

Egyptian – Israeli relations 1948 – 2011

For almost half of its existence as a state, of all its neighbours Israel has enjoyed its most cordial relations with Egypt, particularly under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak. Egypt occupies a strategic position in the Middle East, with control of the Suez Canal, the main maritime thoroughfare for trade between East and West. Throughout its recent history Egypt has been at the political and cultural forefront of pan-Arabism and the Non-Aligned Movement. With the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Egypt took a lead role in the struggle for Palestinian rights in the land occupied by the new state. From 1948 to 1973 Egypt was a key participant in the wars that broke out between Israel and its neighbours, but the Camp David Accords and the 1979 peace treaty heralded a new era of relations between the two countries. It was the peace treaty of 1979 and the subsequent ascent to power of Hosni Mubarak which many viewed as the signal of Egypt's increasing reliance upon the US (it had been a client of the USSR during the Cold War) and its move away from its Arab neighbours, especially as the leader of the Palestinian struggle. The following timeline details the development of relations between Israel and Egypt.

1948 - Declaration of the State of Israel

- As the state of Israel was being recognised by the US in May 1948 (within ten minutes of the midnight deadline), Israel began the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population from the region it occupied; this is known as the “Nakba” (Catastrophe) by the Palestinians.
- The Egyptian army, along with Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, began defensive operations in 1948 – following military operations Egypt went on to sign the 1949 Armistice Deal.
- 1952 – Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in Egypt.



1956 – President Nasser of Egypt and the Suez Canal Crisis

- Gamal Abdel Nasser united the Egypt and Syria (“the United Arab Republic”), including their armies, to create a larger pan-Arab force.
- President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, which at the time was largely European-owned.
- The UK, France and Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. Britain and France moved their troops into the Suez Canal zone.



- Following international pressure, including some from the United Nations and the US, Britain and France withdrew from the Suez Canal zone.
- Israel, however, ensured that the Straits of Tiran (which had been closed by Egypt to ships going to the Israeli port of Eilat) were kept open, claiming that the state depended on the route to the Red Sea for its existence. In fact, only about 5% of Israeli imports entered via these straits. UN Peacekeeping forces were based in the Sinai Peninsula.

1967 – Six Day War

- Israel instigated a war by destroying the entire Egyptian air force on the ground in a “pre-emptive” strike. With war between Israel and Egypt-Jordan-Syria broke out, Israel occupied Sinai and the Gaza Strip (as well as the West Bank and Syrian Golan Heights). Gaza had been administered by Egypt since 1948.
- The Israel Defence Forces took control of the whole Sinai Peninsula up to the Suez Canal.



- UN resolution 242 called for Israel to withdraw from the territories recently occupied, taken to mean to its pre-June 1967 borders.
- Egypt sustained heavy losses during the war.

1973 – The October War

- Gamal Abdul Nasser died in 1970 and was succeeded by Anwar al-Sadat.
- 1971 - Sadat claimed to be ready to enter into a peace treaty with Israel if Israel withdrew to pre-1967 borders and acted on UN resolution 242.
- Israel refused to withdraw from the Sinai and the Gaza Strip.
- Egypt and Syria, hoping to claim back land lost during the Six Day War, launched an operation to claim back the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.
- As the war intensified, the UN passed resolution 339 calling for a ceasefire – prior to a response by the Israelis, the Egyptian national security advisor Hafez Ismail offered to take part in direct talks with Israel if they agreed to a complete ceasefire and allowed non-military supplies to be sent to the Egyptian forces.
- Israeli checkpoints were replaced by UN checkpoints and Israel pulled back from the Suez Canal – allowing Egypt to regain control of the Canal.
- Agreeing to enter into peace negotiations with the Israelis was the first step towards the Camp David Accords.



1978 – Camp David Accords

- The slow development of the peace process frustrated Sadat – given this he went on a state visit to Israel in 1977 and became the first Arab leader to recognise Israel implicitly.
- President Sadat began negotiations with Israel when US President Jimmy Carter invited Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin to Camp David.
- Given Egypt's position towards Israel, tension between Egypt and its Arab neighbours heightened.



1979 – Egypt – Israel Peace treaty

- Following the negotiations at Camp David, a peace treaty was signed by President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin, overseen by US President Jimmy Carter.
- The main feature of the peace treaty was the mutual recognition of each country.
- The peace treaty also provided for the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Sinai Peninsula and the free passage of Israeli ships through the Suez Canal.
- The treaty meant that Egypt was now officially the first Arab country to recognise Israel.
- As part of the treaty Egypt was a recipient of economic and military aid from the USA.
- The peace treaty caused tension between Egypt and other Arab states as well as the Palestinians as represented by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) – the Palestinians had not been involved in the peace negotiations.



- Yasser Arafat, leader of the PLO, declared that the treaty was “false peace”.
- Egypt was suspended from the Arab League from 1979 – 1989.
- Following the signing of the treaty by Sadat, his unpopularity grew within Egypt and in 1981 he was assassinated.
- Sadat’s Vice President, Hosni Mubarak, took over in 1981, and proved to be Israel’s greatest ally yet.

1981 – Egypt and Israel economic relations

- The 1979 treaty dictated that Israel would purchase oil from Egypt and thus began the development of economic relations between the two countries.
- Between 1994 and 2000 Israel exported approximately \$181 million worth of goods to Egypt.
- Exports included chemical products, fertiliser and oil products.
- Egypt and Israel have also established agricultural cooperation.
- By the 1990s reports were spreading about damage to Egyptian agriculture due to Israeli products and plans to deplete Egypt’s water reserves.
- Further reports cited the spread of drugs and an increase in diseases such as AIDS.
- As economic relations developed between the two nations, Egypt’s economy suffered greatly.
- Egypt’s sovereignty was now effectively governed by the US and Israel through Mubarak as they dictated the economic policies of the country.
- By international standards, Egypt’s living standards are relatively low.
- Living standards in Egypt have declined consistently since 1990.



- The UN estimates that approximately 20 – 30% of Egyptians live below the poverty line.
- As the economy has worsened, President Mubarak has become more reliant upon US support.

Egypt and Israel – normalisation of relations

- As the Middle East Peace Process developed President Mubarak became a key figure in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.
- US support, most crucially economic support, has remained strong due to Egypt's ongoing relationship with Israel.
- Egypt has come to be Israel's and America's most trusted ally in the Middle East.
- Egypt went on to support Israel in many of its decisions – most significantly in the closure of the Gaza Strip following the 2006 election of Hamas.



2006 – The Siege on the Gaza Strip

- President Mubarak enforced his rule on Egypt through the heavy oppression of political opposition – including the banning and persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- With the election of Hamas as the government of Palestine in 2006, President Mubarak feared the effect of the democratic process on Egypt, especially the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- As Israel and the international community refused to acknowledge the democratic election of Hamas, Egypt followed suit.



- Egypt moved its embassy from Gaza to the West Bank.
- Israel enforced a blockade on the Gaza Strip in an attempt to force the removal of Hamas from power.
- Egypt supported the blockade and went on to enforce it on the Egyptian border with Gaza, notably by closing the Rafah crossing in 2007.
- The blockade of the Gaza Strip has imposed severe economic restrictions on the people of the territory.
- As the near-total blockade was enforced, most goods were prevented from being imported or exported to and from Gaza, forcing financial hardship on the 1.5 million Gazan citizens.
- The severe restrictions placed on the movement of goods and people has created a huge reliance on UN humanitarian aid by the majority of Gaza's 1.5 million citizens.
- Following massive destruction caused by the Israeli offensive in 2008-09, the Gaza Strip has been unable to rebuild its damaged infrastructure. Egypt still restricts the passage of people across the border at Rafah, and enforces the Israeli prohibition of importing building materials and other essential items.
- Gazans have constructed many tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip in order to bring in the necessary goods it requires for daily living i.e. construction materials, foods, medicines etc. The tunnels have been described by international journalists as "Gaza's lifeline".
- Egypt has continued to try to close the tunnels, including the construction of an underground steel wall. Tunnellers have been able to go under the wall and the tunnels remain an important source of basic essentials for Palestinians in Gaza.
- Egypt has partially lifted restrictions at Rafah, following international pressure due to the Freedom Flotilla incident and attempts to break the blockade by international groups.
- However, the blockade remains in place and only a small number of people are allowed to cross through the border – no access for goods has been allowed through the Egyptian border.

President Mubarak has remained Israel's closest ally in its relationship with Egypt and in the most recent years enjoyed peaceful relations, specifically due to his role in enforcing Israeli policy on the Gaza Strip and Egypt's role in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Egypt hasn't facilitated any negotiations between Israel and Hamas, although it did support reconciliation talks between the latter and Fatah.

