



## THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM THROUGH TAHRIR SQUARE: ANTI-ZIONISM AND PALESTINE IN THE 2011 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

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*This article addresses an aspect of Egypt's 2011 revolution almost entirely ignored in most Western media accounts: Israel and Palestine as prominent themes of protest. In reviewing Egyptian mobilization opposing normalization and in support of the Palestinian cause starting from Sadat's peace initiative of the mid-1970s, the author shows how the anti-Mubarak movement that took off as of the mid-2000s built on the Palestine activism and networks already in place. While the trigger of the revolution and the focus of its first eighteen days was domestic change, the article shows how domestic and foreign policy issues (especially Israel and Palestine) were inextricably intertwined, with the leadership bodies of the revolution involved in both.*

AMIDST INTERNATIONAL interest in the extraordinary Arab uprisings of 2011, the Egyptian revolution arguably attracted the most sustained coverage and analysis. From its first days in January 2011, scenes from Tahrir Square captured imaginations worldwide and featured again in year-end media pieces eleven months later. Yet many accounts, especially in the United States and Israel, have overwhelmingly emphasized the domestic aspects of the revolution, almost totally ignoring foreign policy dimensions such as Israel and Palestine that were present from the start. When these issues were mentioned at all, it was generally in the spirit of Josef Joffe's claim that the Arab uprisings had finally exploded the "shoddy theory" that Palestine was a "core regional issue" when in fact it was nothing but a "distraction" by the region's rulers.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Palestine and the Egyptian-Israeli relationship are issues that resonate powerfully among Egyptians. They figured prominently in protesters' slogans and demands throughout 2011, just as they had informed waves of popular mobilization against the regime over the four previous decades. Since the 1940s and especially the 1950s, the liberation of Palestine was

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regarded as an *Egyptian* issue, deeply internalized and intertwined with concerns for Egyptian national security and dignity, as well as hostility to Israel as a common threat to all Arabs. Indeed, the importance of these issues is reflected in the overlapping layers of Egyptian identity, in which an ancient sense of belonging to the Egyptian nation was later informed by religious and pan-Arab affiliations, as well as a more recent, secular history of resistance to Israeli aggression.<sup>2</sup>

These concepts were at the core of the pan-Arabist policies of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who won unprecedented levels of domestic and regional popular acclaim and for a time established Egypt as the preeminent leader of the Arab world. Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, radically broke with these policies, first by aligning with the United States and then by making peace with Israel, which dramatically isolated Egypt in the Arab world. In the decades that followed, Sadat and his successor Hosni Mubarak made concerted efforts to reconcile Egyptians to Israel and to erode the popular commitment to Palestine. Yet these failed to eradicate from the public consciousness either the conception of Israel as a national enemy and threat or Egyptians' sense of connection with the Palestinian people.

This article investigates anti-Zionism and the place of Palestine in Egypt's 2011 revolution in light of this historical context. Certainly, long-standing domestic grievances—focused on the growing inequality and poverty levels generated by the neoliberalism, corruption, and authoritarianism of the Mubarak regime—were at the forefront of the January 2011 protests. Yet compounding such inequality and impunity was the regime's foreign policy, which had been deeply unpopular for years. The revolution was spurred by the widening material and moral gap between the regime and the people, and Mubarak's policies on Israel and Palestine formed a major fault line. This article therefore examines the ways in which Egyptian citizens articulated their anti-Zionism and support for Palestine, and how they connected these issues with their domestic grievances, in the decades before and during the 2011 revolution. I begin by exploring the history of popular mobilization from the time of Sadat's peace initiative, before considering the emboldening effects of the 2011 revolution in which citizens raised demands for foreign policy change to unprecedented levels, but also faced a host of new challenges.

### ENTRENCHING THE SADAT LEGACY

Under Mubarak, the tenets of Egyptian foreign policy reflected significant continuity with the Sadat era. Key to both was the marshaling of state resources toward “normalizing” Egyptian-Israeli relations at the regional level and discrediting the Palestinian cause at the domestic level. Mubarak also preserved Sadat's U.S. orientation and economic liberalization project, *al-infitah al-iqtisadi*.

Sadat had endeavored to prepare the Egyptian public for his dramatic foreign policy change by adopting domestic policies “aimed at changing the complex of values prevalent in society.”<sup>3</sup> These targeted particularly the Arab orientation and commitment to Palestine that had characterized the Nasser era. Official discourse, the state media machine, and national education curricula under Sadat were all reshaped to project the logic of “Egypt-first” and to discredit Nasser’s Arab policies as costly and futile adventures. Public reeducation efforts targeted not only the Palestinian cause but also the Palestinian people, who were scapegoated as responsible for Egyptian political and economic woes and smeared with accusations of having sold their land to the Zionists.<sup>4</sup> Egypt’s own Palestinian community became suspect as security threats and deprived of the considerable educational, employment, and political opportunities and rights they had enjoyed under Nasser. Meanwhile, Sadat combined sponsorship of Islamist groups with repressive measures to counter and erode the support base of the Nasserists and the Left.

Mubarak entrenched these policies further when he became president after Sadat’s assassination in October 1981. With the advent of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s, he established for Egypt the role of regional mediator. As talks began to break down, “Egypt’s role became more direct, Mubarak and his officials acting as a channel for U.S. and Israeli pressure on the PA [Palestinian Authority] through the mechanism of security cooperation.”<sup>5</sup> Mubarak also pushed for regional economic integration under U.S. auspices. This included trade normalization with Israel: Egypt, the United States, and Israel signed the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) agreement in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

Mubarak’s embrace of the U.S. “war on terror” overlapped with his repression of Egypt’s Islamists and later his role in putting down Hamas. With responsibility for these areas transferred from the foreign ministry to the general intelligence apparatus, Egypt’s relations with Israel reached unprecedented levels of partnership. Their cooperation included coordinated plans to undermine the Hamas-led Palestinian government in 2006, keeping the Rafah border crossing closed after Israel’s siege on Gaza began in 2007, building a wall to seal off the Gaza tunnels, and, while sponsoring reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas, exerting considerable pressure on the latter whenever talks stalled under the weight of the imbalance.<sup>7</sup>

#### **ANTI-NORMALIZATION, PALESTINE, AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST MUBARAK**

Under Sadat’s new order, certain social sectors long opposed to Egypt’s Arabist policies and support for the Palestinian cause—notably big business and high-ranking security officials—were empowered. Meanwhile, lower income groups, promised prosperity under Egypt’s American

neoliberal turn, were influenced by the media campaigns discrediting Palestinians. These developments were reflected in the opinion polls of the late 1970s, which seemed to indicate a moderation in Egyptian attitudes toward Israel, reinforcing the impression of widespread, though tacit, public approval for Sadat's drive toward Camp David. A sense of shame, tempered by weary resignation, greeted the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Its acceptance was encouraged by the official media campaign and promises that peace would lead to justice for the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup>

Yet by 1981, public outrage at Israeli bombings in Iraq and Lebanon compelled a rethinking of these assumptions. Opposition to peace with Israel and commitment to the Palestinian cause had been publicly expressed as early as the mid-1970s and continued to recur intermittently across Egypt with varying degrees of intensity. Politically, strategies for registering dissent, or "repertoires of contention," took the form of anti-normalization campaigns and support for Palestinian or Arab resistance. Socially, these strategies were underpinned by cultural expressions of shared identity as well as common stories of struggle against Israel. These "contentious identity" narratives drew upon Egyptian-Arab, Islamic, and leftist political traditions and symbols.<sup>9</sup> Among the wider population, they were reflected in phenomena such as the folk hero status accorded to Egyptian soldier Suleiman Khater, who was tried in an Egyptian military court for shooting dead seven Israelis in the Sinai who had disregarded warnings that they were trespassing at an Egyptian military post. Khater's death in prison in 1986 was widely believed to have been carried out by the regime.<sup>10</sup> Also indicative of public sentiments was the popularity of cultural production emphasizing Egypt's history of war with Israel—such as 1996 blockbuster film *Nasser 56*—and a boycott movement responding to the Al-Aqsa intifada that compelled Sainsbury's supermarkets to shut down in Egypt in 2001.

Popular mobilization following the peace agreements, which occurred both spontaneously and with activist encouragement, had all the elements of a movement in the making. In terms of organizational structures, the licensed opposition was rarely involved. Parties such as the leftist Al-Tagammu' Party and the Arab Democratic Nasserist Party<sup>11</sup> traditionally defended the Palestine cause but kept within the narrow limits set by the regime, which permitted strong critiques of *Israeli* policy (including the highlighting of Palestinian suffering) but absolutely prohibited any critical discussion of *Egypt's* role. The principal challenges to the emergence of the movement, then, were the quietism of the opposition parties (interested party members increasingly worked within unlicensed organizations), divisions within the opposition as a whole, and the initial reluctance of nonparty activists to confront Mubarak's regime directly.

Negotiating these challenges, the first wave of Palestine-related activism under Mubarak was led by independent activists from the Committee for the Defence of National Culture and centered on anti-normalization.

This pioneering group was formed in the late 1970s by leftist and Arabist writers, journalists, artists, filmmakers, and academics who viewed culture as the “gravest route to reshaping a people’s consciousness” and considered any form of cultural boycott an “act of popular resistance.”<sup>12</sup> The committee, which protested Israel’s participation in the Cairo Book Fair in the early 1980s, employed an array of repertoires including public debates and commemorations, issuing statements, and publishing the circular *Al-Muwagaba* (“Confrontation”) as well as pamphlets and books.<sup>13</sup>

This early phase also witnessed waves of spontaneous popular dissent prompted by specific Israeli actions, such as the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the 1985 bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis, and the brutal crackdown on the first intifada (1987–90).<sup>14</sup> Often, these ad hoc but increasingly broad-based groupings dissolved with time, only to re-form spontaneously, including the same activists, in response to a new trigger. Among these organizations, the 1987 Egyptian National Committee in Support of the Palestinian Uprising is noteworthy. It introduced the practice of calling on citizens throughout Egypt to establish their own local committees to coordinate with the central body in Cairo. The committee’s “broad representation of the active political forces in Egypt was an important signal to the Egyptian government that support for the Palestinian cause is an issue above party politics and above all other divisions in Egyptian society.”<sup>15</sup>

During the mid-1990s, confronting a rise in violent Islamist extremism, Mubarak introduced a host of counterterrorism measures that enabled him to further stifle political dissent. He also used the 1993 Oslo accords to help legitimize Egypt’s closer ties with Israel. This spawned new organizations in 1995–96, including the Arab Committee in Support of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon and Palestine, the Popular Movement for the Resistance and Boycott of Israel, and the Arab Committee for the Resistance of Normalization in the Fields of Agriculture and Water, which published *Al-Muqawama* (“Resistance”), *Al-Sira’* (“The Struggle”), and *Al-Fallab Al-Arabi* (“The Arab Farmer”), respectively.<sup>16</sup> These publications were irregular and mainly dependent on sympathetic printing companies. All three organizations included members from across opposition parties, unions, media, universities, and art institutions. In 1997, such activists took a unified stand against a number of Egyptian intellectuals who had signed the “Copenhagen Declaration.” This document launched the “International Alliance for Arab-Israeli Peace” and became a target for Egypt’s anti-normalizers.<sup>17</sup>

With the September 2000 outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada, popular mobilization resurged. The newly formed Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada was a truly collaborative phenomenon in which leftists, Nasserists, liberals, the Muslim Brotherhood (youth, not leaders), as well as welfare and rights groups, all participated, irrespective of political and historical differences.<sup>18</sup> Committee members

in charge of large-scale aid convoys noted the significant volume of donations coming from Egypt's rural and urban poor.<sup>19</sup> The General Egyptian Committee for the Boycott of American and Zionist Goods and Companies was formed around the same time by popular initiative.<sup>20</sup>

On Egyptian campuses, students were politicized by the 2000 intifada; high school students also participated in demonstrations. One student group, bemoaning the lack of direct ties with Palestinians, launched the Cairo to Camps initiative at the American University in Cairo in 2002. These students spent their summers with Palestinian young people as volunteers in Lebanon's refugee camps.<sup>21</sup> According to cofounder Lina Attalah, "Living in the camps for one month, we exchanged experiences with Palestinian youth and transcended the romanticization of Palestine as an imaginary. We also hosted Palestinians, challenging issues of mobility."<sup>22</sup> Looking back at this period, Amr Ezz, a leader of the 6 April Youth Movement, which played a prominent role in the 2011 revolution, remarked that "Palestine was the one issue that would gather us all, that would mobilize the largest demonstrations. . . . We felt unity with our Palestinians siblings as an enslaved people, liberating itself."<sup>23</sup>

These broad-based Palestine demonstrations in the early 2000s were critical to the galvanization of Egyptian "street politics" that culminated in January 2011.<sup>24</sup> Under a regime that permitted no domestic criticism, the years 2000–2004 marked a brief but productive phase in which foreign policy demands served also as a proxy for domestic dissent. Indeed, the close links between the two often helped citizens overcome their fears, such that Palestine demonstrations would regularly end in chants against the Mubarak regime. Film director Hala Galal recalls slogans at the 2002 protests over Israel's massive Operation Defensive Shield assault on the West Bank: "We haven't forgotten you, Palestine; we are also occupied!"<sup>25</sup> This link was again made explicit in 2003 when tens of thousands of Egyptians protested the U.S. invasion of Iraq: "chanters coupled their outrage against the United States and Israel with critiques of Mubarak and his sons."<sup>26</sup>

It was after the U.S. occupation of Iraq that a number of Egyptian activists began to question their long-time adherence (along with opposition parties) to the discursive and practical limits of dissent laid down by the regime. As Egyptian Socialist Party leader and long-time Palestine activist Ahmad Bahaa' Sha'baan later recalled,

our questions about the absence of an official Egyptian role intensified, and we decided that we had to change the regime, America's pillar in the region. . . . I wrote at the time that if we wanted to help the Arabs we must work domestically against the complicity between the

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regime and Egyptian intellectuals. They could pour insults on America or Israel under the protection of state security, but domestic dissent was forbidden.<sup>27</sup>

This auto-critique enabled activists to take the unprecedented step of organizing demonstrations unambiguously focused on domestic grievances. The turning point came in 2004, when a loose coalition called Kifaya (“Enough”)<sup>28</sup> was formed that openly challenged the notions of *tamdid* (extension) and *tawriih* (hereditary succession) with regard to Mubarak’s presidency. The coalition built on the networks developed during Palestine-related protests. Kifaya cofounder Sha’baan explains that it was the experience of Palestine activism that made possible the collective decision to break the boundaries set by the regime and directly contest its authoritarian rule. Kifaya’s statements were also strongly informed by pan-Arabism, Sha’baan affirms. The first *Bayan ila-l-Umma* (“Statement to the Nation”), for example, warns against the interlocking threats of dictatorship and “aggression against Arab lands.” Kifaya gave rise to a number of similar movements, most recently the National Association for Change, all focused on removing Mubarak, but whose grievances covered both domestic and foreign policy. In this way, anti-normalization and Palestine consciousness became important incubators for the Egyptian revolution.

Ironically, a degree of apathy on Arab issues appeared to follow; even demonstrations during Israel’s 2006 war on Lebanon and its 2008–2009 war on Gaza were poorly attended. This was mainly because those who had poured into the streets during Palestine’s intifadas were now consumed with an all-out domestic struggle against the regime. Activists were forging links with the labor movement, together protesting the corrupt state elite’s privatization of the public sector, resulting in falling wages, rising inflation, and unemployment, compounded by the slashing of public welfare, education, and health subsidies. However, the lack of attention to Israeli policies and Palestine in these years was also partly due to powerful state media campaigns to discredit Islamic resistance movements like Hamas and Hizballah. The secular bias of much of the Egyptian Left, which was reluctant to rally support for Islamist movements even when victims of Israeli brutality, also played a role.<sup>29</sup> As for the Muslim Brothers, while they officially supported the anti-Israeli resistance, their political ambitions led them to toe the government line,<sup>30</sup> though they did organize aid donations separately, mainly through their “Palestine Committees” and the professional syndicates they control.<sup>31</sup>

When the Egyptian revolution erupted on 25 January 2011, then, popular support for Palestine seemed at a nadir. Yet within weeks not only had Palestine once again been pushed to the foreground, but the focus of mainstream political debate on Israel shifted from anti-normalization to whether or not Egypt should rethink—or even cancel—the peace treaty. Thus, while the late 2000s had made clear the limits of Egyptian support

for the Palestine issue, the early months of 2011 demonstrated its enduring resonance among the Egyptian people.

### **THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION OF 2011: ANTI-ZIONISM AND PALESTINE IN TAHRIR SQUARE**

If the anti-Mubarak movement had been focusing on domestic rather than foreign policy matters in recent years, the 2011 revolution represented a peak in public consciousness and expression of the nexus between the two. The popularization of the slogans “Bread, freedom, human dignity” alongside “Raise your head high, you are Egyptian!” suggests this link: citizens connected their impoverishment and the erosion of Egyptian prestige internationally with Mubarak’s subservience to U.S. and Israeli directives, and his personal profiteering from such policies. This subtle connection was made more explicit by banners, chants, and songs denouncing rising food prices, plummeting wages, and privatization, intermingled with slogans condemning foreign interference under Mubarak, demanding an end to the QIZ agreements and Egyptian natural gas sales to Israel, and proclaiming Mubarak a U.S. and Israeli stooge (*amil*). The focus on Israel was particularly clear: images of Mubarak adorned with Israeli symbols appeared, along with banners in Hebrew asking him to leave and chants and signs saying that he would be welcome in Tel Aviv.

Identity narratives during the first eighteen days of the revolution—during which Mubarak was driven from office—did not foreground Palestine per se but highlighted the Egyptian people’s rejection of foreign interference and Zionism. Immediately after Mubarak’s 11 February exit, however, the repertoires and discourse of “January 25th” were expanded to include anti-Zionism and commitment to Palestine. With Mubarak gone, a collective decision was taken by several revolutionary youth groups to replace the permanent occupations of Tahrir and other squares with mass national demonstrations every Friday (a strategy intended to maintain pressure on the authorities and communicate popular demands, while responding to calls for a “return to normalcy” in public space). The very first such demonstrations on 18 February, just a week after Mubarak’s departure, were attended by an estimated 3 million Egyptians and abounded in explicitly pro-Palestinian chants and statements, including “To Jerusalem we’re going; martyrs in our millions!”<sup>32</sup> Palestinian scarves, flags, slogans, and symbols proliferated alongside Egyptian flags and symbols, and Tunisian, Libyan, and other Arab flags also began to appear. These all became recurrent features of subsequent demonstrations.

For the next four months, domestic and foreign policy goals were regularly pursued simultaneously. A prime example was the mass demonstration in Tahrir Square on 13 May. The main theme for the demonstration



Tens of thousands of demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo mark the Nakba, 13 May 2011. (Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images)

was to have been Palestine (as part of the Nakba commemorations discussed below). However, as a result of a vicious attack several days before by Islamist extremists on Coptic Christians in the Cairo neighborhood of Imbaba, when fifteen people were killed and three Coptic churches burned, the youth coalitions decided to rename the demonstration “The Friday of National Unity and the Palestinian Cause.”<sup>33</sup>

There was no single authoritative “leadership” of the revolution. Rather, there was coordination between a number of organizations, parties, and movements that had been active in anti-Mubarak mobilization well before 25 January 2011. Of these groups, most had also been engaged in Palestine activism in the past. Reflecting the spontaneous momentum of January 2011, some of these organized to form the Revolutionary Youth Coalition (RYC) on 6 February in order to coordinate demands and demonstrations more effectively. The RYC became one of the leading decision-making bodies in subsequent weeks. It comprised, for example, the 6 April Youth Movement, which had formed in 2008 to support the momentous textile workers’ strike in al-Mahalla al-Kubra and was critical in preparing for 25 January. The RYC also hosted the Muslim Brotherhood Youth who, in an important generational split, had defied their leadership’s orders to stay away from the protests called for 25 January. Also in the RYC were the Youth in Support of the Al-Baradei [Presidential] Campaign; the leftist Justice and Freedom Youth Movement; the youth of the liberal Democratic Front, Ghad, and Nasserist al-Karama parties; and the National Association for Change Youth.

Also active in mobilizing for 25 January was the group *Kuluna Khalid Said* (“We Are All Khaled Said”), which formed in 2010 to protest the police killing of a young Internet activist and had a strong popular base. The labor movement, which had undergone an unprecedented renaissance since the 2000s, formed the new Egyptian Independent Union Federation (EIUF) in the early days of the revolution. Other, less orthodox, participants were the “Ultras,” associations of football club supporters with significant experience dealing with police violence.

Throughout 2011, these groups continued to be vocal in their hostility to Israel and commitment to Palestine. Almost all participated, as organizations, in the commemoration of the Palestinian Nakba in May 2011. In short, political, (proto-)revolutionary activism in Egypt, whether on domestic or foreign policy issues, was carried out by the same groups with shared concerns, if to differing degrees. The declaration issued in late June by the newly formed EIUF exemplifies the importance of the Palestine and Israel issues to an organization whose professional concerns are by definition domestic:

We affirm our complete support for the right of the Palestinian Arab people to create an independent state in the whole of Palestine, and their right to use whatever means of resistance to achieve their rights . . . one of the principal reasons for our rejection of the old Egyptian Trade Union Federation is its subservience to the state and the National Democratic Party, and its participation in a visit to occupied Jerusalem and its failure to take any position opposing the policy of normalization.<sup>34</sup>

Speaking in December 2011, members of the RYC Executive Bureau recall the turn to Arab issues immediately after Mubarak’s fall. Islam Lutfi and Amr Ezz, then representing the Muslim Brotherhood and 6 April Youth movements, respectively, describe it as a natural progression in their priorities at the time: “We were observing events in Libya and Yemen and began coordinating with other Arab revolutionary youth movements . . . we believe that Arab unity exists, but from below, not from the top-down. . . . For us, Palestine was always a central issue.”<sup>35</sup>

### **NEW REPERTOIRES: FROM TAHRIR TO THE “THIRD INTIFADA”**

Mubarak’s forced exit in February opened up space for sustained mobilization on both domestic and foreign policy issues that lasted until early summer. A new sense of empowerment led Egyptians to challenge all authority structures, with strikes and purges in factories, banks, unions, syndicates, media outlets, and universities. When Mubarak’s last cabinet was toppled in March, the new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, and the new foreign minister, Nabil al-Arabi, were both nominated by representatives from Tahrir.

Al-Arabi made an immediate break with the reactive mode of foreign policy under Mubarak by announcing, in April, the imminent opening of the Rafah crossing, and by describing the siege of Gaza as a “shameful practice.” He also stated plainly that all Egypt’s international agreements signed were open to revision.<sup>36</sup> Cairo’s success, after many failed attempts, in brokering the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement in May was attributed by many to the fall of the old regime and the more even-handed and independent approach of Egypt’s new mediators.<sup>37</sup> These new policies received widespread popular support and acclaim from across the political spectrum.<sup>38</sup> It appeared that the foreign policy realignments demanded by Egypt’s protesters were underway.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, thousands-strong marches toward the Israeli embassy in Giza had become a regular event. Successive demonstrations were held outside the embassy on 8 April, 29 April, and 6 May. As veteran Palestinian activist and Cairo-based writer Abdel Qadir Yassin observed, “the revolutionaries stayed in Tahrir until they removed Mubarak, then they directed themselves to the Israeli embassy.”<sup>40</sup> Setting out from Tahrir Square during every Friday demonstration, protesters’ chants included “Arm us, arm us, to Gaza, send us!” “The people want the liberation of Palestine!” and “Where is Israel? The Egyptian people are here!”

The marches and demonstrations occurred in the context of soaring popular expressions of hostility toward Israel and sympathy for the Palestinian cause, but also of the preparations then underway to commemorate the Palestinian Nakba on 15 May. The initiative was launched from Palestine via the “Third Intifada” Facebook page and was embraced by activist networks across the Arab world. Several Egyptian civil society associations and parties disseminated the initial call, while organizers such as the RYC incorporated references to Palestine in their posters and online flyers before each Friday demonstration. Egyptian Facebook groups such as “The Liberation of Jerusalem Begins with the Liberation of Cairo” and “The Preparatory Committee for the Third Palestinian Intifada” immediately formed and linked to the Palestinian “Third Intifada” page. Activists in Palestine and Egypt forged new online connections after January 2011.<sup>41</sup>

As had long been the case in Palestine activism, participation in the 15 May preparations and demonstrations crossed generational, party, and political divisions. Participant groups included Kifaya, the RYC, the Nasserists, the Islamist-leaning Labor party, and the Revolutionary Socialists. New groups, like the “Popular Committees in Defence of the Revolution” set up to protect local neighborhoods<sup>42</sup> and student organizations such as the “Association of Supporters of the Palestinian Revolution” at Cairo University, all played roles. The latter intentionally revived the name of its leftist-Nasserist predecessor, which had helped spark the 1972 demonstrations against Sadat’s inaction against Israel. Reflecting the coalitions of the later anti-Mubarak movement, however, the new group’s

participants came from across the political spectrum.<sup>43</sup> The organizers' demands reflected continuity with previous Palestine committees, including the right of return for all Palestinian refugees, the permanent opening of the Rafah crossing, the end of Egyptian gas exports to Israel, and the release of all Palestinians imprisoned in Egypt. One new demand was added: "cancellation of all the humiliating agreements and treaties, and boycott of all commercial and political relations with Israel."<sup>44</sup>

The range of participants was mirrored in the diversity of the narratives that converged on the Palestine issue. Prayers were held spontaneously at many demonstrations, and there were also Arabist and leftist songs and slogans, testifying to the ongoing popularity of the 1952 revolution's artistic canon and the anti-establishment repertoire of singer Sheikh Imam and poets Ahmad Fuad Nigm and Zein al-Abidin Fuad. Pamphlets for 15 May were put out by new (often online) groups that employed both Arabist and Islamic framing,<sup>45</sup> as well as by organizations directly involved in the Third Intifada campaign, which used more leftist-Arabist language. One such pamphlet, which emphasized that "anti-Zionist Jews are our allies" and called Mubarak "a Zionist occupier of our own skin," opened with Amal Dunqul's "Do Not Reconcile," a poem rooted in Egypt's leftist anti-normalization tradition that referred to both Egyptian and Palestinian towns as being under occupation.<sup>46</sup>

Egyptian organizers of the Nakba commemoration events oversaw an ambitious three-day program of daily dawn prayers and mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square, at the Israeli embassy, outside the ambassador's residence in the Cairo suburb of Maadi, and outside the Israeli consulate in Alexandria. Given the ferment underway, activists stressed that "there was no need to mobilize; people were gathering spontaneously."<sup>47</sup>

Also planned was an aid convoy to the Gaza border that was to depart from Tahrir on 14 May but that was largely thwarted by the military authorities. On the appointed day, as participants assembled in Tahrir for departure, military orders were dispatched to all tourist offices forbidding them to release the buses hired. Those able to find other means of transport proceeded regardless, but were stopped at the Al-Salam Bridge in Ismailiyya and ordered to turn back. Instead, many held protest sit-ins at the bridge,<sup>48</sup> whereas others continued on to Rafah with public transportation.<sup>49</sup> Another reason for the failure of the aid convoy was the recurring division within the opposition based on levels of quietism vis-à-vis the authorities. Organizers complained that the Muslim Brotherhood had used Tahrir Square platforms to discourage participation; indeed, members were ordered not to take part.<sup>50</sup> Some tried to participate on an individual basis but returned at the first military roadblock.<sup>51</sup> As in previous decades, coalitions working on Palestine included Islamists from a range of groups, except the largest.

Meanwhile, the 13 May Tahrir Square demonstration in support of Palestine and national unity was a great success, drawing crowds

estimated at a million people. Smaller gatherings outside the Israeli embassy, however, were subjected to unexpected violence from the military that continued for all three days devoted to honoring the Nakba. From Friday through Sunday, security and military police chased, tear-gassed, and fired at protesters, using the most vicious tactics on the last day.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, the attacks served to link the current authorities with the same U.S. and Israeli interests Mubarak was seen as having served for decades. In a eulogy for Atif Yehya, a protester killed at the embassy on 15 May, journalist Naglaa' Bedeir wrote, "the youth heading to the embassy simply wanted to send a message to the Zionist enemy that revolutionary Egypt considers it an enemy and supports the Palestinian *intifada*," adding that Atif was a young man who had respected the army.<sup>53</sup>

The security forces' behavior at the embassy demonstrations in May exacerbated the already growing anger at the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which appeared increasingly reluctant to bring Mubarak to trial, trace stolen public funds, and overhaul government ministries. By late spring, the realization that their demands were not being met by the ruling generals led the revolutionaries back to their tactics of January. The renewed occupation of public squares began on 8 July, with slogans such as "returning to Tahrir" and "retribution for the martyrs" killed by the authorities since January 2011. Yet although the priority for mobilization had reverted to domestic demands, Palestine and its flags and slogans continued to be visible, having become permanent fixtures in popular protests.<sup>54</sup>

### **BUCKING THE TREND: THE ISRAELI EMBASSY PROTESTS**

On 17 August, the focus of mobilization again turned to foreign policy. That day, Israeli forces shot dead five Egyptian officers and guards and wounded others at the Sinai border. The act unleashed a wave of anger, breaking the previous months' trend of domestic focus. This confirmed the enduring strength of Egyptian grievances against Israel and their capacity to resurge at any Israeli provocation. Defying an easy calibration of their priority demands in the revolution, protesters now shifted the focus squarely on the peace treaty with Israel.

Activists declared an indefinite occupation outside the Israeli embassy in Giza as well as ongoing protests outside the ambassador's residence and the Israeli consulate in Alexandria. There were also demonstrations in the provincial towns of Fayyum, Beheira, Ismailiyya, Suez, Mansura, and Luxor, among others. Citizens spoke of the need to restore their wounded dignity and protect the sanctity of Egyptian land and life from the Zionists. There was a heightened emphasis on Israel-related demands, such as expelling the ambassador, closing the embassy, severing all diplomatic and economic ties, and renegotiating or abrogating the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.<sup>55</sup> Activists and politicians alike

underlined that “Egypt after January 25th is different from what it used to be.”<sup>56</sup>

For three days, protesters launched fireworks at the Israeli flag on top of the high-rise building where the embassy was located, trying to set it on fire. Then, on 20 August, a house painter named Ahmad al-Shahat from Al-Sharqiya governorate scaled all twenty-one stories, took down the Israeli flag, and raised the Egyptian flag to cheering crowds. He was instantly hailed as a national hero, his act generating huge popular acclaim and media interest.<sup>57</sup> Numerous opinion pieces reflected on the meaning of his act, connecting it with historical precedents in which Egyptians had confronted Israel, such as Suleiman Khater.<sup>58</sup> While some cautioned that the event had brought no concrete victory, all agreed on its symbolic power.<sup>59</sup> Thousands more demonstrated outside the Israeli embassy the following Friday, 26 August, dubbed the “Friday of the Expulsion of the Ambassador.”

Al-Shahat’s symbolic precedent was tested two weeks later when the Israeli flag was restored and Egyptian authorities erected a wall—painted with the colors of the Egyptian flag—around the embassy building. This sparked instant comparisons with Mubarak’s wall along the Rafah border, also built for the sake of Israeli security. A demonstration (nicknamed “Hammers Friday”) was spontaneously called for 9 September to bring down the wall and expel the ambassador. With a demonstration on electoral reform (titled “Correcting the Path”) already planned that Friday for Tahrir Square, hundreds of the protesters set out from the Tahrir demonstration for the embassy. By evening, they had brought down the wall. Some of the protesters scaled the building and removed the Israeli flag; some managed to enter one of the embassy floors and hurled documents from the windows. The entire diplomatic staff was evacuated under Egyptian commando escort, while military police launched a large-scale clampdown that resulted in three deaths, 1,049 injuries, and thirty-eight arrests. Despite these losses, the events of 9–10 September were seen as another popular victory: the government had failed to respond to citizens’ demands, and they had expelled the ambassador themselves.

Still, the embassy protests had been marred by a certain degree of breakdown in consensus. The Muslim Brotherhood, repeating its opt-out from the Nakba events in May, stayed away from August’s “Friday of the Expulsion of the Ambassador,” citing Ramadan prayers.<sup>60</sup> Further divisions surfaced in September as some groups feared that the authorities had manipulated events to provoke the destruction of the wall and thus justify extending the emergency law.<sup>61</sup> In different ways, these instances confirmed the consensus that domestic change had to be secured before pursuing foreign policy agendas.

Yet overall, the embassy protests were able to align various political groups and raise the ceiling of collective demands, formalizing a focus on the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty that recalled the debates of the 1980s.

On 21 August, public figures from thirteen political parties, organizations, and movements, including four presidential candidates, the RYC, and rights activists at the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre, petitioned the military council with a number of demands. These included the suspension of diplomatic and economic ties with Israel and Egyptian redeployment

in Sinai, but also “stopping Israeli military fleets’ use of the Suez Canal . . . handing over the killers of Egyptian martyrs [of 17 August] for trial before Egyptian courts, and informing the Security Council of Israel’s violations.”<sup>62</sup>

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Like the Palestinian intifadas of 1987 and 2000, this had been a moment when citizens, acting spontaneously, had taken the lead, with activists and political organizations building on their initiative. Reflecting on the embassy protests, RYC Executive Committee member Islam Lutfi observed, the “Egyptian people have a profound yet unpub-

licized creed that Israel is the enemy.”<sup>63</sup> Kifaya cofounder Abdel Halim Qandil remarked, “the presence of Israel in Egypt will gradually waste away: the Egyptians have collectively broken their barriers of fear.”<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, activists displayed a careful and pragmatic concern not to push Egypt into an untimely military confrontation.<sup>65</sup> There was a strong sense that the interdependence between domestic and foreign policy change required a strategic sequence in which the former should enable the latter. This was pointedly suggested in the abovementioned petition of 21 August, which, after endorsing the protesters’ demands to expel the Israeli ambassador and renegotiate the peace agreement, noted that Egyptians needed to unite and solve their *internal* problems in order to effectively challenge Israel.<sup>66</sup>

The evacuation of the Israeli embassy in September was followed by renewed focus on domestic developments. The first parliamentary elections of the post-Mubarak era had been called, with the first of four rounds scheduled for 28 November. For some months, new party formation had been underway as a result of a change in Egypt’s electoral law in March. This period revealed the impact of the revolution on certain ossified political structures, but also saw increasing fragmentation. Of particular significance was the Muslim Brotherhood’s decision to claim a part in the revolution (after having forbidden its members from participating in the 25 January protests) by forming the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) to stand in the forthcoming elections. When the Brotherhood leadership banned its membership from joining any party other than the FJP, many young members left or were expelled. One group of former Brothers joined with 6 April members and others to form the Egyptian Current Party. Once campaigning got underway in early November, domestic politics and its divisions became a national preoccupation.

Meanwhile, by late summer many Egyptians were gravely concerned about the future of their revolution in light of increasing attacks by the military council, military and civilian police, and state media. The SCAF, which had secured its position with a constitutional declaration in March 2011, had initially viewed public protests as a sort of “pressure release” it could instrumentalize to pose as “protector of the revolution.” At the same time, and in line with its consolidation of power, it increasingly turned to violence against protesters on the pretext that the demonstrations endangered national “stability,”<sup>67</sup> while state media echoed SCAF claims of “foreign hands” sabotaging the revolution.<sup>68</sup> The revolutionary groups were divided at this stage as to the optimal response: while the SCAF’s attacks still appeared to be sporadic, most preferred not to alienate the generals and tried to cooperate with their timetable for transition.

The closing months of 2011, however, were marked by an upsurge in direct attacks on the revolutionaries. In October, over twenty died in a military crackdown on a largely Coptic demonstration protesting the burning of a church. The death toll climbed in November and December as military and civilian police targeted small sit-ins at Tahrir Square and outside the Egyptian cabinet, using teargas and live fire.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, SCAF was tightening its grip on power. In mid-November the generals had stated that they would rule until a new president was elected and a new constitution was written, a process then expected to last into 2013. They also attempted to preserve their privileges and immunity from parliamentary scrutiny in a draft document of basic principles for the constitution, and on 7 December they stated that they, not the parliament, would select the constitutional committee. As the SCAF’s credibility fell and public outrage mounted, the FJP, which along with the Salafis’ Al-Nour party had swept parliamentary polls, kept largely silent. These developments brought thousands back onto the streets of downtown Cairo in protest, met in turn with unprecedented violence, and the closure of several human rights organizations in mid-December. As 2012 began, mobilization around foreign policy change seemed like a luxury of the distant past.

### **LOOKING FORWARD: DEMOCRATIZING EGYPTIAN POLITICAL SPACE**

For all their immense achievements, Egyptian activists and citizens had to commemorate the first anniversary of 25 January 2011 with the slogan “the revolution continues.” The revolution’s ability to effect far-reaching change had been severely hampered by the self-appointed SCAF. With regard to foreign policy, its very first communiqué had indicated its positions, emphasizing that Egypt would respect all its international treaties.<sup>70</sup> Initially the momentum of the revolution had seemed to overwhelm the generals, but they were soon buoyed by the financial and political support of such regional and international players as Saudi

Arabia and the United States, which did not hide their displeasure with the foreign policy initiatives of Nabil al-Arabi,<sup>71</sup> who was transferred to the less “sensitive” position of Arab League Secretary General by June. SCAF General Mohammed Al-Asaar’s visit to the United States in July 2011 seemed to reassert continuity in Egyptian foreign policy, preserving U.S. business interests, the peace treaty, and hence economic and military aid to Egypt.<sup>72</sup> Assuming the generals fulfill their latest promises to step down after the presidential elections announced for June 2012, the new incumbent will confront mutually reinforcing national and international business interests in the status quo, and the institutionalized securitization of both U.S. and Egyptian foreign policy.

Furthermore, given the electoral sweep of the Islamist parties, the next government is unlikely to embark on a revisionist course in foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> Despite the anti-Zionism and deep Palestinian sympathies of their constituencies, the Brotherhood and FJP leaderships have consistently taken positions of approximate alignment with the SCAF, which they have been able to impose thanks to highly disciplined internal structures.<sup>74</sup> Nor has any change in position been signaled since the new FJP-dominated parliament was seated on 23 January 2012, and Muslim Brothers even participated in halting mass demonstrations on 30 January calling for hastening the end of military rule. Specifically on Palestine, the FJP program speaks vaguely of a “just solution to the Palestinian issue” and the “right of Palestinians to their state.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Islamist leaders’ statements have been inconsistent. Senior Muslim Brother Rashad Bayyumi declared in January 2012 that the FJP would put the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty to a popular referendum.<sup>76</sup> Yet a month earlier, FJP leaders had told U.S. senator John Kerry and U.S. ambassador Ann Patterson that they would respect Egypt’s international treaties. This position was echoed by Al-Nour leader Emad Abdel Ghaffour days later.<sup>77</sup>

On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true, as the revolutionaries affirm, that “Egypt will never be the same again.” A new factor has been irreversibly inserted into every high politics calculation in Egypt, namely the popular will and the democratizing impact of its political pressure. The SCAF’s inability to insulate itself from the impact of popular mobilization was demonstrated by the outrage over the Israeli military’s killing of Egyptian troops in August, forcing it to allow people to express their anger. The generals made no attempt to dampen the celebrations of Ahmad Al-Shahat as a national hero or to prevent protesters from tearing down the embassy wall. They even had to seek an apology from Israel—and, remarkably, were obliged—though this act was publicly scorned. Even if these moves were intended as a pressure release, and for all the self-assurance of the SCAF, this episode served as a reminder of the precariousness of Egyptian-Israeli “peace.”

In January 2012, activists’ mere preparations to commemorate the revolution’s first anniversary extracted several concessions from the SCAF,

including the release of almost 2,000 political prisoners (out of a total 12,000 imprisoned since February 2011) and the partial lifting of the emergency law. Yet these gestures did not stop millions turning out on 25 January, and thousands on subsequent days of protests, calling openly for the fall of military rule. At the time of writing, preparations are underway for a national day of strikes and civil disobedience on the anniversary of Mubarak's departure, 11 February, with the same aim and significant potential.

The revolution has also "democratized" the language and structures of Egyptian politics: statements from presidential candidates<sup>78</sup> and parties<sup>79</sup> throughout 2011 sought to reflect the public's positions with their overwhelming focus on the peace treaty with Israel. In shaking up the old structures of the Islamist movement, the revolution generated new formations that are willing to break ranks and expose their erstwhile seniors' silence on domestic and foreign policy issues. The language of the Egyptian Current Party, for example, is hostile to Israel and vocal about Palestinian self-determination and resistance.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, by late January 2012, even FJP sympathizers were expressing disappointment with the party's deferent behavior to the SCAF, labeling it opportunism or even betrayal.<sup>81</sup> The bounds of legitimate policy have been significantly altered, and popular trends will likely act as a check on Israeli militarism, mediated by pressure from Egyptian officials.<sup>82</sup> There can be no return to the Egyptian-Israeli cooperation that characterized the Mubarak era.

Throughout 2011, depending on context and political opportunity, protesters and revolutionaries chose their battles and the optimal timing for them, and in so doing were able to redraw the boundaries of official policy significantly. The pattern of popular mobilization reflected an unarticulated sequence of priorities whereby domestic change was to precede or indeed facilitate foreign policy overhaul. The latter would in turn involve confrontation with Israel and restoration of Palestinian rights, to be pursued pragmatically, as domestic developments allow.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, it is important not to impose too strict an analysis on the political strategies of 2011. Protesters have identified and seized political opportunities to mobilize on different dimensions of their domestic and foreign policy demands depending on context, such that they have surfaced together and also separately at different times.

The popular commitment to Palestine and against Israel in Egypt is powerful, because it is based not only on a sense of justice and humanitarianism but also on an emotive sense of shared identity and fraternity in the struggle against a common threat. Indeed Egypt's 2011 revolution built on the foundations of four decades of spontaneous popular protest and activism, in which anti-Zionism and Palestine were consistently present, crossing class and religious divides. This rich tradition will further democratize the political scene between the authorities and contenders for power in Egypt, despite the retrenchment of the military and security forces' positions in the latter months of 2011. Indeed, as the year came to

a close, protesters were firmly focused on challenging the military council, yet the Sinai gas pipeline was blown up for the tenth time, and the new Israeli ambassador in Cairo reported for duty without an embassy, as all efforts to find a new landlord had so far failed.

## ENDNOTES

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15. Al-Sayyid, p. 49.
16. Sha'baan, pp. 15–18, 22–23.
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19. Interview, Kifaya cofounder Sha'baan, Cairo, 14 December 2011.
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