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Egypt and "the new Mediterranean:" Economy, security, and culture

By Ofir Winter

The history of Egypt has for thousands of years been intertwined with reciprocal relations that existed between the land of the Nile and the armies, trading goods, religions, ideas, and values that came from it, and to it, via the Mediterranean Sea.

Modern Egypt has been greatly influenced by the arrival of Napoleon's navy at Alexandria's shores at the end of the 18th century, from the digging of the Suez Canal that connected the Mediterranean and Red Seas, toward the Indian Ocean, in the mid-19th century, and liberal ideas that stemmed from mutual contacts with the overseas West in the first half of the 20th century. In the Nasserist era, the influence of the Mediterranean Sea declined, but a renewed and substantial Egyptian look northwestwards could be discerned from the start of the 1990s, and increasingly so since the January 25, 2011 revolution.

The Mediterranean, which will be the focus of this essay, has in recent years turned into one of the most important circles of national security guiding Egyptian policy. Additional circles that face decision makers in Egypt consist of the Arab circle, the center of which are the mutual intimate ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the common struggle against regional threats from Iran, Islamist forces, and Salafi-jihadist forces; the African circle, centered on Libya and the states of the Nile basin, through which the river that forms the "artery of life" flows; the Red Sea circle, which extends from the Bab El-Mandeb Straits to the Suez Canal; and the international circle, in which Egypt manages a complex fabric, consisting of a variety of support pillars, in its ties with the powers, chief among them the US, Russia, China, and the countries of the European Union (EU).

The return of the Mediterranean Sea to the center of the political and public agenda in Egypt is tied to economic, security, and cultural aspects: The discovery of gas reserves off Egyptian coasts, and the New Suez Canal project, have amplified the importance of the Mediterranean Sea regarding the financial present and future of Egypt; whereas concerns from terrorist threats to the maritime economic assets that are tied to the Mediterranean Sea created a change in the Egyptian defense concepts, and led to a force build up program on the part of the Egyptian navy. These economic-security aspects increased the importance of regional cooperation with countries that have shared interests, chief among them Greece, Cyprus, and Israel. In addition, they stimulated a profound internal debate about Egypt's national and cultural identity, and the desired level of its affiliation to the Mediterranean and to the countries that border it.

Historical background: Egypt as a "Mediterranean country"

The standing of the Mediterranean Sea in modern Egypt is both a political and a cultural issue. A series of Egyptian thinkers in the first half of the 20th century emphasized Egypt's historical and geographical affiliation to the Mediterranean Sea, as part of calls to apply Western models of society, religion, and government. Thus, for example, the well-known Egyptian author and historian, Taha Hussein (1889–1973), found a basis for authenticity, within a legacy that links Egypt to the Mediterranean basin, for his vision of founding a modern Egyptian nation-state, as a cosmopolitan, liberal and advanced country, which is oriented towards Europe.¹

In his writings from the 1930s and 40s, he argued that "the Egyptian spirit" is composed, from a historical perspective, of three intertwined elements, whose levels vary: The pure Egyptian element, the Arab element, and the foreign element whose roots are in the maritime reciprocal relations of ancient times with Greece and Rome that relate to art, policy, and economy. Modern Egypt – so he argued – can view itself as an integral part of Europe and its culture, without self-deprecating itself, or disconnecting from its past.²

The conceptualization of Egypt as a Mediterranean state, which served as a bridge in Hussein's contemplation between East and West, dropped off the agenda of the Egyptian establishment during the Nasserist era of the 1950s and 1960s, in favor of cultivating alternative national identity circles – Arab, Islamic, and African. The Mediterranean returned to the Egyptian discourse only in the 1990s, among others, as a counterweight to the "new Middle East" vision of Israel's Shimon Peres, which was perceived in Cairo as an attempt to enforce Israeli hegemony in the region, and to challenge Egypt's standing.³ As an alternative to "the Middle East," Egypt preferred to take part in the promotion of Mediterranean frameworks, chief among them "The Barcelona Process," which was launched in 1995 with the participation of European Union states, alongside 12 Mediterranean region states (Israel, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Syria, Cyprus, the Palestinian Authority, and Libya as an observer).⁴

Egyptian thinkers who have been preaching for the past two decades for a revival of the Egypt's Mediterranean orientation, tended to consider the deep impression left by Nasserite Arab nationalism on the country's identity. The Coptic intellectual Milad Hanna (1924–2012) recognized the superiority of Egypt's Arab identity over its Mediterranean identity. Still, he defined them as complimentary, even overlapping identities, which

1 Immanuel Koplewitz, *Taha Hussein and the Revival of Egypt: Selections from his Writings* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2001), pp. 80–81.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 228–229, 232–238.

3 Muhammad Afifi, "The Historical Roots of the Mediterranean Idea in Egypt, *al-Hayah* (November 19, 1988): <https://goo.gl/X6cV4a>

4 Ohad Leslau, "Israel and the EU," The Israel Democracy Institute (January 14, 2004): <https://www.idi.org.il/parliaments/9899/10718>

can be aligned without great difficulties. In his book, "The Seven Pillars of the Egyptian Identity," which was published in 1999, he argued that residents of Egyptian coastal cities (similar to the residents of coastal cities in other Arab countries like Syria, Lebanon, and Morocco) excel at a mentality, dress, and customs that are indistinguishable from those of coastal cities in Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, and Italy. In a rough division, he assessed that "Egypt is half European, a third Asian, and a sixth African. Europe starts in Alexandria, Asia starts in Cairo, and Africa starts at Aswan".⁵

Other writers emphasized the range of identities that Egypt contains, sharing the utilitarian assessment, according to which, fencing Egypt into an exclusive identity will make it difficult for it to utilize its national interests throughout the overlapping circles in which it strives to operate – the Arab, the Islamic, and the regional-geographic.⁶

Egypt and the Mediterranean after the "Arab Spring"

The strengthening of Egypt's Mediterranean orientation following the "Arab spring" stemmed from a consolidation of functional and cultural elements: In the functional dimension, a consolidation of Egyptian interests in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, particularly in the energy sector, which has amplified the geo-strategic importance of the Mediterranean circle. The finding of gas reserves, and the widening of the Suez Canal, provided a concrete dimension to the historical-cultural discussion of Egypt's Mediterranean identity, which touches on economic and security interests; in the cultural dimension, the revolutions that Egypt underwent on January 25 2011 and June 30 2013 placed national identity questions on the agenda, with competing forces seeking to exploit the liminal period⁷ that they found the state to be in, and to shape its image in line with their world view.

In the face of the ongoing decline of pan-Arabism, and the failure of the Muslim Brothers in their attempt to realize their Islamist vision, a liberal discourse has appeared that calls for reviving the Mediterranean ideas from Taha Hussein's school. In the face of an unsettled regional environment, which has pointed the threats of terrorism and anarchy at Egypt, the Mediterranean stood out as a positive horizon of security, prosperity and hope.

The functional and current importance of the Mediterranean Sea area for Egyptian national security is derived from the two significant economic assets that are tied to it –

5 Milad Hanna, *The Seven Pillars of Egyptian Identity* (October 6: Nahdat Masr, 1999), pp. 61, 130–132.

6 For example: Ahmad Hasanein al-Hasaniyya, "Egypt doesn't have an Exclusive Identity," *al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin* (June 15, 2007): <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=99709>

7 Liminality is an anthropological concept that describes situations and periods that are unclear, in which the self-identity of the individual or the group is unclear and lacks an orientation. Liminality can form a transition stage, in which the regular confines of thought and behavior are more flexible to changes.

the gas fields, and the Suez Canal. Added to these are the ports and tourist sites that are dispersed along the Egypt's north coast. The Zohr gas field, which Egypt reported on in August 2015, is the largest discovered thus far in the Mediterranean, containing 850 billion cubic meters (BCM) of gas. The field should allow Egypt to gradually decrease its dependency on gas imports from external sources, and in the future, to also export gas.

The new and expanded Suez Canal, which was unveiled in August 2015 after a grand national project, was designed to maximize the royalties that comes from ship passages, through increasing the number of ships that sail through the Canal, and shortening their waiting period. In addition, alongside the renovated Canal route, a series of projects are being planned in the sectors of logistics, technology, and industry.

The development of maritime arenas has been accompanied in recent years by a strengthening of the Egyptian Navy, through the acquisition of submarines, helicopter carriers, and warships, which are designed to protect sea and trade routes in the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea against symmetric threats (from potential rivals like Iran and Israel), and asymmetric threats (from terror groups).⁸

According to the Egyptian government-affiliated press, the major purpose for the military acquisitions program is to allow Egypt to defend the Suez Canal and the gas rigs in the Mediterranean. The massive investment in weapons, at a time when Egypt is suffering from a serious economic crisis, is based on the need to deter potential enemies and to develop a "long arm" that will defend these sea assets, which are responsible for the country's economic strength in the coming years. The declared goals of the naval force build-up are not offensive, and it is accompanied by means to reach diplomatic understandings with Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, in order to prevent future conflict over maritime borders.⁹

The Mediterranean interests that are now forming have led to a significant tightening of the triangle of relations between Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus, which was encouraged by the tensions between these three countries and Turkey. The leaders of the three countries met between 2004 and 2017 on five occasions for joint summit meetings, dedicated to coordination, in a series of economic issues, including: Forming economic borders, setting up a joint gas pipeline, connecting electrical grids, trade, tourism, maritime agriculture, technology and science, communications, and housing. This growing triangle of ties assists in the promotion of Egypt's interests vis-à-vis the European Union, and makes it easier for Greece and Cyprus to promote their own interests in Africa.

8 See: Eyal Finko, "The build Up of the Egyptian Navy," Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy: (Hebrew) https://poli.hevra.haifa.ac.il/~hms/images/Articals/Egyptian_Navy.pdf

9 Samir Farag, "Egyptian National Security Circles," *al-Ahram* (January 7, 2016): <http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/522767.aspx>

In addition, the bilateral and trilateral ties between the three countries include coordinating responses to the crises in Libya and Syria,¹⁰ the war on terrorism and illegal immigration, and joint military training involving navies and air forces.

The discovery of gas, and the renovated Suez Canal, have therefore placed the Mediterranean Sea at the center of the Egyptian administration's diplomatic, security, and economic agenda for the first time in years. An expression of the growing importance given by the Egyptian establishment to the Mediterranean arena can be found in an article by Liwa' (Major General) Samir Farag, formerly head of the Department for Moral Affairs in the Egyptian Armed Forces, who stated that "in the current era the Mediterranean Sea has turned into the most important circle influencing Egyptian national security". In light of the meteoric rise in its position, Farag advised Egypt in his article for the government affiliated Al-Ahram daily newspaper to strengthen its diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with Mediterranean states, and to sign agreements with them that will serve supreme Egyptian interests.¹¹ Ahead of the Egyptian-Greek-Cypriot trilateral summit held in November 2017, Al-Ahram used an official editorial to describe the Mediterranean as "the most important bridge" between Egypt and European countries, and expressed hope that leaders will promote the concept of "Mediterranean Sea security".¹²

The shared interests of Egypt with Mediterranean countries, and the discernible move towards Greece and Cyprus, promoted an official discourse in the Egyptian press regarding the country's Mediterranean orientation, in which security and economic considerations were mixed with cultural and historical perspectives. Former Egypt's Culture Minister, Hilmi Al-Namnam, presented cooperation between the shores of the Mediterranean in the fight against terrorism as a security need, which reflects a deeper common denominator between forward-looking forces against forces that seek to drag civilization back by hundreds of years.¹³ The Executive Chairman of the Al-Masri al-Youm daily newspaper, 'Abdel Monem Said, viewed the Egyptian interest in the Mediterranean as a signal of a desired transition of Egypt from a "river country" to a "sea country". According to Said, this is not only a benefit aimed at creating private and collective profit for Egypt and its citizens, but rather, a complex advantage that touches on the way of life, on the employment sector, and most of all, on replacing a conservative mentality into an

10 For example: Ayman Samir, "Egypt, Cyprus and Greece: The 5th Summit Writes the Future of the Triangle Cooperation," *al-Ahram al-Masa'i* (November 18, 2017): <http://massai.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/81012/246650.aspx>

11 Samir Farag, "Egyptian National Security Circles: The Mediterranean," *al-Ahram* (February 11, 2016): <http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/476079.aspx>

12 Al-Ahram, "Egypt and the Mediterranean," *al-Ahram* (November 19, 2017): <http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/623580.aspx>

13 Hilmi al-Namnam, "On both Shores of the Mediterranean," *al-Masry al-Youm* (May 9, 2017): <http://www.almazryalyoum.com/news/details/1131127>

innovative way of thinking.¹⁴ The literary critic Yusri Abdallah, in his article for Al-Ahram, called for the renewed adoption of the link offered by Taha Hussein between Egypt's Mediterranean identity, and a revival based on the values of modernism and progress: "In a climate of darkness and religious extremism, we must go back to the path of Taha Hussein, through a renewal of the Egyptian and Arab modernization project on the one hand, and defending the rationality that is at the heart of enlightenment on the other. Taha Hussein was and remains an authentic speaker of the progressive Egyptian spirit, which is still awaiting practical actions, dreams, and adventures".¹⁵

The establishment's perspective sought to rely on the vision of Taha Hussein, in order to reinforce functional policies being pursued by the el-Sisi administration for the changing national Egyptian interest in the Mediterranean. Egyptian liberal thinkers, in contrast, saw in the vision of their spiritual father a source of inspiration and legitimization for the call to apply a democratic-Arab model in post-revolutionary Egypt, and to promote a political and cultural alternative that will challenge the existing authoritarian order.

An example of this can be found in the articles of Abd al-Gawad Sayed, who suggested the introduction of a political party under the name "Mediterranean Egypt", and formulated a potential platform for it. According to his vision, the party would etch on its flag the following principles: Founding a civilian and democratic state, in which the military will focus on defending society and the law; encouraging a plurality of parties; tying the future of Egypt to three circles – the Middle Eastern, the Mediterranean, and the African – and not to the Arab world alone; a fight against religious fundamentalism; freedom of religion and separating religion and state; a free market economy with social safety networks; and founding a Middle Eastern League and a Mediterranean League in place of the current Arab League.¹⁶

Israel – Egypt relations and "the new Mediterranean"

The Egyptian discourse on the country's Mediterranean identity has had a positive effect on Egypt – Israel relations on three levels: First, it placed on the Egypt's public agenda the economic potential concealed in bilateral cooperation between Egypt and Israel in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, particularly in the gas fields (although this has also raised concerns of a struggle between the countries over energy resources); secondly, it assisted in the internalization of the mutual Egyptian Israeli interest that lie in turning flourishing trilateral cooperation that exists between both countries, each one separately, with Greece and Cyprus, into a four-way cooperation (although political limitations have

14 Abdel Monem Said, "from the River to the Sea Once More?!", *al-Masry al-Youm* (August 7, 2017): <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1173524>

15 Yusri Abdallah, "Taha Hussein and the Renewed Egyptian Spirit," *al-Ahram* (November 6, 2017): <http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/621410.aspx>

16 Abd al-Gawad Sayed, "Towards the Establishment of Mediterranean Egypt Political Party," *al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin* (October 30, 2016): <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=536296>

thus far prevented this interest from being realized); thirdly, it upgraded the position of the Mediterranean circle that includes Israel at the expense of traditional circles, Arab and Islamic, which exclude Israel. In general, this discourse has created an opening for Israel's future integration in Mediterranean cooperation frameworks alongside Egypt, which is subordinate to common economic-security interests, and ripening of essential political conditions.

Indeed, Egypt and Israel have for a number of years been holding contacts ahead of potential gas deals. The Tamar and Leviathan gas partnerships signed a long-term contract and memorandum of understanding with the Egyptian Dolphinius company in March and November 2015 (respectively) worth billions of dollars for the export of natural gas to Egypt, and through it, to European destinations, with the assistance of the LNG plants in Egypt. Although there are still unsolved technical obstacles on the way to realizing the transactions, the leaders of the Egyptian government stood behind the agreements in the name of the economic interests that they serve, and despite objections that exist among sections of the Egyptian public to normalization.¹⁷

The discussion on founding a four-way Mediterranean cooperation framework, which will include Israel, stressed with great vigor the tension that exists in Egypt between the functional consideration and the political-cultural barriers. At a time when Egypt and Israel each hold prosperous trilateral relations with Greece and Cyprus, creating a four-way regional front – despite its security and economic logic – is still controversial. The reservations held by the Egyptian administration about this process mainly stem from the concern over public criticism, against the background of setting precedents in cooperation with Israel, in the absence of simultaneous progress in the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. For this reason, the Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri refused to confirm reports, according to which he met with the Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz in March 2016, to promote a four-way regional energy alliance.¹⁸ In addition, Egyptian officials denied reports that appeared in October 2017 regarding a joint military exercise involving the four countries.¹⁹

The discourse in the establishment Egyptian media demonstrates a growing internalization of the interest in setting up Mediterranean frameworks with Israel, alongside a lack of readiness for the transition to move this idea to the operative field. The dominant stance

17 See: Ofir Winter and Eyal Razy-Yanuv, "Pipelines to Normalization in the BDS Era: The Natural Gas Deals with Egypt and Jordan as a Case Study", in Einav Yogev and Gallia Lindenstrauss (eds.), *The Delegitimization Phenomenon: Challenges and Responses* (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2017), pp. 77–90.

18 Itamar Eichner, "Senior Israeli Minister Meets with Egyptian Foreign Minister," *Ynet* (April 1, 2016): <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4786033,00.html>; Misbah Qutb, "The Foreign Minister denies an Alliance with Israel and Turkey Concerning the Gas of the Mediterranean," *al-Masry al-Youm* (April 5, 2016): <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/923456>

19 Ahmed Fouad, "Analysts Weigh Prospects of Egypt-Israel Military Exercises", *al-Monitor* (October 24, 2017): <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/news-on-israeli-egyptian-drill-raises-criticism-at-president.html>

holds that Egypt would be inclined to cooperate with Israel in regional-level frameworks (even if not in a "regional alliance"), in line with progress in the Israeli – Palestinian peace process.²⁰ Other voices have insinuated their support for the setting up of Mediterranean cooperation systems, in which Egypt and Israel would take part, even without explicit conditions. For example, Ahmed Qindil, head of the Program for Energy Studies at the Al-Ahram Center, underlined the need for "real cooperation" through the setting up of an upper regional framework that will allow for the extraction of profits that exist in the gas discoveries.²¹ Muhammad Kamal, an expert in international relations and a columnist in al-Masry Al-Youm, was even more daring, when he hinted that Egypt will miss the "Mediterranean train" unless it formulates a new and revolutionary regional outlook: "For many years, Egyptian diplomacy was imprisoned in traditional foreign policy circles, some of which were unproductive and became a burden. Hence, the hour has come to see the eastern Mediterranean as a new circle for Egyptian policy, which should be given priority in vision and in action, in light of the economic and strategic opportunities that are latent in it. In short – the future lies in the eastern Mediterranean Sea".²²

Liberal Egyptian thinkers have exhibited even more explicit openness for the need to get closer to Israel, as part of a wider orientation towards the West. Abd Al-Gawad Sayed called for the Arab League to be changed into the "Middle Eastern League" and to bring Israel into it, when the time is right, as part of a trend to increase the framework of regional cooperation. He also suggested setting up a "Mediterranean League" that will utilize the reciprocal relations between the Mediterranean countries through a "cultural, advanced and organic framework [rooted] in the history of the region".²³ In an extensive essay dedicated to the issue, Sayed defined three Mediterranean sectors that require cooperation between regional states: The security-political sector, including a resolution of territorial conflicts and the fight against extremist Islam; the economic-social sector, which requires regional integration, free trade, investment, and technology; and the cultural sector, which deals with cultivating trends and values of accepting the other, peaceful coexistence, and a mutual understanding of cultures belonging to the peoples in the region.²⁴

20 See: Ofir Winter, "An Egyptian Take on the 'New Middle East'," *INSS Insight* 826 (June 7, 2016): <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/an-egyptian-take-on-the-new-middle-east>

21 Ahmad Qindil, "Gas Findings in the East Mediterranean Sea: Will They Push into Cooperation or Incite Conflict?," *al-Ahram* (March 11, 2013): <http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/135998.aspx>

22 Muhammad Kamal, "The Future of the East Mediterranean," *al-Masry al-Youm* (November 27, 2016): <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1047903>

23 Sayyid, "Towards the Establishment of Mediterranean Egypt Political Party".

24 Abd al-Jawwad Sayyid, "Egypt and the Mediterranean", al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin (June 19, 2016): <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=521262>

Summary

Since the revolution of January 25 2011, an increasingly dominant discourse has been occurring in Egypt about the role of the Mediterranean Sea in the renewing identity of the Land of the Nile, and about the link between the varying economic and security interests of Egypt in the Mediterranean and the changes in its political and cultural orientation. An analysis of this discourse raises two principal perspectives: The Egyptian administration sees the Mediterranean as one of the most important national security circles for Egypt in light of its economic importance, and dedicates many resources to its development and protection, as well as promoting joint regional cooperation frameworks with Greece and Cyprus based on issues tied to it; by comparison, Egyptian liberals strive to go a step beyond this, seeking to channel the current circumstances offered by the Mediterranean Sea – and the liminal transitional phase that Egypt is experiencing, against the background of internal and external unrest – to lead to a deeper turning point in Egypt's identity, from Arabism and Islam towards Europe and the West.

The above discourse also touches on futures ties between Egypt and Israel. The latter is referred to as a rival, but chiefly as a partner, in actual terms, to pragmatic Egyptian interests in the Mediterranean – and sometimes, as a potential *de facto* ally – as part of the discussion on establishing joint regional cooperation frameworks in the coming years.

The relative openness that exists today in Egypt for pragmatic cooperation with Israel around common interests in the Mediterranean Sea forms a historic opportunity for a relative expansion of relations between the countries. Yet pursuing this necessitates an overcoming of the sensitivities that still exist in Egypt regarding the question of normalization.

A series of Israeli steps could make it easier for the Egyptian administration to endow more legitimacy for establishing common cooperation frameworks with Israel, including: Progress in the Israeli – Palestinian peace process; integrating the Palestinians in Mediterranean Sea frameworks that are forming; Israel's refraining from leading the regional processes, while third parties such as Greece and Cyprus becoming intensively involved in getting these going; choosing appropriate semantics that will make it easier for the marketing of Mediterranean cooperation frameworks (such as a "forum" rather than an "alliance"). Liberalization processes in Egypt, should they occur, are also expected to create a more comfortable political and cultural climate for breakthrough ideas.