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Israel and Egypt: The First Sign of Peace

Egypt became the first Arab country to recognize the Jewish state when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed a comprehensive peace treaty on March 26, 1979, that formally ended decades of warfare. The two countries had been at war since Israel's founding in 1948, when Egypt joined other Arab countries in rejecting the U.N. plan to partition Palestine into two states. While the two many have characterized the relationship between them as a "cold peace," Israel and Egypt, supported by the United States, have taken significant steps in recent years to enhance their ties and encourage greater dialogue and cooperation.

Egypt Joins Arab States in Wars Against Israel

When the state of Israel declared its independence in 1948, Egypt joined Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq in declaring war on the new nation. Though Israel successfully rebuffed the invading armies, war erupted again in 1967 when Egypt and other Arab countries began mobilizing troops and issuing increasingly bellicose threats in preparation for an attack. Israel responded swiftly and decisively by launching a preemptive strike, rapidly defeating the Arab armies in less than six days and ultimately succeeding in capturing the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights.

On October 6, 1973, war erupted once more when Egypt and Syria, with the help of other Arab countries, launched a surprise attack against Israel. When Arab states rejected U.S. efforts for a cease-fire, the United States airlifted emergency supplies to Israel, ultimately defeated the Arab armies.

U.S. Supports Israel-Egyptian Peace Efforts

In November 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made a stunning overture of peace by courageously traveling to Jerusalem. With the help of President Jimmy Carter, the Egyptian leader engaged his Israeli counterpart in negotiations that ultimately led to Israel's return of the Sinai Desert, which entailed the uprooting of 7,000 Israelis from their homes, in return for a peace agreement. America also agreed to provide millions of dollars in military and economic aid to Egypt, while Egypt agreed to stop participating in the Arab League boycott of Israel.

Through this treaty, Sadat became the first Arab leader both to recognize Israel and to make peace with the Jewish state. On October 6, 1981, Sadat was assassinated by members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which opposed any sort of reconciliation with Israel.

Expanding Ties Marred by Anti-Israel Propaganda

Despite Sadat's courage and the endurance of the agreement, a cold peace has persisted between Israel and Egypt. While the two countries enjoy full diplomatic relations and promote ties with respect to tourism, trade, and agriculture, anti-Semitic and anti-Israel propaganda pervades the Egyptian media and educational systems. In the wake of the Palestinian intifada that began in 2000, Cairo withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv.

While such concerns problems persist on the Egyptian side, the two countries have taken significant steps to strengthen their ties. In December 2004, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak released from prison Azzam Azzam, an Israeli Arab accused of spying for Israel, in exchange for six Egyptian prisoners in Israeli jails.

Israel and Egypt signed a \$2.5 billion gas deal in 2005 that would provide the Jewish state with 25 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Egypt over the next fifteen years. Likewise, in the first quarter of 2006 industrial exports to Egypt grew 148.5% compared to the same period in 2005, for a total of \$26.5 million.

The two countries have also made increased efforts to coordinate security arrangements along the Israel-Egypt border, while Egyptian security officials have played a key role in seeking to Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel.

Such developments represent tangible signs of growing bonds between the two nations. For all its achievements and disappointments, the history of Israeli-Egyptian relations points to the latent but vast potential for growing cooperation between Israel and those Arab states prepared to recognize Israel and live in peace with the Jewish state.