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## Egypt interests as envisaged at Sharm El-Sheikh and Negev summits

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The Sharm El-Sheikh summit on 22 March 2022 brought together the leaders of Egypt, the UAE and Israel, and then a few days later, a summit described as "historical" was held in the Negev in the occupied Palestinian interior on 27 March 2022 bringing together the foreign ministers of Egypt, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, U.S., and Israel - with the absence of Jordan and the Palestinians from both summits.

As the two summits are not devoid of political, security and economic connotations, in addition to the long-term Israeli strategic connotations behind the two summits, what are the Egyptian interests envisaged by Cairo from the two summits?



(The

*Sharm El-Sheikh Summit on 22 March 2022 between MBZ, Sisi, and Bennett)*

It has become clear that the Sharm el-Sheikh and the Negev summits, which were held in succession in late March, seemingly focused on propaganda by "taking photos", as the participating countries sought to convey a message that they are united in facing what they view as common challenges, in addition to the United States pursuit to highlight its commitment to its regional allies through the second summit, despite its absence from the first summit.

In light of what Tel Aviv considers a political and diplomatic "achievement", which may be only propaganda, from participation in the Sharm el-Sheikh summit and then holding the six-party summit in the occupied Negev, yet there are several obstacles that are likely to prevent achievement of the desired goals behind the two summits, in light of doubts around the ability of the two summits participants to translate those understandings on the ground.

The two summits came in light of the hiking food prices around the world due to the Ukrainian-Russian war, with the Gulf countries refraining from responding to Western, specifically American, demands with respect to pumping more oil to compensate for the Russian oil due to the international sanctions, while the major powers are about to sign the nuclear agreement with Iran.

The convening of the two summits came in light of a now public and well-known mediation efforts carried out by Israel between Gulf states and Washington, where its special relations with both parties make Tel Aviv an acceptable mediator to both sides, due to the United States' regression from some of its regional positions, particularly towards Iran and its allies in the region.

It is evident, at least according to the Israeli vision, that the Arab leaders participating in the two summits have recently chosen to consider Israel as a vital and important ally, in light of the decline of the Palestinian issue on the regional and international agenda.

## Egyptian interests

### First: Sharm El-Sheikh Summit

Egypt hosted the Sharm El-Sheikh summit, which brought together Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Emirati then Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, and Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, to discuss international and regional developments, reflecting concern in formation of new regional alliances in the face of the decline in the American presence in the Middle East, and the need for regional countries to take care of their common security and economic affairs in the absence of a global power, and crystallization of a regional axis of action that would share common concerns and interests on various issues, most prominently:

1- The Iranian nuclear program: The three countries (Egypt, UAE and 'Israel') showed their desire to highlight a solid stance (to the US administration) towards a likely return to the nuclear agreement

with Iran, amid escalating public Israeli reservations about some of items contained therein. Meanwhile, Egypt is interested in increasing security coordination with Israel and the rest of regional countries, and preventing the outbreak of further tensions, especially from Yemen's Houthis that target its Gulf allies, which would pose threats to the Suez Canal, Egypt's important source of foreign exchange.

2- Ukraine war: Although the three countries (Egypt, UAE and 'Israel') are United States' allies, they are striving to maintain a legitimate space for maneuver in light of their direct security and economic interests towards Moscow. Egypt, for example, imports fifty percent of its wheat from Russia and depends on Russian tourism. Meanwhile, the Egyptian regime assigned several infrastructure economic projects to Russia, including the power plant and the industrial zone in Suez, in addition to the Russian-Egyptian cooperation on the Libyan arena, and the significance Egypt attaches to Russia's position in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) crisis.

3- Maintaining stability in Egypt and the Middle East region, especially that Egyptians have been experiencing severe economic hardships since the outbreak of the Ukraine war, including the devaluation of the Egyptian pound by more than 15% and a sharp hike in food and energy prices, which may provoke political and social unrest. Israel contributed to compensating the loss of Russia and Ukraine tourism, where it agreed to open a new airline between Tel Aviv and Sharm el-Sheikh. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi announced investment of two billion dollars in Egyptian companies. Moreover, the two countries are likely to stand by Egypt in its efforts to collect grants and receive loans from international financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

## Second: Negev Summit

With regard to the Negev Summit, Egypt was the last country to confirm its participation in it, perhaps for fear that its regional position would retreat if new agreements were signed by the Arab countries invited to the summit, in its absence, amid its desire to remain first, and perhaps exclusive, in playing the role of "liaison officer" between Arab countries and Israel, especially as the recent UAE, Bahrain and Morocco's normalization agreements with Israel seemed to pose a threat to that "privilege" which Cairo would not waive.

At the same time, Cairo's positions are not in line with Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi in several respects, whether it is related to the marginalization of the Palestinian cause, or its unwillingness to engage in an open confrontation with Iran, as the Egyptian regime does not seem to view Iran as posing a threat to the stability of the region. Although Cairo is only watching with concern what is being seen as undermining Washington's commitment to its regional allies, it is at the same time keen to condemn the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, which have long driven oil prices higher. However, Egypt does not share the same apprehension with the Gulf states and Israel about the conclusion of the nuclear agreement with Tehran.

Perhaps Egypt's participation in the Negev summit in the presence of the US Secretary of State also came out of its desire to obtain assistance from the United States, the Gulf states and Israel to address the exacerbating economic challenges that the country is experiencing due to the Ukraine War. It is noteworthy that the Egyptian government had previously applied to the International Monetary Fund to obtain a new aid package, and in this respect it needs the US support to approve it, while expecting more support from its two Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In addition, Egypt believes that the current conditions boost attraction of bilateral and regional projects, with the participation of Israel, especially in the fields of energy, tourism, food security, facing Iranian influence, amid Iraq's proximity to Jordan and Egypt as part of the "New Levant" alliance, and the security of cruises in the Red Sea amid Yemen's Houthi threats, and supplying Lebanon with gas via Jordan and Syria, which is likely to bring about a renewed rapprochement of Syria with the Arab world.

In coincidence with the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, there were Egyptian amendments underway in some internal laws, agreements and treaties with Israel, amid a state of "warm peace". For example, the government has most recently conducted the executive regulations of the capital market law, excluding the areas of "Sharm el-Sheikh, Dahab and the Gulf of Aqaba" from provisions of the Integrated Development Law that prohibits the ownership, usufruct or lease of lands and real estate located in strategic areas of military importance and areas adjacent to the borders, as well as natural reserves and the Red Sea islands.

At the same time, along with the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, Sinai witnessed an Egyptian-Israeli agreement to inaugurate a direct flight line between the cities of Sharm El-Sheikh and Tel Aviv for

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the first time, and also to amend the security agreement with Israel, to allow for an increase in the number of border guards and their capabilities in the Egyptian Rafah region, as well as other natural gas transfer agreements between the two parties, which opens the door for the Israelis to own land and real estate in South Sinai<sup>1</sup>.



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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies