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Egypt-Israel Relations Versus UAE-Israel Relations

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During the first quarter of 2021, Israel was preoccupied with developments of its relations with Egypt on various political, economic and security levels, as compared to its relations with Arab countries, especially the UAE, in light of the recent normalization moves towards Israel.

Molla's visit to Israel

The recent visit of Egyptian Minister of Petroleum & Mineral Resources Tarek El-Molla to Israel carried many political and economic connotations, especially that the two countries agreed during the visit to link the Israeli natural gas field "Leviathan "with the Egyptian liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants via an underwater pipeline, where LNG can be exported to European markets.

Commenting on El-Molla's visit to Tel Aviv, some Israeli circles confirmed that the visit had many political connotations that are no less important than the Egyptian minister's talks on energy and gas affairs as the visit's overt agenda, especially that Tarek El-Molla is known for being very close to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the head of the Egyptian regime.

Following are key political connotations of El-Molla's recent visit to Israel:

1- El-Molla's visit to Israel is the first public and open visit of an Egyptian minister to Israel since Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry visited it in July 2016. However, some Israeli sources indicated that the fact that the meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Egyptian minister in occupied Jerusalem implies a kind of Egyptian recognition of the Israeli announcement of Jerusalem as the capital of the occupation state.

2- The visit of the Egyptian Minister of Petroleum & Mineral Resources was a highly busy one, as Tarek El-Molla was on head of a delegation of eight Egyptian officials in the field of gas and energy. He met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, and the Israeli ambassador to Cairo, Amira Oron.

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3- The visit's agenda included a field tour to the gas platform, where El-Molla discussed with his Israeli counterpart promoting a regional gas forum in which Greece and Cyprus also participated. It is worth noting that El-Molla's visit came after two similar visits by the Greek and Cypriot leaders to Israel, sending a message to the United States that the regional allies are united together.

4- While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was warmly welcoming the Egyptian minister, he sent his greetings to his "friend" Sisi, stating that it was an important day, "marking our continued cooperation on energy and so many other things. There is a new era of peace and prosperity for the region with the Abraham Accords. This began of course with the historic peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, but now it is becoming something that can better the lives of all the people in economic terms, and we think that this is a great opportunity for regional cooperation — Egypt, Israel and the other countries. We are an energy hub. Together we can supply not only our own needs but the needs of many other countries."

5- Some Israeli circles believe that the visit of El-Molla is linked to the Egyptian regime's severe concern about its relationship with the new US administration under President Joe Biden, and the likely Israel role of in that. In this regard, Egypt wants to re-engage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to send a positive signal to the White House, to the effect that Egypt and Israel are partners. In addition to discussions of energy issues, El-Molla's meetings with Israeli officials were intended to send a message to Turkey, whose relations with Egypt were strained, before they started to improve recently.

9- Israeli diplomatic circles stated that El-Molla's visit emphasized Egypt's encouragement of moves for normalization with Israel, provided that Israel help it repair its relations with the new US administration.

10- During El-Molla's visit to Israel, the Egyptian minister went to Ramallah to meet with Palestinian officials, marketing the Sisi regime as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians for pushing the two-state solution forward.

Israel's relations 'cold' with Egypt, 'warm' with UAE

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The uproar caused by the dissemination of a picture that brought together Egyptian actor Mohamed Ramadan with some Israeli singers and actors indicates a decline in normalization between Egyptians and Israelis despite the passage of 40 years since signing the Camp David Accords. Whereas the Egyptian actor was punished by the Theatrical Professions Syndicate because of his picture with Israeli singers, normalization with Israel took at a rapid pace with some Gulf countries, despite the passage of only a few weeks after signing normalization agreements with Israel, which means that the results that Israel has achieved with the Gulf countries within a few months have not been achieved with Egypt for 40 years.

Although former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak received senior Israeli officials in Cairo, yet he did nothing to bring peace to the level of popular grassroots.

Although Egyptians have repeatedly declared that one of the main obstacles to achieving warm relations with Israel is the Palestinian cause, which Israel promised to solve within the framework of the peace agreement with Egypt, the wars that Egypt fought against Israel have left deep traces in the memory of the Egyptian people. Therefore, comparing Egyptian relations with Israel to Abu Dhabi's normalization with Tel Aviv reveals many differences between Israeli peace with Egypt and the UAE, given that Israel never witnessed wars with any of the Gulf states.

While association of some Gulf rulers with the Palestinian cause seems more flexible, Egyptians find it difficult to change their attitudes towards Israel, considering it a friendly country after it had been an enemy for decades, as Israel fought at least one war in every decade against Egypt, during the period between 1948 and the signing of Camp David Accords in 1979.

Egypt is experiencing a difficult economic situation, but the biggest problem is that its political situation is more complicated, in light of the deterioration of the popularity of the Sisi regime. However, media professionals associated with the Sisi regime are still keen to clarify the limits of the current relationship between Egypt and Israel; and while they confirm that there is peace between the two sides, which is important and strategic, yet such peace is not likely to lead to exchange of warm embraces between the two parties. In addition, peace between Israel and Egypt at the governmental level is mainly focused on security cooperation only.

UAE warm peace with Israel

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In contrast to the uproar caused by the dissemination of a picture of the Egyptian actor Mohamed Ramadan with the Israeli singer Omir Adam, Adam's visit to Dubai carried "hopes" for further enhancement of relations with the United Arab Emirates, and the possibility that more visits from Israeli singers would follow, with talk about the joint works filmed in Israel and the UAE. In addition, a picture of the Israeli singer with prominent Emirati personalities did not cause the same hype as it happened in Egypt.

As soon as establishment of relations between the UAE and Israel was announced in August, Dubai opened its doors to Omir Adam and other Israeli artists, as Adam arrived in Dubai in early November, and posted a picture of himself on Instagram, sitting on a sofa while dressed as an Arab sheikh.

Adam was not the first Israeli to visit the Emirates, but as a singer he is considered a pioneer in his field, where other Israeli singers such as Itai Levy, Moshe Peretz and Sarit Haddad may follow him in making visits to the Arab Gulf. In fact, there is actually cooperation between Israel and the UAE in the field of music, with Elkana Marciano and Walid Al Jasem recording duets filmed in Israel and Dubai, with one of the song's composers being Doron Medley.

While there are thousands of singers in Israel, the UAE does not have as many of domestic singers, which means that singers from all over the Arab world will come to the Emirates to present their performances, thanks to the Saudi Rotana TV network that is dominant in the Arab world.

Live Nation, one of the largest concert companies in the world, has an office in the UAE and an Israeli representative. Some expect that the Israeli-Emirati agreement will encourage Israeli singers such as Sarit Haddad, Eyal Golan, Zahava Ben, Yishai Levy, and Haim Moshe to sing more in Arabic.

Hagai Uzen, director of the NMC Music LTD's Mediterranean division, claims there is an opportunity for Israeli musicians to make a leap forward in the UAE, unlike relations with Egypt and Jordan, where peace there is limited to security coordination.

The Israelis and Emiratis both claim that although peace in previous years and decades was limited to leaders only, without bringing about a change in the reality of the peoples of the region, the UAE normalization with Israel is different, claiming that the time has come to focus on establishing a

popular peace with Israel. In fact, the facts on the ground refute and dismiss all these allegations that are not based on historical facts.

Emirati rapprochement

While Israelis anticipate the development of the relationship with Egypt, the Israeli relationship with the United Arab Emirates is currently witnessing a steady and progressive growth, at a record speed, which may surpass forty years of the Israeli relationship with Egypt.

When Mohamed Al Khaja, the first Emirati ambassador to Israel, went to submit his credentials to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, he delivered a message from Abu Dhabi that the UAE rulers are enthusiastic about friendship with Israel. After his meeting with the Israeli president, Al Khaja met with the foreign minister. He was hosted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, then he met with Tourism Minister Orit Farkash-Hacohen and Minister of Regional Cooperation Ofir Akunis, and he was scheduled to meet with Economy Minister Amir Peretz ... all this happened in just three days, which indicates that the ambassador and his country were extremely longing to cement relations with Israel.

Unlike the Egyptians, the Emiratis submitted proposals for joint projects in the Emirati-Israeli political, commercial, security and cultural circles, as Israel has not received such a promising offer from any other Arab country.

On his first night in Israel, the Emirati ambassador wrote on his Twitter account about his movements via tweets in Arabic to his Arab followers, and in Hebrew for the Israeli followers.

While the Egyptian Minister of Energy hid the details about his trip to Israel from the Egyptian media, banning any media report about his movements during his visit to Israel, the Emirati ambassador tweeted about his agenda in Israel himself.

Israeli ambassador in Cairo

Amid the openness in Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates, there is silence in Israeli-Egyptian relations. For nearly a year, the Israeli ambassador's office in Cairo remained vacant, until the arrival of Amira Oron, the new Israeli ambassador to Egypt, who has recently submitted her credentials to Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

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The appointment of Oren as Israel's ambassador to Egypt at this time may be intended to remind Egyptians of the anniversary of the landing of President Anwar Sadat's plane at Ben Gurion Airport on 19 November 1977; yet after all these long years, there are still no signs of warmth in their relationship.

Oron's dispatch to Egypt coincides with Egyptian indications of interest in improvement of relations with Israel, with assurance that Egypt has not abandoned the Palestinian cause.

The Egyptian-Israeli peace is still cold, as Sisi has not yet ordered a change of the political climate towards Israel. However, the Egyptian people still view the Israeli presence in their country as suspicious. In fact, this is not surprising, because decades of efforts to brainwash Egyptians and improve relations with Israel have not affected them so far. In the end, while there may be only faint signals towards warmth of relations with Tel Aviv, there are loud cheers coming from the UAE in favor of Israel.