



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Has Trump shored up the Middle East's creaking Pax Americana?



Donald Trump did something quite uncharacteristic at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. No, not the latest apparent U-turn on Ukraine.

He actually appears to have **engaged** in a damage-limitation exercise aimed at Arab and Muslim leaders.

At the table on the sidelines of the annual UNGA meeting were some very jittery US allies in the Middle East and beyond.

Their alarm at Trump allowing Israel to carry on and intensify its war in Gaza has recently been exacerbated by the perceived US acquiescence in that country's airstrike in Qatar.

Particularly Arab countries with actual peace treaties or diplomatic relations with Israel, primarily the UAE, Egypt and Jordan, would have looked for some reassurance from the US administration.

It's hard to imagine that they got anything meaningful from Trump, given his propensity for unreliability. But at least the gesture of meeting them and listening to their concerns might have alleviated some of their worst apprehensions.

The keystone of Middle East peace

Main among these is that the US under Trump cannot be counted upon anymore to guarantee arrangements that bring at least some stability to a notoriously unstable region. The oldest and most significant of these is the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

The peace that then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat signed in 1979 with Israel's hard-right Prime Minister Menachem Begin under the auspices of US president Jimmy Carter has been the cornerstone of the American position in the Middle East.

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It's underwritten by billions in US military aid to both Egypt and Israel and has put a large part of what was until then a geopolitically contested area of the world under a firm Pax Americana.

Both the later peace treaty between Israel and Jordan and Trump's own Abraham Accords that saw, among others, the UAE establish relations with Israel, flow from the original 1979 peace treaty with Egypt – the most populous Arab country by far.

Warnings from Cairo

It is precisely that keystone peace that has now come under pressure. Egypt **sees** Israel's actions in Gaza as potentially an existential threat.

Cairo vehemently **opposes** any plans that would see millions of Palestinians pushed into its Sinai Peninsula. It has also warned Israel of dire consequences should it repeat its attack on Hamas leaders in Qatar on Egyptian soil.

While the attack in Qatar was widely seen to have unsettled nearby countries on the Arab Peninsula, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, it carries extra risk for Egypt.

The UAE hardly has a native population, which in any case is overwhelmingly compliant. Saudi Arabia doesn't have ties with Israel and also has pervasive control over its population.

Egypt, however, is where the term 'Arab street' has most resonance. It has a population of some 116 million and got rid of one dictator less than 15 years ago.

The current, even more authoritarian military strongman, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, while firmly in

control, still needs to keep an eye on popular sentiment, which is vehemently anti-Israel.

Israel's actions against Palestinians in Gaza have naturally sparked outrage in Egypt

Any real or perceived slight to Egypt's national pride can evoke strong reactions, even when it involves ostensible allies. That became clear several years ago when there were public protests against the transfer of two Red Sea islands to Saudi sovereignty.

Israel's actions against Palestinians in Gaza have naturally sparked outrage in Egypt, but it's particularly infringements of the arrangements between the two countries that create most tensions.

Among these is Israel's occupation of the strategic Philadelphi corridor along Gaza's border with Egypt and the Rafah border crossing.

Israel, on the other hand, has **protested** an Egyptian military deployment into the Sinai Peninsula far beyond what has been agreed upon. The Israeli government has asked the US to intercede and get Egypt to draw down both personnel, equipment and alleged new infrastructure.

High-pitched rhetoric for public consumption

The presence of a much stronger Egyptian force in Sinai is particularly disturbing to Israel in light of the history between the two countries.

When Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser ordered UN peacekeepers to leave the peninsula in 1967, that was one of the sparks that caused the June war that year, also known as the Six-Day War.

On the other hand, Israel is probably not

displeased with the success that the reinforced Egyptian deployment has had in clamping down on Islamist groups in Sinai, some of whom are allegedly aligned with Hamas.

This illustrates that the increasingly high-pitched rhetoric between the two sides might be more for public consumption than actually signalling an imminent breakdown in relations.

Both countries not only have too much to lose from a real resumption of hostilities, they actually have a lot of interests in common.

Hamas and its Muslim Brotherhood precursors are as much of the enemy for the Netanyahu government as they are for Sisi's. Back in 2013, the then commander of the Egyptian army overthrew the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo.

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Even before, the Egyptian authorities were not on good terms with Islamic militants, such as Hamas. But Sisi has persisted in a harsh crackdown on his opponents.

Some of those on the more progressive-liberal side have recently been pardoned, but the same is not true for the regime's Islamist adversaries.

Despite Egypt's anger over Israel's **move** on Rafah and the border area, Cairo never agreed to free **movement** of Palestinians into Egypt, not even those who travelled for study or medical treatment were ever assured easy passage.

This went well beyond Egypt's opposition to the displacement of Gaza's population, which is shared by most Palestinians. Egypt's restrictive regime for letting Palestinians pass through Rafah has been a bone of contention between Cairo and the Palestinians for years.

Looking for backup options

Apart from their animosity towards Islamic militancy, Egypt and Israel share many other interests. As the Arab world's largest Sunni nation, Egypt has traditionally been opposed to Iran's influence in the region. It is also closely aligned, politically and economically, with the conservative Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies.

Both economically and militarily, the expectation is that Egypt cannot afford to go against the United States and rip up its pact with Israel, even if it wanted to.



The question is how far Netanyahu government will go in provoking the Arab governments and whether the Trump administration will do anything to rein him in

The relationship has been further cemented in recent years by Egypt becoming reliant on large quantities of gas from Israel's Mediterranean fields.

There has been talk of Netanyahu threatening a new multi-year \$35 billion gas **deal** that has just been signed over Egypt's Sinai military build-up, but that would be a spectacular own goal for Israel.

Despite mounting tensions, Egypt and its Arab partners, such as the UAE, have taken very few concrete steps to distance themselves from Israel. Even the EU is starting to do more to signal its displeasure.

The question is how far an increasingly uninhibited Netanyahu government will go in provoking the Arab governments it has ties

with or aspires to have ties with. And whether the Trump administration will do anything to rein him in.

The meeting in New York was the minimum Trump could do to reassure them. But the Arab countries are starting to look for backup options. Saudi Arabia's defence pact with Pakistan is part of that, so is Egypt's joint naval exercise with Turkey this month, the first in 13 years.

Still, all this is far from an alternative to the hegemonic security position the Americans continue to occupy in the region. The expectation for now is that nobody will step up to challenge or upset this. At least, as long as Washington is interested in maintaining it.