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Mohamed Morsi, Egypt and Israel

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GLEN SEGELL, DEC 12 2013

Egyptian President Morsi's single year in power from 2012 to 2013 brought more changes in relations between Israel and Egypt than did the many years of rule of his predecessors, Presidents Mubarak, Sadat and Nasser. This article looks at three such changes: attitudes towards Israel; the Palestinian peace process; and the Sinai Peninsula. These offer a chronological and thematic interregnum showing the evolving trends and patterns that would have been devastating for Israel had Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood remained in power.

Prior to Morsi and since the 1977-1979 Camp David peace process, Israel worked well with Egypt when the military and the political elites were one and the same. During Morsi's presidency, there was a divergence between the Egyptian and military and political elites. Israel continued to maintain good relations with the military elites, despite a deterioration in the relationship with Egypt's political elites. The political elites of the Muslim Brotherhood tended to alliances with Hamas, Teheran and Islamic fundamentalists – who are all opposed to Israel's existence. Since Morsi's fall from rule and a re-convergence of military and political elites Israel's relations with Egypt have improved.

Attitudes towards Israel

There was an inherent danger in the dichotomy of statements and actions made by Morsi regarding Israel. They suggested that Morsi, who took office on 30 June 2012, was unsound, volatile, and lacked control of the Presidency. These included anti-Semitic comments; for example, in 2010, Morsi gained wide attention following a report in Forbes magazine, when he called Jews a collection of "Apes and Pigs." [1]

Although Israel did not respond to this rhetoric, the United States did, as Israel was portrayed by the Muslim Brotherhood as the imperialist tool of the USA. For the US, an anti-US regime in Egypt posed a threat to the freedom of passage through the Suez Canal. Following American diplomacy and threats to reduce financial assistance, Morsi timidly contended that his remarks were "taken out of context," [2] and his office made public exchange with a delegation headed by Senator John McCain. [3] Morsi stated, "I cannot be against the Jewish faith or Jews or Christianity and Christians," pointing out that the Quran requires Muslims "to tolerate all religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity)." [4] Morsi also indicated that he was committed to the freedom of religion and belief, his spokesman said, adding: "His Excellency [Morsi] pointed out the need to distinguish between the Jewish religion, and those who belong to it, and violent actions against defenceless Palestinians." [5]

In expressing this, Morsi moved from his 2010 anti-Semitic stance to an anti-Israel occupation standpoint. For example, in videos posted by MEMRI, Morsi declared,

"[t]he Zionists have no right to the land of Palestine. There is no place for them on the land of Palestine. What they took before 1947/48 constitutes plunder, and what they are doing now is a continuation of this plundering. By no means do we recognize their Green Line. The land of Palestine belongs to the Palestinians, not to the Zionists." [6]

His denial of anti-Semitism and support of anti-Zionist, anti-Israel and pro-Palestine sentiments was strengthened during a visit to Germany in January 2013, when Morsi again stated that his remarks were taken out of context, insisting that they were intended as a criticism of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Addressing reporters, Morsi stated that "[I am] not against the Jewish faith or the Jewish people. My comments were about conduct that

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sheds blood and kills innocent people. Things neither I nor anyone condones.”[7]

Such rhetoric, rebuttals, and denials were indicative of other mixed message about Egypt’s foreign policy to Israel. While Morsi made reference to the violent actions against defenceless Palestinians, he acknowledged that he would honour all of Egypt’s international treaties, implicitly referring to Egypt’s treaty with Israel. However, he also called for a restoration of relations with Teheran as part of a “rebalancing” exercise of Egypt’s foreign policy.[8]

It was not surprising that the Israeli media projected a worst-case scenario, that of Morsi cancelling the peace treaty. Such a scenario gained momentum as there was compelling evidence of irrationality and instability typified by the ransacking of the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September 2011 by Egyptian demonstrators.[9] Public opinion and polls in Israel responded to the scenarios and actions showing the extent of common concern in Israel of the election of Morsi and his attitude toward Israel.[10]

In response, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu initiated a concerted diplomatic process with Egypt seeking common ground stating, “We expect to work together with the new administration on the basis of our peace treaty.”[11] The fruits of success of this diplomacy was seen when Morsi appointed a new ambassador to Israel, Atef Salem. However, in this act, there was also cause for concern. The letter of accreditation from the Egyptian president to his Israeli counterpart, Shimon Peres, instilled apprehension because of its ambiguity. The letter commenced “dear and great friend” and concluded “loyal friend Mohamed Morsi”. The text contained Morsi’s desire to develop loving relationships to bind the two countries.[12] Many senior Egyptian officials and the Moslim Brotherhood quickly asserted that the letter was fabricated and even Morsi initially refuted sending the letter.[13] However later, Morsi’s spokesman Yasser Ali told Egyptian state-run newspaper Ahram that the letter was “100 percent correct.”[14]

The twist of attitudes and the diplomatic relations reached their lowest point when the Egyptian Ambassador was recalled at the onset of Operation Pillar of Defence in November 2012.[15] Despite the withdrawal of the Ambassador, Morsi, together with the USA, mediated a cease-fire. The dichotomy was explained by Morsi’s motives; to assist Hamas and not to assist Israel.[16] Now that Morsi is no longer President relations between Israel and Egypt have returned to pre-Morsi days where the Egyptian civil and military elites were one and the same. For example there is common interest in at eradicating Islamic extremists affiliated with the Moslim Brotherhood in the Sinai and in promoting the Palestinian peace process.

The Palestinian peace process

The proximity of Egypt and Israel, in demography and geography, lends towards Egyptian partaking in the affairs of Palestinians. Morsi’s public views about the Palestinians can be segmented into two groups. First, Morsi frequently attacked Israel about the affairs of Palestinians to gain domestic and regional support. Had Egypt’s internal political, economic and social problems persisted Morsi could also have used Israel as an external scapegoat to unify Egypt.

One example of the rhetoric came in an interview with the Qatari television news channel Al-Jazeera. Morsi was adamant that Israel was responsible for a systematic information campaign aimed at demeaning Egypt and justifying what he considered decades-long Israeli expansion. He said “true peace cannot not exist as long as Palestinians are denied their rights.”[17] He cited Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel, saying “The peace treaty clearly states, a just and comprehensive peace for the nations of the region. Where is just and comprehensive peace for the Palestinian people?” [18]

Another example of this rhetoric came when he was interviewed by Iran’s Channel Press TV. Morsi said “These futile [Israeli-Palestinian] negotiations are a waste of time and opportunities”[19] and “The Zionists buy time and gain more opportunities, as the Palestinians, the Arabs, and the Muslims lose time and opportunities, and they get nothing out of it.”[20] He also stated, “This [Palestinian] Authority was created by the Zionist and American enemies for the sole purpose of opposing the will of the Palestinian people and its interests.”[21]

Second, and of greater concern than the rhetoric discussed above, was Morsi’s intentions not to follow the preferences of his predecessor President Mubarak for Palestinian statehood. The Palestinians are not ruled by a

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singular entity. Fatah dominate the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas, the sole interlocutor of Tel Aviv in the West Bank while Hamas rule Gaza. In his support of Hamas, the archenemy of Israel, Morsi marginalised the Palestinian Authority.[22] It was of no surprise that, when Morsi was ousted, Abbas applauded the Egyptian people for their revolution, congratulated Adly Mansour on taking over as Egypt's interim president, and praised General el-Sissi and the Egyptian army for preserving security in Egypt.[23]

An important example of Morsi's expression of views about the Palestinians and his support for Hamas came on 14 November 2012, when Israel launched 'Operation Pillar of Defense' in the Gaza Strip. Morsi's government condemned the operation and called for a halt to Israeli airstrikes, but didn't condemn the Hamas rocket fire.[24] Furthermore, Morsi sent Prime Minister Hesham Qandil to Gaza to express solidarity with Gaza and Hamas.[25] This was a stark contrast to Hosni Mubarak's treatment of Hamas as an enemy in a similar military operation undertaken by Israel in 2008/09.[26]

In taking sides with Hamas, Morsi found himself in an unenviable situation. On the one hand Morsi had ideological support for Hamas and wished to attract domestic and regional support by showing Hamas sympathy and solidarity. On the other, in doing so, he was endangering relations with Israel and potentially antagonising the USA. Morsi found an unusual way to extricate himself from this predicament: he intervened as a mediator, along with the United States allowing an end to the offensive against Gaza in November 2012.[27] Although appeasing the wrath of Tel Aviv and Washington, it was nevertheless obvious that the main motivation for his intervention was his desire to rescue Hamas from the bombing and destruction committed by the Israeli army.

Differentiation must be made between Morsi's politically-inspired act of mediation and the ongoing security cooperation between Israel and Egypt. Throughout the Sadat and Mubarak period and in the general schematic, it was not unusual for Egypt to assist in maintaining Israel's security. However, Mubarak was a General and Morsi wasn't. So, while Morsi as the elected President displayed dichotomous antagonism on the political level to Israel, the Egyptian Army continued to work with Israel as if Morsi wasn't president.[28]

The mainstay of Israel's relations with Egypt has been in security affairs and with the Egyptian Army. Under Morsi's rule Israel worked not with Morsi but with General [Abdel-Fattah] el-Sissi the military chief who eventually oversaw the President's ouster. [29] With the overthrow of Morsi, the Egyptian military authorities warned Hamas not to seek to intervene in the domestic Egyptian crisis and bolstered their military presence on the Gaza border, even arresting several Hamas members in Egypt.[30] The view expressed by Ayman Salama, a retired Egyptian brigadier general connected with Cairo's military academy, was that the military deposed Morsi because he was too friendly to Hamas and devalued Israel relationship.[31]

The Sinai Peninsula

Since the peace treaty with Sadat in 1979 and subsequently with Mubarak, the Egyptian army had developed a good working relationship with its Israeli counterpart on common security issues including handling the infiltration and presence of jihadist elements in Sinai.[32] For Israel, the worst possible result of the political upheaval in Cairo and Morsi's relations with Hamas in Gaza was the deterioration of its security along its southern border and in the Sinai Peninsula.

Sinai began to descend into total lawlessness as the police state apparatus melted away around the time of the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt in February 2011.[33] With the election of Morsi in June 2012, there was a further deterioration of security in the Sinai Peninsula with the proliferation of jihadist groups in connection with Hamas and other Palestinian and Salafist groups.[34] This was to be expected, as during the Morsi rule, these groups deliberately tried to embarrass the Egyptian army, to expose the cooperation between Egypt and Israel, and to compel Israel to respond across the border.[35]

Hence in a bizarre turn of events, the security in the Sinai was handled by the Egyptian army, against Morsi affiliates, at a time when Morsi was President. Ayman Salama, explained that theoretically and legally Morsi was the president and the supreme commander, but as the first civilian commander, he was clearly unable and did not understand how

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run the military. [36] Salama claims that Morsi endangered and jeopardized national security. After Morsi was deposed, the military prepared many charges against Morsi, including those pertaining to the national security in Sinai, with Gaza providing evidence of where Hamas-associated jihadis and extremists had entered the Sinai and inflicted losses on the Egyptian army.[37]

Since the military's removal of Morsi on 3 July 2013, the Egyptian army has been actively engaged in a protracted battle in the Sinai with jihadists and Hamas militants loyal to Morsi. Their operations include the opening and patrolling of roads for the MFO force monitoring the Israel-Egypt peace treaty.[38] Israel has allowed Egypt to move troops into the Sinai, a move prohibited by their peace treaty, as an added security measure.[39] Former Israeli chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi praised these actions, as the Egyptian Army also launched a crackdown on underground supply tunnels between the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip.[40] Hamas will almost inevitably suffer a negative effect from the Egyptian army's anti-terrorism campaign underway in Sinai.[41] In sum, Morsi's support for Hamas in Gaza and radicals in Sinai inflicted losses on his own Army causing them to turn against him while also endangering peace with Israel. Now that Morsi is no longer President, the Egyptian Army and Israel are working together to stabilise the Sinai.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the year of Morsi's rule over Egypt saw significant changes in three areas of Israel-Egypt relations: attitudes towards Israel, the Palestinian peace process, and the Sinai Peninsula. Each is important in its own right, yet combined, they suggest the sprouting trends and patterns that would have been devastating for Israel had Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood remained in power. Since his downfall attitudes and affairs pertaining to Hamas, Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula have undergone significant positive shifts more akin to relations with his predecessor.

This can largely be explained by considering civil-military relations, as Israel has worked well with the Egyptian military and the political elites when the military and the political elites have been the same. Morsi's one year of rule brought with it a divergence between the Egyptian military and political elites. During that year, Israel continued to work with the Egyptian military, but the political elites under Morsi were tending towards deteriorating relations with Israel. The next stage is in motion in Egypt with watchful eyes in Israel. Since Morsi has fallen from rule, there has been a renewal of the convergence of military and political elites in Egypt. They are attending to the situation in Gaza and the Sinai and are supporting Israel's preferred partner for Palestinian peace, the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. Time will tell the future of Israel-Egypt relations, but one thing is for certain: Morsi's year of ruling Egypt caused a number of shifts in the relationship with Israel, and the consequences of these shifts could have proved significantly greater had Morsi's time in leadership been extended.

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