

As Egypt celebrates October War anniversary, Cairo-Tel Aviv ties in focus

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

After Egypt marked the 44th anniversary of the start of the October War that led to the Camp David Accords and peace between Cairo and Tel Aviv, analysts looked to the future of Egyptian-Israeli ties.

"There is marked transformation in ties between the two countries," said Tharwat el-Nosieri, a retired army general who served as a lieutenant-colonel during the war. "This transformation serves the security interests of both Egypt and Israel and reflects on general conditions in the region."

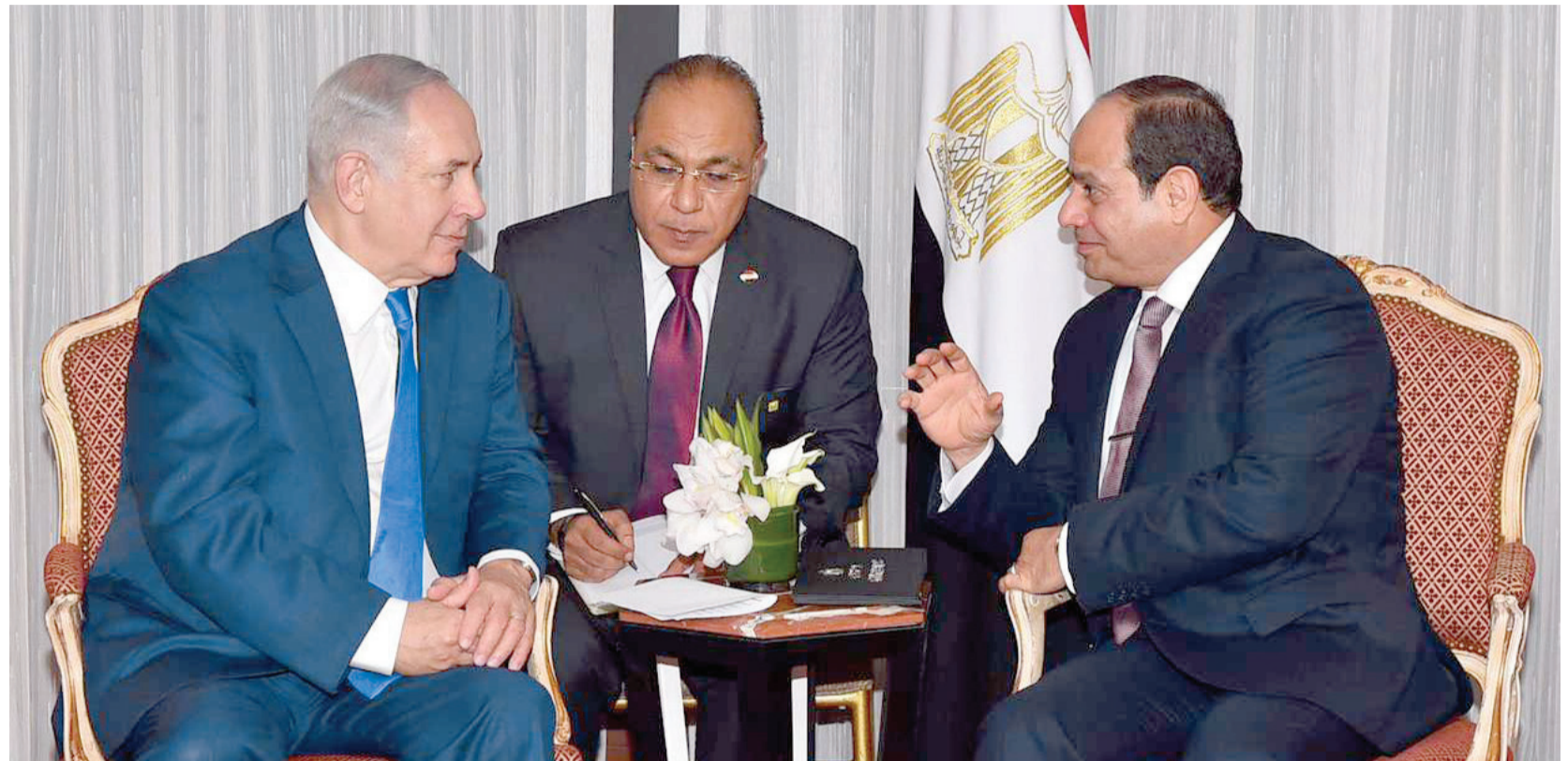
Following a humiliating defeat in the Six-Day War (1967) – known in Egypt as al-Naksah or "the Setback" – the three-week war in October 1973 is a point of great pride for most Egyptians. Named for the day the war started, 6th of October city is a populous suburb of Cairo.

After the war, Egypt became the first Arab country to officially recognise Israel, with Anwar Sadat signing the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979. Although relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv remained remote over the ensuing decades, amid popular Egyptian suspicion and discontent towards Israel, there have been signs that Egyptian-Israeli ties are warming.

"One of the reasons this is happening is that as a former army officer, Egyptian President [Abdel Fattah al-Sisi] knows that war is only about death and destruction," said Magdi Shehata, who commanded an Egyptian battalion during the October War.

"This is why Sisi is very keen to create a different future for everybody in this region, one free from the conflicts, bitterness and bloodshed of the past," he said.

Sisi has brought rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah to the ne-



Different future? Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (L) meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in New York, last September. (AFP)

gotiating table amid hopes that inter-Palestinian reconciliation could reinvigorate the stalled Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

"I tell the Palestinian people it's extremely important... to overcome the differences and not to lose opportunities and to be ready to accept co-existence with the other, with Israelis in safety and security," Sisi said at the UN General Assembly in September.

Addressing the Israeli delegation, Sisi said: "We have an excellent experience in Egypt in peace with you [Israel] for longer than 40 years... We can repeat this experience and this excellent step once again."

Sisi met separately with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas during the Gener-

al Assembly and urged both leaders to restart the peace process.

Analysts said, however, that Sisi's attempts to resuscitate the Middle East peace process are premature given the many challenges in the way.

"These challenges include Palestinian divisions and whether the main parties, namely the Palestinians and the Israelis, really want peace," said Mohamed Kamal, a professor of political science at Cairo University. "Egypt can try but, at the end, it will not force the Palestinians and the Israelis to make peace if they do not have the will."

Israel has said it would not acknowledge any reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah that did not see Hamas explicitly recognise Israel, disband its military wing and

cut ties with Iran – conditions the Islamist militant faction is unlikely to agree to. Officials of the Palestinian factions warned that peace talks cannot begin until Israel halts its illegal settlement building.

Cairo and Tel Aviv, however, appear to share many of the same objectives, not least an interest in

countermanding Iranian influence in the region and ensuring calm in the Sinai Peninsula where the Islamic State (ISIS) has a toehold.

Egypt and Israel have increased military and security coordination, albeit discretely, including participating in upcoming air force drills in Greece, Greek Defence Minister Panos Kammenos said.

"Whether Israel can have similarly good relations with other Islamic countries in the future depends on the extent to which it demonstrates a will to make peace with the Palestinians," Kamal said. "When there is peace, the public anywhere will find no reason to object to good relations with Tel Aviv."

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.

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Era of political Islam is over, say ex-Brotherhood figures

Amr Emam

Cairo

The once powerful Muslim Brotherhood, proscribed as a terrorist organisation in Egypt since 2013, is down and out and will not return, said Mohamed Habib, a former senior member.

Habib, a retired professor of geology in his mid-70s, served as second-in-command of the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving the group in 2010 following internal elections that led to a schism within it.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, has been banned, there are several Islamist parties in Egypt.

Habib had been expected to become the next leader of the group but elections resulted in the ascension of a more radical cadre of leaders, led by Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie and his deputy, Khairat el-Shater.

"This was actually the beginning of the end of the movement," said Habib, who served as deputy supreme guide from 1995-2010. "I had full knowledge of the vio-

lent nature of the new leaders and knew how they would act in any situation."

This schism, which saw several senior Brotherhood figures leave the organisation, took place almost one year before the 2011 uprising that resulted in the ouster of long-time Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The Muslim Brotherhood, as one of the few organised grass-roots political forces in the country, was well-placed to exploit the political chaos that followed and it secured a majority in the first post-Mubarak parliament.

The group initially said it did not intend to compete in presidential elections but nominated Muhammad Morsi, who went on to a disastrous single year in office.

"They were in a hurry to be in power and this was their deadliest mistake because they were not prepared for it," Habib said. "When in power, the Brotherhood also failed to contain other political forces, which united everybody against them."

The Brotherhood's downfall in Egypt, Habib said, had ramifications for its branches in other countries and political Islam overall.

"The Muslim Brotherhood now does not have any kind of future [in Egypt], which also means an end to political Islam," he said.

"This is not just true for Egypt but for other countries in the region, even though some Muslim Brotherhood branches, especially



Down and out. Egyptian men speak behind a door with shattered glass that bears the Muslim Brotherhood's logo in Cairo. (Reuters)

in North Africa, continue to linger on the political stage."

Habib was not the only former Brotherhood figure to spot the early signs of the group's demise. Ahmed Ban, a researcher into Islamic movements and an ex-member of the Brotherhood, said the group has become synonymous with violence and political mismanagement.

However, he warned that despite the ongoing campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood – designated as a terrorist group by several Arab

and Gulf countries – and its main backer Qatar, the group has left a void on the political stage.

"This vacuum can easily be filled by Islamists who could rebrand themselves and convince the public that they have solutions to their problems," Ban said. "Economic failures and the lack of basic freedoms here [in Egypt] and in other countries in the region could help them do this."

Although the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, has

been banned, there are several Islamist, particularly Salafist, political parties in Egypt, including al-Nour Party, which backed Morsi's ouster.

Sameh Eid, another former member of the Brotherhood and an Egyptian expert in political Islam, said the new generation of Islamists had taken careful note of the mistakes made by the Brotherhood.

"This new generation will seek to present a new discourse, one that is different from the single-minded discourse of the current leaders of their movements," Eid said.

"This could lead to the return of the Brotherhood and Islamists in general to the political stage in the future," he said.

However, Habib, who was one of the founding members of the Renaissance Party in 2011, which explicitly endorsed a civil society formula, said the era of political Islam was over.

"The violent nature of the Islamist leaders, especially those of the Brotherhood and the mistakes they committed over the past seven years, makes their return to politics next to impossible," he said.

"Everybody witnessed the violence and ugly nature of their rule. The Muslim Brotherhood's mistakes are too grave to be easily forgotten or forgiven anytime soon."

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.