



All Eyes on Egypt

When Israel looks out to the rest of the Middle East, it no longer can make the same assumptions about its security that it could a year ago or even a decade ago. The durability of the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, the quiet along the Israeli-Jordanian border, the behind-the-scenes cooperation with Persian Gulf states—these anchors of Israel’s security can no longer be taken for granted.

The country to watch the closest is Egypt. The Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, signed in 1979, is the linchpin of U.S. policy in the entire region. In fact, there has not been a regional war against Israel since the treaty was signed.

Why is the peace treaty so important? It seems like a long time ago now, but for decades, Egypt was Israel’s most powerful and dangerous enemy. Egypt fought four major wars against Israel—the War of Independence in 1948, the Sinai Campaign in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Because of the treaty, Israel has not had to seriously worry about an Arab army’s tanks reaching Tel Aviv. Given the many threats that Israel faces on its other borders, the peace treaty is vital for Israel’s security, and has enabled Israel to reduce its defense spending burden from 23 percent of its GDP prior to the Camp David Accords to eight percent today; it is also the foundation of the principle of “land for peace.”

Indeed, Egypt matters. The Suez Canal—a vital international waterway and a frequent path for the U.S. Navy—passes through the country. Egypt is the most populous state in the Middle East, more than 80 million people live there, and it has long been the political and cultural center of the Arab world. What happens in Cairo will be felt throughout the region.

As of this writing, nobody knows what will happen in Egypt. We hope that any political transition in the country will lead to a democratic government that continues Egypt’s pro-American and pro-Western orientation and expresses a firm commitment to maintaining the peace treaty with Israel.

From a broader perspective the unrest in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East demonstrates a fundamental fact: Israel, a democratic country with peaceful transitions of power, is an island of stability in a volatile and important region. The United States can always count on Israel as its closest regional ally.

The uncertainty about Egypt and other states shows why it is so important to help keep Israel strong through U.S. assistance and close U.S.-Israel ties. One can never know what the future will bring, and just how fast it might bring it. We must help Israel prepare for any scenario.