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Israeli-Egyptian Relations, 1980-2000

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Though in terms of global importance Egypt cannot compare to either China or the Soviet Union, the subjects of other recent works published by Frank Cass in which former senior Israeli officials have chronicled their experiences representing the Jewish state in the diplomatic arena,(1) the importance of Egypt as a 'pivotal state' in the Near East cannot be exaggerated. This is particularly so for Israel which has viewed Egypt as both its leading opponent and then, after Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 which culminated in the signing of a peace treaty in 1979, its leading (and until recently only) partner in the Arab world. As such, Ephraim Dowek's comprehensive study of the last two decades of Egyptian-Israeli diplomatic relations is most welcome.

Dowek examines his subject from a unique vantage point. Not only was he Israel's minister plenipotentiary in the fledgling Israeli embassy from 1980-1983 and then, between 1990 and 1992, Israel's fourth ambassador to Egypt, but he was also born and educated in Egypt and Cairo was the city of his youth. Before the peace his return to the land of his birth, even in a private capacity, would have been unimaginable (indeed the author poignantly recollects how on his departure to Israel in 1949, the Egyptian authorities stamped his passport "Exit: No Return").

Thus the intensely personal nature of the author's return after three decades combined with his fluency in Egyptian Arabic, customs and culture (that allowed him to pass easily as a local), make his general observations fascinating.

Especially touching is his portrait of Egypt's once proud Jewish community. This provides a timely reminder of the forgotten victims of the Jewish –Arab conflict, the once vibrant Jewish communities of the Arab world. While Dowek admits that both assimilation and emigration have taken their toll he also shows how the official Egyptian policy of reducing community morale and cohesiveness through the strangulation of communal assets and property and the tight control over its social activities, personal freedoms and dignity have decimated his old community.

However, this work is not primarily a personal memoir. Rather it is an in-depth, if, as the author himself admits, an informal and anecdotal rather than scholarly, examination of two decades of relations. Dowek examines the policies and attitudes of his three predecessors as Israeli Ambassador to Egypt, as well other Israeli politicians and diplomats and provides illuminating pen portraits of the small group of Egyptian officials in the Israel department of the Foreign Ministry and in the Egyptian Embassy in Tel Aviv. In particular his frank evaluation of Mohamed Bassiuni, Egypt's long-time ambassador to Israel, who has dominated the diplomatic relationship between the two countries since the early 1980's, is both informative and entertaining.

Less entertaining but just as informative is the description of the conditions that he and his colleagues had to endure from the opening of the embassy in Cairo. Indeed, those chapters entitled 'Settling Down', 'Security' and 'Ambassadors and Staff' will be an eye-opener for those who believe that the diplomat's life is glamorous. Others may find such drawn-out recollections monotonous. But by refusing to spare the reader from his detailed exposition on the drudgery of every day life Dowek manages to evoke the sense of siege, isolation and loneliness that quickly set in amongst staff at the Cairo embassy (and even more so in the Alexandria Consulate), who were marginalized, ignored and ostracised by their Egyptian partners in peace.

Despite the general euphoria, excitement and optimism of the early days of the peace, Israel's representatives on the ground, hampered by severe restrictions, struggled to succeed in even such mundane tasks as finding accommodation. Indeed the intensive security provided by the Egyptian authorities was only partly intended to protect Israelis from attack. Its second objective was to prevent them from establishing normal contact with average Egyptians. For Dowek (a man completely at home in the Egyptian "street") this was hugely disappointing because on the few occasions that the security services allowed him contact with ordinary Egyptians he found them to be hospitable and supportive of the peace process.

The same, however, cannot be said about the Egyptian elites in the professions, the media and the universities where anti-peace resolutions and outright hostility towards Israel and her representatives was the norm. Even members of the Israel department of the Egyptian Foreign ministry, responsible for nurturing and developing diplomatic ties with Israel, kept clear of Israelis unless protocol or superiors gave them little choice. This was also true of Egyptian representatives overseas. Dowek, who became ambassador to India after Egypt, compares his non-existent social relationship with his Egyptian counterpart in New Delhi with the good-natured and mutually beneficial ties he developed with the Jordanian ambassador to India.

The almost universal 'coarse behaviour and social boycott' (p.66) of the Egyptian elite combined with the security service's policy of minimising Israeli contacts with ordinary Egyptians meant that within months of arriving in Cairo embassy morale had been completely eroded and any change from the norm of obstruction and isolation, such as an increase in those residents of Cairo whom the authorities allowed receive the embassy's (non-political) cultural bulletin, attained major diplomatic significance.

After two decades of formal peace little has changed. There has been no improvement from the 'ground level of peace' (p.123) that Dowek and his colleagues encountered on first arriving in Egypt. The bulk of this book is an explanation of why this is the case. His thesis is straightforward. Since the Sadat era Egypt has been sincere in its absolute commitment to peace. However, for Egypt peace had nothing to do with a desire to improve Israel's place in the region or to help Israel achieve her ultimate objective - full legitimacy in the Arab world, but has been a decisive attempt to end the 'vicious circle of military confrontation', (p.111) that had retarded her development, damaged her relations with the United States and proved

ineffective in defeating Israel. It was also viewed as the only way that the territory of Sinai, lost to Israel in the 1967 war, could be regained.

Dowek argues that Egypt only pursued a policy of normalisation when it was politically necessary to do so to achieve its objectives, as on the eve of Israel's complete withdrawal from Sinai. Nor does he believe that Egypt ever had any intention of turning the formal peace into a normal peace, and he is convinced that that this decision came from the top: 'all our difficulties and the stalemate in the normalization process were, beyond any doubt, the result of an overall strategic decision taken at the highest level and whose implementation was supervised at the highest level' (p. 52). Dowek is adamant that President Mubarak, who has ruled Egypt longer than anyone since Muhammed Ali, has followed a peace policy similar to that which Sadat would have pursued if he had not been assassinated in 1981. Perhaps Sadat would have been more flexible in some non-critical areas such as development co-operation but there would have been little difference in the overall strategy, or as Dowek puts it 'after Sadat came another Sadat (Mubarak)' (p.333).

The Israeli position could hardly have been more different. Israel viewed the treaty as a launch pad for full legitimacy, first with Egypt, and then throughout the Arab world. As such, it spared no effort, expertise or expense in attempting to achieve normalisation. In the face of Egyptian intransigence successive Israeli governments developed a policy of denial based on one hope: that by ignoring Egypt's strategy the situation would improve. Dowek speaks at his most emotive and bitter when recalling the degrading lengths Israeli representatives, including himself, had to go to in order to initiate and maintain even the most basic diplomatic relationships while in Cairo: 'when doors were slammed in our faces, we tried to come in through the windows but, to our great sorrow, the windows too were hermetically sealed' (p.67). He feels that such an obsequious Israeli policy, was wrong, not simply because of its impact on pride, self respect and morale but because it allowed Egypt to hold out the faintest prospect of normalisation (or even improved embassy privileges!) as a lever to exert much more significant Israeli concessions both bilaterally and in the Arab world in general.

The author was one of the few intimately involved in the bilateral relationship who from an early stage (in April 1982 one day after Israel's withdrawal from Sinai), argued forcefully with his superiors in Jerusalem that to continue the policy of appeasing Egypt in the hope of minor improvements in normalisation was politically naïve and strategically misconceived. But he also admits that Israel was in a difficult position. Egypt was fully aware that Israel would take almost any humiliations rather than lose its only formal peace. By the time that Dowek returned to Cairo as Ambassador in 1990 diplomatic relations common in all other states were practically non-existent between the Cairo authorities and the embassy; the social boycott of Israeli diplomats was worse than ever; cultural contacts had ceased; exist visas were still needed to visit Israel and practically no Egyptians bothered to apply for them.

While Dowek's experience, intimate knowledge of Egyptian-Israeli relations and the sheer volume of evidence he brings forward to support his case makes it impossible for any but the most naïve or partisan to question the substance of his arguments one can take issue with his style and approach. He first presents his central thesis in a fine chapter entitled 'The Struggle for Normalisation' but this is followed by several over-long and, at times, repetitive chapters dealing with every conceivable aspect of the bilateral relationship and drawing on endless examples of Israeli goodwill and Egyptian intransigence to drive home his argument. While this relentless approach can be welcomed for setting the historical record straight, it does not add much to the overall argument and may even overwhelm the reader in what the author himself admits is an 'ocean of detail' (p.332).

The same cannot be said about Dowek's 'short stroll into the intricacies of the Egyptian information apparatus' (p.91). This is a vitally important chapter that shows how the Egyptian media has not only refused to partake in normalisation but has led, what Dowek rightly calls, an 'unrestrained and slanderous onslaught [against] Israel, Israelis and the Jewish people'(p.85). These vile anti-Semitic writings (accusing Jews of blood libel and denigrating the Holocaust among other things) and the horrendous caricatures of Jews that would not have been out of place in Nazi propaganda are as likely to be found in such leading papers as *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Akhbar*, as on the margins of the publishing world. Hardly surprising when one

considers that as late as 1984 one could find copies of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* on the official stand of the government Information Agency at the Cairo international book fair.

Dowek dismisses as contemptible the official Egyptian defence of media anti-Semitism- that to restrict the views of the press would breach freedom of expression in a democratic society. As he notes there is no genuine press freedom in Egypt (outside the freedom to besmirch Israel and world Jewry), and the media is dominated by the ' formidable Egyptian information and propaganda machine' (p.85) under the supervision of the all powerful Ministry of Information and the President's Office. The Egyptian authorities have the capacity to eradicate anti-Jewish incitement at any time they choose and the fact that they do not means simply that 'whatever we, and the Egyptian people, read in the newspapers, hear on the radio or see on television screens is exactly what the Egyptian government wants us to read, hear and see' (p. 91).

This is not just a matter of living up to the spirit as well as the letter of peace. It can be argued that the cultivation of extreme anti-Semitism among educated Egyptians (the main audience of the written media) has almost completely negated one of the most positive achievements of the formal peace - that with every year a growing percentage of the Egyptian upper-classes do not remember what it was like before Israel and Egypt had a treaty. Indeed, only last year, Zvi Mazel (who was Israel's ambassador in Egypt when this book was written) publicly despaired that the anti-Semitism of the Egyptian press was sowing the 'seeds of hatred for the next fifty years'.(2) That the authorities recognise this is clear from the fact that, as Dowek notes, neither Sadat or Mubarak permitted the same ferocity in attacks against Israel or Jews in the visual media, which provides information for the seventy percent of the Egyptian population that are illiterate or near illiterate, in fear that to do so would not only incite the masses but build up expectations of war (p.96).

One of the most interesting issues that Dowek raises relates to the Egyptian determination to oppose any normalisation on the grounds that to open full relations with Israel would result in Israel's complete domination of Egypt's economic and cultural life. Dowek argues that this widespread belief is based on the conviction that world-Jewry co-ordinate its actions, 'making them a mighty force that rules the world and lead the west in general and the USA in particular by the nose' (p.123). In support of this he recalls how Professor Yusef Wali, Egyptian deputy-prime minister and a leading advocate of peace with Israel, told him personally how he was sure that the Jews caused the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990's to punish the Bush administration because of differences over loan guarantees for the absorption of Soviet immigrants.

It should be noted that this Egyptian attitude to Jews predates the birth of Israel. It was, for example, in Egypt during the Great War that Sir Ronald Storrs, future British Governor of Jerusalem, first heard a proverb that he was often to repeat: 'tread on his [the Jew's] tail in Cairo and he barks in China'.(3) It should also be noted that there are those within Egyptian society, such as the acclaimed Egyptian playwright Ali Salem, a vocal supporter of normalisation with Israel, who was expelled from the Union of Egyptian Writers in May 2001 for visiting Israel and for writing in support of improved relations, who have long rejected the sincerity of those who raise the spectre of cultural invasion. Indeed, Salem argues that this 'has become the white flag raised by those who can't defeat the peace movement by their old rhetoric'.(4)

While I am hesitant to take issue with an author who was born and grew up in Egypt and who, on his return to Egypt as Ambassador in 1990, became the primary focus of this 'bitter venom' (p. xiv), it is difficult to agree with Dowek's assertion that the Egyptian belief that 'the assumptions underlying *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are basically true', (p.123) should not be interpreted as sheer anti-Semitism, but rather as the consequence of a genuine admiration for the Jewish people's national character. Indeed it hard to see how this view of the Jews as Spengler's 'magical nation', can be interpreted as anything other than a textbook case (perhaps the leading contemporary example) of state sponsored anti-Semitism.

Dowek has provided students of Egyptian-Israeli relations with an important and indispensable source. His explanation as to why after two decades of formal relations there is nothing more than a 'ground level of peace' is all too convincing. The author's 'profound grief' (p.123) and 'great sorrow' (p. 333) at this state of affairs are palpable. Nevertheless, Dowek believes that the formal peace, for all its failings, has been 'a wonderful achievement' (p.125) and is irreversible. No doubt he is correct in his view that any alternative is

better than constant war. But he is also correct in his view that the status quo is ‘fraught with danger’ (p.125) and as such Israel should alter its policy of accepting Egyptian intransigence as the unavoidable price of peace. It is a testament to the difficulty that this entails that a man as expert and experienced on the subject as Dowek is at his least convincing when discussing how Israel can achieve normalisation in the face of Egypt’s strategic world view and the deep-seated antipathy to the normal existence of a Jewish state in the region.

Notes

1. See E Zev Sufott’s, *A China Diary Towards the Establishment of China-Israel Diplomatic Relations*, London, Frank Cass, 1997; Yosef Govrin’s, *Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1953-1967: From Confrontation to Disruption*, London, Frank Cass, 1998.Back to (1)
2. ‘Egypt’s, Al-Akhbar: Thanks to Hitler', *Associated Press*, 7 February 2002.Back to (2)
3. MS Diary of Sir Ronald Storrs, 20 January 1945, Box 6/6, Storrs Private Papers, Pembroke College, Cambridge.Back to (3)
4. See excerpts from Ali Salem, *My Drive to Israel*, (translated by Robert Silverman), *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2002, p.51.Back to (4)

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