Egypt deepens its collaboration with Israel

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Ever since working together to ensure that Yasser Arafat was buried without provoking major unrest amongst the Palestinians, Egypt and Israel have been deepening their collaboration in preparing to suppress resistance within the Occupied Territories.

Both have taken Arafat's death and a second term for US president George W. Bush as a cue for a Middle Eastern version of détente of a type not seen since Egypt became the first of the Arab states to recognise the Zionist state in 1979.

In a clear reference to the death of Arafat, Egyptian diplomat Tariq al-Quoni, interviewed in *Ha'aretz*, explained that "several factors in recent months have improved the atmosphere." But there is also major pressure being exerted by Washington for Egypt to lead the way in pressurising all the Arab states to work more closely with Israel. Egypt and Israel have long been major recipients of US aid and cornerstones of its geopolitical strategy.

High-level talks between Cairo and Tel Aviv recently came close to agreement in discussions on enhancing border security arrangements. Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon met with the respective foreign ministers, Ahmad Abu al-Geit and Silvan Shalom, Egyptian Director of Intelligence Omar Suleiman, and Israeli Defence Minister Shaoul Mofaz. The main issue was to ensure that Egypt will be able to police the Palestinian masses in the Gaza Strip following Sharon's planned withdrawal.

Israeli officials had agreed last October to an increase in Egyptian forces without the need to alter the Camp David Agreement. Outstanding points now include the number of Egyptian forces to deploy and the level of armament they will carry. The Egyptians proposed deploying 750 lightly armed forces and (for public consumption) are demanding the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, including troops at the border area in Rafah.

In November three policemen were killed by Israeli shellfire in the Egyptian section of Rafah. In an unusually muted response, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accepted Sharon's apology and his promise that it wouldn't happen again. Last week Mubarak went so far as to call Sharon the Palestinians' best chance for peace.

Egypt is only spearheading a broader strategy of securing support from the Arab states for Sharon's government. Shalom told the Knesset last week that whilst "we have to continue to isolate any radical Muslim states," i.e., Syria, Iran and the Palestinians, "There is no reason why we shouldn't improve our ties with a significant number of the Arab and Muslim states.... We don't have disputes over territory or economic issues, so we can look forward to a warming in our relations with a series of Arab states."

Mindful of his domestic audience, where Islamic fundamentalist and anti-US feeling is growing, Mubarak is more cautious in openly praising the newfound relations. He has recently denied that there is an Egyptian-Israeli deal, or that an ambassador would soon return to Tel Aviv—he was recalled four years ago in protest at excessive Israeli force used against the Palestinians (which has certainly increased in the last four years).

In a speech designed for mass consumption, official Egyptian presidential spokesperson Ambassador Majed Abdul Fattah stated, "There is no need for any new initiatives as the Arab peace initiative adopted by the Arab summit in Beirut 2002 had exactly specified the bases for reaching the comprehensive peace."

This is so much hot air, as the 2002 summit made peace conditional on Israel's total withdrawal from all Occupied Territories back to the "4th June 1967" line—something that Israel has no intention of demanding.

In another sign of improving relations, the two

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countries recently undertook a prisoner swap. The Egyptians freed Azzam Azzam, who had received an eight-year sentence for spying for Israel. In exchange, Israel offered six Egyptian students who were detained last August for planning to kidnap Israeli soldiers.

Mubarak also claims that Azzam's release "has nothing to do with normalising relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv" and that the decision was taken in October. He was reportedly asked in Bahrain last week why he did not ask for the release of Marwan al-Barghouthi, the general secretary of the Fatah movement, replying that he gave a greater priority to the interests of Egyptian citizens. At the time al-Barghouthi was running for president of the Palestinian Authority from his prison cell, but has since withdrawn in order to support the overtly conciliationist candidacy of Mahmoud Abbas. Israel is soon expected to release a further 120 Egyptians in a "goodwill gesture" of thanks to Egypt.

As well as seeking an improvement in its own dealings with Israel, Egypt is undertaking a diplomatic crusade to promote Arab-Israeli relations—a strategic goal of US imperialism, which is promoting a Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) by 2013.

Cairo has recently been brokering talks between Syria and Israel, on behalf of imperialism. The US and Israel have both had secret meetings with Syria, as have France and Britain. Meanwhile all the Western powers openly employ a mixture of threats and intimidation against Damascus.

MEFTA is the US attempt to control trade and strategic position within the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin to the detriment of its rivals in the European Union, which has plans of a similar nature. The US is undertaking a series of bilateral agreements to create Free Trade Areas (FTAs) across the region, and Egypt's reward for obliging US imperialism is to become an enhanced FTA.

The first step in this process is the creation of Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) to promote Egyptian-Israeli trade, i.e., tariff-free zones around certain clusters of factories, which will allow tariff-free access to the US market for certain goods with an Israeli input. Goods would qualify that have 35 percent value added in the Egyptian QIZ, and around 11.5 percent Israeli components.

Egypt, Israel and the US signed a deal in Cairo on December 14 regarding the creation of seven zones in Egypt, four in Greater Cairo and three on the Mediterranean coast—two near to Alexandria and one at Port Said on the Suez Canal. Egypt expects a jump in its exports to the US, which currently stand at $560 million.

Since 1999 the US has designated 13 QIZs in Jordan to promote trade with Israel. This led to the creation of a US-Jordan FTA in 2001. Trade between the countries has risen from $31 million in 1999 to $674 million in 2003.

Egyptian textile manufacturers and government officials recently received a delegation of Israeli counterparts, the first such visit in five years. The Egyptian government figures that the volume of trade between Israel and Egypt increased during the first half of the current year to $9.5 million, up by $4 million in comparison with the first half of 2003. Egyptian exports to Israel increased by $3.5 million to $5.5 million, with imports up to $4 million.

Another reward possibly awaits for Egypt's services rendered. The executive director of the United Nations Development Programme has said that Egypt, as a major African/Middle Eastern power, has a great chance of becoming a permanent member of the enhanced UN Security Council as the African member. The US and China are both backing Egypt to get the seat.

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