



Middle East Spotlight

Relations with Egypt Over the Years

This month, as we sit down to our Passover seders, we will recount the experience of living as a slave in Egypt. We will remember the pain of oppression and witnessing the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. In great detail, we retell this ancient story and each year it always ends the same way: achieving our freedom and yearning to return to our homeland—Israel.

Since this dramatic moment in Jewish history, relations with Egypt have experienced ups and downs. In recent years though, the relationship between Egypt and the Jewish state has been surprisingly positive—albeit still complex and not without its issues.

Most people are familiar with the historical animus between Egypt and the modern state of Israel—the world’s most populous Arab nation and the world’s only Jewish state— that manifested in four wars and numerous other skirmishes. Egypt in fact spearheaded the 1956, 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel. But the mutually-beneficial relationship that has developed between the two former enemies over the years is much less well known.

The 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, signed in Washington, D.C., by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, has served as the foundation for bilateral relations to this day. And now, Israeli-Egyptian relations are stronger than at any time in history.

Common challenges and goals—ranging from counterterrorism and water and energy security, to combating Iran’s regional aggression—have helped solidify this unique partnership. Bilateral security, defense and intelligence cooperation are closer now than ever before, and are crucial to both countries’ security. Water and energy cooperation also continue to increase, and economic relations have been robust.

For example, both countries support Egypt’s goal of combating terrorism on the peninsula, which shares a 150-mile-plus border with Israel, and recent reports explain that Israel has allowed Egypt to increase its military presence in the Sinai Peninsula beyond what was permitted by previous agreements. Egyptian forces have also helped Israel stem the smuggling of weapons and other military equipment from the Sinai into the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

Unfortunately, as with Israel’s relations with other Arab countries, much of the bilateral cooperation remains hidden from public view. Years of widespread indoctrination against the Jewish state have not prepared Arab publics for the sudden geopolitical shifts that helped catalyze these relationships. This has caused these mutually-beneficial alliances to remain somewhat fragile and complicated .

Yet even the few bits that are made public are quite enlightening: Israel’s stability and ingenuity—backed by a strong U.S.-Israel alliance—have increasingly led it to be seen as an ally of Egypt, rather than its enemy. Although the Egyptian-Israel relationship is by no means perfect, it is important to recognize and be thankful for how far we have come.