 1955. These tensions culminated with the 1956 conflict that was one of the first signs of a new geopolitical frame in the Middle East resulting in the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the retreat of the former colonial power from the region in the midst of a new international order. The following years will contradict President Nasser's assumptions that he took advantage of Israel after the precedent established in 1956. When Egypt placed troops in the Sinai and closed the Gulf of aquaba to Israeli ships, Israel incapacitated the Egyptian army in six days. Israel then took control of some Egyptian territories including the Gaza Strip and inversed the power balance with the big Arab neighbor. In a position of weakness, the collective imagination of

Egyptian Leaders will stay profoundly affected by the defeat, it is in an atmosphere of suspicion that Egypt, and Israel will engage in a long road towards peace.

The arrival of Anouar el-Sadate to power in 1970 confirmed the will of Egypt to allay the tensions with the Jewish State. Indeed, Anouar el-Sadate seemed in favor of peace with Israel, the Kippur war in 1973 having improved the image of the Egyptian army that made it inside the Sinai, the context was suitable for a peace initiative. The speech of Anouar El Sadate at the Knesset in 1977 constitutes a risky step forward for the Egyptian president. In spite of the fact that this speech isolated Egypt for its Arab allies, the Egyptian population welcomed the initiative favorably. In addition, even if the reaction for the Israeli government was measured, this speech was a step further towards the Camp David accords. These accords arrived in a tense geopolitical context : Egypt needed peace with Israel to resolve its economic crisis but it had to consider its close neighboring to not lose its regional influence. The preservation of Palestinian interest then becomes a *sine qua non* condition for Egypt that needed to stick to the ideological straightjacket of Arab solidarity. Egypt then exemplifies its commitment to this solidarity by explaining through its secretary of State Boutros Ghali that the "Arab world is a whole" and that Egypt could not untie its destiny to that of the other Arab countries. The Camp David accord was seen as a betrayal for the majority of the Arab countries except Sudan and Oman that kept their diplomatic relation with Egypt, this decline of Egypt influence in the Arab world even leads to its exclusion for the Arab League. On the other hand, the appeased relation with Israel does not rhyme with better economic performances in Egypt and the development of the Israel-Palestine conflict will further intensify the complexity of the relation between Egypt and Israel.

Following the fall of Hosni Mubarak, The Jewish State was particularly worried by the rise of the Muslim brothers in power and the possible start of a new era of confrontation. This period of uncertainty revived historical tensions between the two countries and shed a light on the animosity of the Egyptian population toward the Israeli State. For instance, on September 9, 2011, the Israeli embassy in Cairo was invaded and trashed by an Egyptian crowd. On the contrary, the arrival to power of Abdefttah el Sissi reassured Israeli leaders and started a reconciliation and stronger cooperation. President Al Sissi has the ambition to replace Egypt as regional power and aims to place security as a priority. The help of Israel in these two endeavors is primordial for the former

marshal who multiplied the gestures of good will towards Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli regime. With the new geopolitical mainframe, the rapprochement does not seem to irritate the Arab nations who concentrate their distrust towards Iran.

In the common history between Israel and Egypt, the question of energy supply was always important. Egypt imported gas to Israel for a long time via its pipeline before the recent offshore discoveries in Israel inverted this tendency. This interdependency on the energetic level is determined by the context of geopolitical uncertainty in the region and the strategic importance of that sector for Israel, cornered in its close environment as well as Egypt that is a demographic giant. The new ambitions of the two countries in light of recent discoveries is then explained by the necessity for the two countries to sustain a high level of energetic consumption to ensure their development and security.

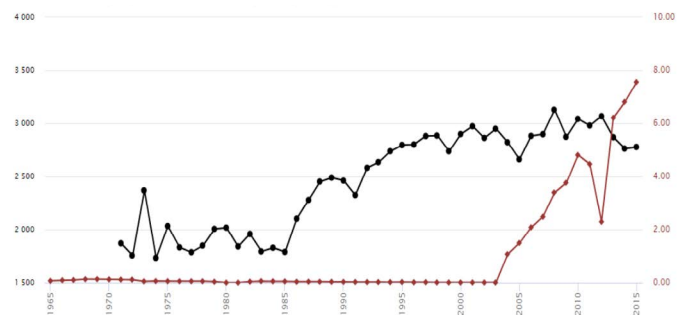
The cooperation on energy: Pillar of the rapprochement

The economic model of development of Israel is highly consuming in terms of energy. In 2015, Israel was consuming 2777.88 kg of oil per inhabitant and imported all of its oil, traditionally from Russia and recently from Iraqi Kurdistan. In contrast, Egypt's consumption, with almost ten times the population of Israel, in 2014, was 814.99 kg of oil per inhabitant. Concerning gas, we noticed a clear augmentation of the consumption in Israel after the discovery of the Tamar² natural gas field. Moreover, the discovery of the Leviathan³, whose exploitation starts in 2019, will allow Israel to maintain a strong consumption of gas, especially from Tamar resources.

2. The Tamar gas field is a natural gas field in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Israel. The field is located in Israel's exclusive economic zone, roughly 80 kilometres (50 mi) west of Haifa in waters 1,700 metres (5,600 ft) deep. The Tamar field is considered to have proven reserves of 200 billion cubic metres (7.1 trillion cubic feet)

3. Leviathan gas field is a large natural gas field located in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Israel, 47 kilometres (29 mi) south-west of the Tamar gas field. The gas field is located roughly 130 kilometres (81 mi) west of Haifa in waters 1,500 metres (4,900 ft) deep in the Levantine basin, a rich hydrocarbon area in one of the world's larger offshore gas finds of the past decade.

- The consumption of oil (kg per inhabitant)
- The consumption of gas (by millions of tones equivalent to oil)



Perspective monde, date de consultations: 15/1/2019
Source: Banque mondiale et British Petroleum (via QUANDL)

Cut off from its regional environment and applied to a small territory, the economic progress of Israel is put under stress in view of the prevailing geopolitical uncertainty. The use of the retaliation of energy resources by the Arab countries following the Yom Kippur war has marked the Israeli political establishment, who became aware of the capacity of this diplomatic tool to be harmful. Israel's energy insularity is a marker of its foreign policy that has strongly conditioned its relations with Egypt. The discovery of gas fields off the coast of Israel has changed the situation for Israel, which, in addition to the exploitation of these deposits, has secured a sustainable supply of gas through binding agreements.

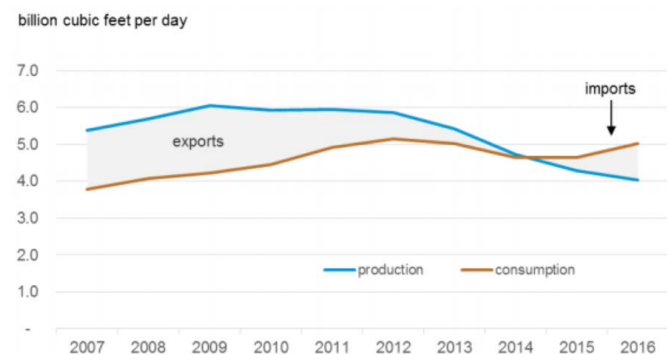
Indeed, Egypt and Israel signed a memorandum in June 2005 in which Cairo promised to deliver natural gas for 15 years, for a price of \$ 2.5 billion. An Israeli-Egyptian joint venture, EMG (Eastern Mediterranean Gas), is building the underwater gas pipeline from Egypt to Ashkelon Port. At the end of another agreement with a private company, EMG will thus have to supply every year for a period of 15 to 20 years for 100 million dollars of natural gas, which makes Egypt the second largest supplier of Israel in gas in 2011⁴. Nevertheless, this supply is not safe given its fragility in the face of geopolitical tensions in the region. Egypt does not hesitate to stop, in 2008, these supplies of gas, taking into account the hostility of the Egyptian public opinion to the commercial exchanges with the Jewish State. Israel needs Egypt, despite the discovery of the gas field Leviathan and Tamar, which provide a significant energy manna. Indeed, the Israeli defense system depends on the electricity produced from these gas platforms, so it is sufficient that one of these

4. HISTOIRE DES RELATIONS ENTRE L'EGYPTE ET ISRAËL, LA « PAIX FROIDE » (2/2) : LE LONG CHEMIN VERS LA PAIX SOUS SADATE ET MOUBARAK (1970-2011), Les clés du Moyen-Orient.

platforms is damaged by an attack so that the network of video surveillance and electric barriers is put out of operation. In this sense, securing different sources of sustainable gas supplies, particularly from Egypt, would enable Israel to ensure its security.

At the national level, Egypt is the largest consumer of hydrocarbons in Africa and in view of its ambition to become a regional power, this consumption will only increase. Natural gas alone accounts for almost half of Egypt's primary energy consumption. With the rise in domestic demand and a decline in production of the country's historic fields, Egypt became a net importer of gas in 2015. The government hopes to regain some independence thanks to the contribution of its new deposits (Zohr but also Atoll or in the western Nile Delta) and new discoveries of importance. The Energy Information Administration, which is dependent on the US Department of Energy, believes, however, that "imports of natural gas will still be needed to meet domestic demand, albeit in smaller volumes."

Dry Natural gas Production and consumption in Egypt



eia Source: BP 2017 Statistical Review of World Energy

In this sense, the recent agreement⁵ with Israel seems to be related to Egypt's very strong domestic demand for energy and the time to exploit the new Egyptian deposit. Indeed, while Egypt is with Zohr,⁶ in the process of becoming a gas hub in the region, this supply will only

5. Israel signed a record \$ 12 billion deal with Egypt in 2018 for the supply of gas extracted from two major off-shore deposits in the Mediterranean.

6. Zohr is a gas field of the Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Egypt. With 850 billion cubic meters of recoverable gas, it is the largest hydrocarbon deposit discovered in the world in 2015

"troubleshoot"⁷ Egypt as the country increases its production capacity and becomes an exporting power. This agreement is considered historic because it changes the energy situation in the region and marks an economic rapprochement between two historically rival powers.

Cooperation between Israel and Egypt has become de facto necessary. On the one hand, Israel must overcome its isolation in the region by diversifying its sources of energy supply and, on the other hand, Egypt must undertake economic reforms and overcome its strong internal demand, the time to mount in power in terms of national production. At present, it seems that the two countries are in great need of each other and although a rivalry is to be considered for the dominance of the energy landscape in the Mediterranean, the high uncertainty in the Middle East and the multitude of common threats reinforce the links between the two historically opposed countries.

The rare visit of Israeli Energy Minister, Yuval Steinlitz, to Cairo is a strong signal of this rapprochement. Invited by the Egyptian government, the Israeli official attended a conference on natural gas. Aware of the delicate nature of this collaboration at the political level, the Israeli Minister linked the promotion of peace in the Middle East in the region to this energy collaboration by stating: "You have here for the first time a real economic cooperation between States of the axis of peace."⁸

Counter-terrorism: The Sinai as a common interest

Sinai is an Egyptian peninsula of about 60,000 km² located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. Its land border runs along the Suez Canal to the West and the border between Egypt and Israel as well as the Gaza Strip to the Northeast. Oil, iron and manganese deposits are exploited in the North and in the South Center of the peninsula. It shelters 400 000 Egyptians and has, within it, two cities with strong tourist potential: Sharm el Sheikh and Taba.

7. Egypt impose itself as a major actor in gas in the oriental Mediterranean sea. In French https://www.lesechos.fr/28/02/2018/lesechosfr/0301356647531_l-egypte-s-impose-comme-l-acteur-majeur-du-gaz-en-mediterranee-orientale.htm

8. <https://fr.timesofisrael.com/le-ministre-israelien-de-lenergie-en-rare-visite-en-egypte/>



Sinai is one of the witnesses of the future in common between Egypt and Israel. From a geopolitical point of view, the return of the territory under Egyptian control has had the effect of separating the relationship between the two countries from the Palestinian question. Indeed, the return of territory to Egypt in 1982 was conditioned by a recognition of Israel. Historically, the territory is of protean use: it is at the same time the theater of geopolitical rivalries, a zone of confrontation between central power and local population and "a space project"⁹ having been the object of unprecedented investments on the part of the Egyptian state.

From a geostrategic point of view, the Sinai Peninsula has been consecrated, since the Camp David Accords, as a "buffer zone" between Egypt and Israel. Thus, the zone is subjected, in terms of militarization, to drastic rules concerning the military manpower, and jihadist groups established a refuge in this very sensitive zone. Israel views this instability in Egyptian territory as an external threat and has been conducting counterterrorism and defensive operations for years. The resurgence of jihadist elements in the region, coupled with the Egyptian army's difficulty to cope with this threat, has pushed the two states to seal a strong military cooperation in the Sinai Peninsula which, beyond its geostrategic importance, has a certain interest in the commercial relations between the two neighbors.

Ansar Bayt al Maqdis, a group under the banner of Daesh, represents a real threat on the peninsula. The population neglected by the central government, as well as the feeling of historical distrust of the Bedouins in the central power, grows the ranks of the organization with an estimated figure of 1,500 soldiers. Faced with such a situation, Egypt and Israel decided to cooperate discreetly to stem the terrorist threat in the region before the New York Times revealed that Israeli drones have been conducting attacks on the peninsula for nearly two years¹⁰.



Source: Afrique The International Informant Page 6

9. Sanmartin, Olivier. « La péninsule du Sinaï : « espace projet », territoire sous tensions », *Confluences Méditerranée*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2010, pp. 107-119.

10. Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, With Cairo's O.K. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/world/middleeast/israel-airstrikes-sinai-egypt.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>

The economic development of the peninsula and the fight against the terrorist threat fit perfectly into the political philosophy of Abdelfattah El Sissi which reflects this concomitance between economic growth and stability. For the Egyptian state, it is a question of facing not only the jihadist threat but also a historically marginalized indigenous population. The Bedouins of Sinai have not benefited from the tourist manna, especially in terms of access to the public service. While Cairo says it is investing heavily in the economic development of the region, people still struggle to reach decent living standards. In terms of counterterrorism, Operation Sinai 2018 has, since its launch on February 9, 2018, killed more than 450 jihadists. With the provision of several heavy artillery equipment to the army, this conflict, of an asymmetrical nature, has, according to several NGOs, had a serious impact on the civilian population¹¹.

For Israel, the terrorist threat on the peninsula has changed the paradigm. It is more about reducing the terrorist threat than about monitoring the territory. As a result, cooperation with Cairo is reaching new heights. Today, we are witnessing Israeli military operations inside the peninsula and a strengthening of exchanges between officials of both armies¹².

Conclusion

The opening of trade and energy routes, and the need for security cooperation, are issues that seem to surpass the weight of history. The relationship between the two countries has hardly ever been so good. As we have seen, the stabilization needs of Sinai have strengthened the links between Israeli and Egyptian security arrangements, even allowing for interoperability in Sinai. At the economic level, the two countries, knowing the importance of the border trade, multiply the gestures of good intentions and Israel even named a new ambassador in the person of Amira Oran, first woman named to this function. Energy cooperation, reinforced by gas discoveries, is a striking feature of this rapprochement, which now has a regional dimension with the two countries that could become energy hegemonies in the Mediterranean Sea.

In the context of this rapprochement, there is the Iranian common enemy and the vision of a new equilibrium in the Middle East that is looming. At the mercy of common uncertainties, several Arab countries seem to be complying with Israeli power. Faced with more immediate threats, the Sunni powers seem to be moving towards a new paradigm that is resolutely pragmatic, emphasizing realistic interests rather than ideological proximities. US Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Mike Pompeo's Cairo speech marks a break with Barack Obama's speech in the same capital on June 4, 2009. Where the former US president was addressing Muslims, Mike Pompeo addresses the states and calls on the Arab community to unite against the threat of an Iranian expansion in the region, by simply invoking the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of these states.

In affirming the support of the United States to Israel and Egypt, the Trump administration confirms the rapprochement between the two neighbors. Moreover, President Sissi and his American counterpart are constantly reaffirming the admiration they have for each other. This new regional alliance, which, as we have seen, is based on solid pillars, will be consolidated with the support of the United States, which sees this collaboration as a means of countering Iran and establishing a lasting influence in the region. Not to mention the fact that this will secure the activity of the American company Noble Energy that exploits the Israeli deposits. Nevertheless, one big question remains, that of the reaction of the population. The stigma in Israeli and Egyptian societies left by years of war are still overflowing. The Egyptian population regards the relationship with Israel as being taboo.

Ultimately, the normalization of relations between the two countries would be a great step in the path of peace between Arab countries and Israel. The extent of cooperation in highly strategic areas such as energy and the fight against terrorism are strong signs. However, it is of the utmost importance that the two states promote tolerance between peoples, by translating this rapprochement at the societal and cultural level.

11. <https://www.lapresse.ca/international/dossiers/le-groupe-etat-islamique/201811/01/01-5202543-egypte-18-djihadistes-presumes-tues-dans-le-sinai.php>

12. Sand, Ivan. « Les représentations géopolitiques de la péninsule du Sinaï en Israël », *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, vol. 117, no. 1, 2015, pp. 87-105.

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The views expressed in this publication are the views of the author.



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