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FROM COLD PEACE TO COLD WAR? THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EGYPT'S MILITARY BUILDUP

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Since the 1978 Camp David Accords, the Egyptian government has undertaken extraordinary efforts to modernize its military with Western arms and weapon systems. By bolstering its armored corps, air force, and naval fleet with an array of U.S. military platforms, the Egyptian armed forces have emerged as one the region's most formidable forces. But as the post-Husni Mubarak era looms, questions abound. Who, precisely, is Egypt arming against, and why? Has Egypt attained operational parity with Israel? How will the military be affected by a succession crisis? Could Cairo's weapons arsenal fall into the hands of Islamists? This essay will address these and other questions by analyzing the regime's procurement of arms, its military doctrine, President Mubarak's potential heirs, and the Islamist threat.

INTRODUCTION

In March 1999, then U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen embarked on a nine-nation tour of the Middle East to finalize arms agreements worth over \$5 billion with regional governments. No state received more military hardware than Egypt. Totalling \$3.2 billion, Egypt's arms package consisted of 24 F-16D fighter planes, 200 M1A1 Abrams tanks, and 32 Patriot-3 missiles.^[1] Five months later, Cairo inked a \$764 million deal for more sophisticated U.S. weaponry. Few in Egypt and the United States batted an eye.

For the government of Husni Mubarak, exorbitant military expenditures have always been the rule, not the exception. In the 29 years since the Camp David Accords, successive U.S. administrations have provided Egypt with roughly \$60 billion in military and economic aid subsidies to reinforce its adherence to peace.^[2] Under U.S. auspices, the Mubarak regime has utilized \$1.3 billion in annual military aid to transform its armed forces from an unwieldy Soviet-based fighting force to a modernized, well-equipped, Western-style military.

Outfitted with some of the most sophisticated U.S. weapons technology, Egypt's arsenal has been significantly improved--qualitatively as well as quantitatively--in nearly every military branch. While assimilating state-of-the-art weaponry into its order of battle, the Egyptian military has also decommissioned Soviet equipment or upgraded outdated ordnance. This unprecedented military buildup, however, extends beyond the mere procurement and renovation of Western armaments; Egypt has been the beneficiary of joint military exercises and training programs with the United States dating back to 1983.

However, while the Egyptian leadership has professed its desire for peace and emphasized the deterrent nature of the buildup, its stockpiling of arms should arouse some concern. Already the most advanced army on the African continent, the Egyptian military faces no appreciable threat on its Libyan or Sudanese borders. Thus, some analysts believe it has been reconstituted with one purpose in mind: to achieve military parity with its neighbor across the demilitarized Sinai Peninsula--Israel.

Many Israeli policymakers, though, see Egypt's conventional military buildup in a different light. In their analysis, Egypt's self-perception as a regional power broker necessitates the creation of a potent military. While Egypt remains a hotbed of anti-Semitism nearly three decades after peace, for them, such rhetoric is intended only for domestic consumption. The mainstream Israeli defense establishment, by and large, shares this assessment, citing the Egyptian military's doctrinal flaws and questionable combat readiness as an impediment to renewed conflict.

Yet while battle plans are not being drawn up in Cairo, Egypt's muscle-flexing does raise an eyebrow when other factors are considered. As the Husni Mubarak era enters its twilight years, no real decision has been made concerning his successor, though his son certainly appears the frontrunner. While Egypt's Islamists are unlikely to usurp power anytime soon, a drastic change in leadership could spawn greater instability in the Egyptian-Israeli arena. Likewise, Egypt's failure to curtail endemic weapons smuggling on the Egypt-Gaza border--arms which are funneled to Palestinian terrorists--has fueled speculation among Israeli hardliners that Cairo may be girding for war.

The truth, of course, likely lies somewhere between these divergent viewpoints.

ARMING TO THE TEETH

In a November 1995 speech, President Husni Mubarak encapsulated the mission statement of the Egyptian military, declaring, "...The level of our armed forces is a source of pride for us all, and [they] are capable of deterring any danger threatening our national security."^[3] Senior officials and generals in the Egyptian armed forces, such as Minister of Defense and War Production Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, have echoed similar sentiments that, while stressing the doctrine of deterrence, have explicitly stressed the importance of offensive capabilities. While not discounting the probability of armed conflict with Israel, Egyptian officials view such offensive-orientated capabilities as a means of enhancing Egyptian diplomacy, allowing it to operate from a position of

strength. The Mubarak government sees this posture as a prerequisite for regional stability, inextricably linked to a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

However, diplomatic leverage alone cannot explain Egypt's buildup. As the main bastion of regime support, the military's strength serves Mubarak's interest in stability. Given the paranoia that pervades much of the ruling elite in Egypt and other Arab *mukhabarat* states, it is understandable that the Egyptian leadership views a strong military as its greatest asset. In this sense, Egypt's bloated defense budget represents a *quid pro quo* of sorts. Mubarak furnishes his military brass with weapons and pensions; in return, they refrain from dabbling in politics and pledge to safeguard his regime from external threats. Perhaps one can also frame the buildup in terms of domestic prestige. Owen L. Sirs writes that during the height of the 1960s, the government's military parades "...served as a sort of symbolic dialogue between the Egyptian regime and its people."[\[4\]](#) While today's demonstrations may lack the pomp and grandeur reminiscent of the Nasser era, they still serve to showcase the country's modernization and progress.

Other motives drive Egypt's strategic objectives as well. Ostracized by its neighbors in the 1980s for blazing a trail to peace, Egyptian leadership found vindication in the peace process of the 1990s. Yet with this historic opportunity came two distinct choices. As Robert Satloff notes, Egypt could either "...expand the circle of peace via widening Arab normalization with Israel or [choose] to follow a different path, one that views Israel as a fundamental challenge to Egypt's self-perception as a regional power... and makes anti-normalization a fixture of Egyptian policy."[\[5\]](#) Perhaps threatened by the Jewish state's regional assimilation and military prowess, Egypt has opted for the latter. Thus, it has embarked on a sustained campaign to contain Israel and alter the Middle East's balance of power.

Flush with billions in U.S. military aid since the 1980s, the Egyptian government has significantly revamped its conventional forces, paying particular heed to its armored corps, air, and naval forces. Today, Egypt, no longer a beneficiary of its erstwhile Soviet patron, can boast of a Western-style fighting force--comprised of 450,000 regular servicemen--that approaches the quantitative and qualitative levels of the Israeli military in certain sectors. Israel is, of course, more concerned with preserving its edge in the latter. That is, given the sheer size of Israel's Arab neighbors, it is imperative that the Jewish state compensate for its inevitable quantitative weakness by maintaining its advantage in weapons systems, training, and technological know-how.

Still, the qualitative gap has shrunk as Egypt catapulted itself into the upper echelon of Middle Eastern arms importers during the past decade. From 2001 to 2004 alone, Egypt paid \$6.5 billion in arms transfer agreements, \$5.7 billion of which was used to purchase U.S. weaponry.[\[6\]](#) During this period, Egypt supplanted Saudi Arabia as the primary recipient of U.S.-manufactured arms in the Middle East.[\[7\]](#)

Among Egypt's most noteworthy acquisitions has been its procurement of American-made M1A1 Abrams battle tanks, whose components are partly assembled on Egyptian production lines. When the U.S. Department of Defense first licensed production of the

M1A1 tank (commensurate with the Israeli Merkava tank) in Egypt in 1988, the decision raised alarm in some U.S. and Israeli policy circles, given the sensitive transfer of technology involved, the method of co-production, and the fiscal constraints it would place on an already burdened Egyptian economy. Yezid Sayigh notes that this industrial strategy of in-country assemblage, prevalent in the Middle East, enables the arms importer to "...acquire the necessary production skills and military technology gradually, with the eventual aim of producing indigenous systems."[\[8\]](#) Israeli analysts believe that by the time the current contract is completed in 2008, Egypt's armored corps will have amassed 880 M1A1s.[\[9\]](#)

In 1999, Israeli defense officials became concerned when Egypt acquired 10,800 rounds of 120mm KEW-A1 ammunition for its Abrams battle tanks.[\[10\]](#) Composed of depleted uranium, this armor-piercing ammunition--long possessed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)--was used by U.S. Abrams crews to decimate 4,000 Iraqi tanks and armored vehicles during Operation Desert Storm and is said to be able to neutralize any armor system in existence.[\[11\]](#) None of this is to mention Egypt's 835 upgraded and U.S.-made M-60A3 tanks that also saw action in the 1991 Gulf crisis.[\[12\]](#)

The influx of sophisticated, Western weapons into Egypt is not limited to the renovation of its armored corps. This buildup also extends to the Egyptian Air Force (EAF), which now sports roughly 220 F-16 fighter planes, in comparison with the approximately 240 F-16s in the Israeli arsenal.[\[13\]](#) Israeli strategic analysts, such as Ret. Brigadier General Shlomo Brom, are quick to point that while this margin has narrowed substantially since the 1980s, the status of the Israeli Air Force's qualitative edge should not be confused with quantitative parity in military platforms. "We say they aren't the same planes. The level of the pilots and the quality of the weapons systems are not identical," Brom stated.[\[14\]](#) There are also reports that Israel will be the first Middle Eastern state equipped with the F-22 and F-35, the F-16's successors.

Still, other IDF officials disagree with Brom's assessment and believe that the EAF's growth has forced Israel to alter its air combat techniques. Those critics point to the EAF's recent integration of 36 AH-64A Apache attack helicopters, each capable of carrying 16 laser-guided, anti-tank, Hellfire missiles.[\[15\]](#) It is worth noting, though, that while permitted to upgrade the Apaches to their more advanced prototype (the AH-64D), Egypt has been prevented from acquiring the helicopter's most coveted feature--the Longbow radar--which has first-rate target identification capabilities.[\[16\]](#) Nonetheless, the Israeli Air Force maintains only a handful more of Apaches than its Egyptian counterpart.

While apprehensive about the buildup of the Egyptian ground and air forces, some Israeli officials, especially Knesset Member Yuval Steinitz and former commander-in-chief of the Israeli Navy, Major General Yedidia Ya'ari, consider the overhaul of the Egyptian navy to be the most significant aspect of the military's modernization program. The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies' *2003-2004 Middle East Strategic Balance* report notes that Egypt acquired two Knox class frigates and four Oliver Hazard Perry frigates from the United States in the 1990s.[\[17\]](#) Obtained as excess defense articles from the Pentagon,

the Perry-class frigates are "capable of over-the-horizon combat and anti-submarine warfare."[\[18\]](#)

However, it was the November 2001 Bush Administration decision to sell Egypt 53 satellite-guided Harpoon Block II missiles, which can exploit Israel's lack of strategic depth by evading its current air defense systems, that has truly caused consternation in Jerusalem.[\[19\]](#) This purchase could signal a strategic shift in Egypt's naval doctrine--one that would allow it to project its open-sea capabilities even further in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and place a stranglehold on Israel's most important maritime lifelines. Though the U.S. State Department downplayed the missiles' offensive nature, one must remember that Egypt's geographic position gives its fleet--which maintains principal naval bases at Ras al-Tin on the Mediterranean and at Safajeh and Hurghada on the Red Sea--the capability to blockade both of Israel's sea links with the outside world.

The United States will likely continue to refrain from selling the Egyptian government advanced weapon systems that would allow the EAF, or any other branch of the Egyptian armed forces, to enjoy operational parity with their Israeli counterparts. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen said as much during his visit to the region in 1999, when he reassured then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the United States remained committed to "...Israel's qualitative edge and military capability to protect its own people."[\[20\]](#)

In the past, though, the United States has demonstrated a willingness to export some of its most sensitive military technologies to regional governments, as evidenced by the Clinton Administration's sale of the AIM-120 Advanced Medium-Range-Air-to-Air-Missile (AMRAAM) to the United Arab Emirates in 1998.[\[21\]](#) Prior to this transfer, only Israel had been cleared to purchase the AMRAAM among Middle Eastern states.[\[22\]](#) However, contracts were soon inked in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt, with the United States selling Cairo a lesser ground-launched version of the missile in 2000 only because of vociferous Israeli objections.[\[23\]](#) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's blasé reaction to these and other related developments belied Israel's true concern. In 2004, Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom vehemently opposed--and ultimately won restrictions on--a U.S.-AMRAAM sale to Jordan based on fears that the technology would eventually be sold to Egypt.[\[24\]](#) Though purchasing the AMRAAM system had once been the sole prerogative of NATO member states (and Israel), the flurry of U.S. sales to non-NATO Arab governments, including Egypt, signaled that U.S. arms transfer sales could indeed trump strategic promises.

WESTERN WEAPONS, SOVIET DOCTRINE?

While detractors of the gloom-and-doom scenario in the Israeli defense establishment will not dispute the Egyptian military's modernization, their sanguine assessments assume that it will be mired in its antiquated Soviet-style military doctrine for the foreseeable future. Undoubtedly, Egypt's military ranks are still characterized by a rigid command structure; one that strategic analysts say precludes the implementation of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)--a military concept espousing the use of precision-guided

weaponry, information technology, and integrated command and control systems with real-time capabilities.

That the Egyptian armed forces have failed to fully adopt the RMA paradigm thus far is true. Even with continued American aid at current levels, the Egyptian armed forces would encounter a serious economic crunch in financing such an initiative. Yet that is not to say they do not possess some of the requisite skills. The military has been the beneficiary of numerous joint initiatives and training exercises with Western forces dating back to the large-scale "Operation Bright Star" maneuvers kicked off in 1983.[\[25\]](#) Held biennially in the Egyptian desert, "Bright Star" stresses interoperability and has exposed thousands of Egyptian military personnel to U.S. advanced training techniques and expertise in tactical ground, air, naval, and special operations.[\[26\]](#) Mubarak's deployment of 30,000 troops, including commando and paratrooper units paired alongside U.S. forces, into the Kuwaiti theater during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 illustrated Egypt's ability to apply RMA techniques in actual combat.[\[27\]](#)

U.S. programs such as Peace Vector and the International Military Education and Training initiative (IMET) have provided additional know-how to the Egyptian military in tactical training and weapons maintenance. Under the third installment of the Peace Vector program (PV III), which began in August 1991, Egyptian Air Force pilots have logged thousands of flight hours with their American counterparts in tactical operations.[\[28\]](#) Other projects in the PV III program have included the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' construction of a self-sufficient F-16 air base located in Ismailiyya, Egypt (adjacent to the Suez Canal and demilitarized Sinai), which can accommodate a population of up to 20,000 personnel.[\[29\]](#) Under IMET, 6,600 Egyptian soldiers have participated in U.S. military education courses since 1995 in an effort to instill U.S. values, doctrines, and procedures.[\[30\]](#)

Despite such assistance, logistical support, and extensive coordination, the mainstream Israeli defense establishment continues to perpetuate the belief that the Egyptian military's mere knowledge of the RMA doctrine does not necessarily imply its implementation. The Badr-96 and Jabal Pharon-98 exercises debunk this myth. In September 1996, the Egyptian armed forces staged a ten day maneuver near the Suez Canal, the largest operation of its kind since the late 1970s. The target of the exercise was explicit: Israel. Badr-96--the same code-name used for Egypt's crossing of the Suez Canal in the 1973 Yom Kippur War (Badr-73)--simulated a large-scale amphibious landing on the Sinai Peninsula coast by a mechanized infantry battalion.[\[31\]](#) Designed first to repel an Israeli attack, the battalion--coupled with border guards, paratroopers, and special forces--would then engage in a counteroffensive to seize control of the entire Sinai and penetrate Israeli territory.[\[32\]](#)

Hailed by the Egyptian media as a stern warning to Prime Minister Netanyahu, Badr-96 evoked stirring nationalistic sentiments from the 1973 war. The state-controlled newspaper *al-Ahram* was one of several media outlets to engage in saber-rattling. An editorial published by the paper's managing editor read "...The lessons of Badr-73 and

Badr-96 take us back to the starting point... that the end of war does not necessarily mean the achievement of peace, and vice-versa."[\[33\]](#)

Similarly, the Jabal Pharon exercise on April 22, 1998 sought to create a scenario whereby the Egyptian Third Army, in conjunction with naval and air force personnel, conducted operations in the rugged terrain of the Sinai.[\[34\]](#) Once more, the target was the Israeli Defense Forces. On August 12, 2001, in the midst of the al-Aqsa Intifada and three days after a Hamas suicide bombing rocked Jerusalem, London's *Sunday Times* reported that a senior Egyptian official allegedly threatened to deploy the Egyptian Third Army into Sinai--at the late Yasir Arafat's behest--if Israel moved into the occupied territories to thwart Palestinian terrorism.[\[35\]](#) That another Badr-like exercise ensued the following month[\[36\]](#) at Ismailiyya should be sufficient evidence to suggest that the Egyptian military--which enjoys a symbiotic relationship with Mubarak and the state--feels constrained by the security measures imposed on it by the 1979 treaty. As a result, some Israeli officials see these exercises as an inherent Egyptian desire to remilitarize the Sinai. Whether that ambition translates into capability is contested, given the assertion of military experts that any successful military operation in the Sinai Peninsula requires RMA-style warfare.

It is here, precisely, where Egypt's acquisition of the M1A1 Abrams tank and the AH-64A helicopter could have dire consequences. As the tank battles of the 1967 and 1973 wars have illustrated, the peninsula is an ideal battleground for armored, mobile warfare. Theoretically, an Egyptian foray into Sinai, in which M1A1s are given aerial cover by AH-64A Apaches and F-16s, would enable mechanized forces to seize the strategic Mitla and Giddi passes in central Sinai before an Israeli counterattack. By controlling these access routes, vital for east-west movement, the Egyptian armored corps could then traverse the entire peninsula in a relatively short period of time.

This scenario, though, is not universally accepted. While the M1A1's superior long-range capabilities were put on display in the Iraqi desert in 1991 and 2003, Stephen A. Cook believes that the "...Egyptians are able to employ them [M1A1s] only as set battlefield pieces. This is a function of the fact that Egypt's land forces... cannot refuel and re-supply its forces beyond a limited range."[\[37\]](#) Other Israeli analysts counter that the Suez Canal zone's weak logistical infrastructure, which includes bridges (some of which are pontoons), ferries, and the Ahmad Hamdi tunnel, renders the movement of Egypt's M1A1s highly susceptible to an Israeli air attack with precision weapons.

THE DAY AFTER MUBARAK

Most Israeli policymakers, though anxious about the buildup on the Nile, portray Egypt as something of a paper tiger; one that derives too many rewards from peace to foolishly self-inflict death and destruction on its own people. Their conventional wisdom holds that President Mubarak's quarter-century of authoritarian rule has actually acted as a bulwark against not only those extremist elements in Egyptian society who wish death upon Israel, but against the military's adventurism as well. Even if that assumption were true, Egypt faces a looming presidential succession that could completely invalidate this strategic

assessment. In 2003, Shaul Mofaz voiced his uncertainty over the matter, stating, "Within a few years Egypt's leadership might be replaced and the new regime might have a different attitude toward Israel."[\[38\]](#)

While President Mubarak at age 78 is in reputedly "good health," his fainting during a televised parliament session in 2003 and his sudden two-week absence for medical treatment abroad in 2004 paint a different picture of stability.[\[39\]](#) Mubarak has also eschewed pressure over the years to appoint a vice president, most recently during an April 9, 2006 interview with al-Arabiyya TV. Mubarak stated: "The constitution gives me the right of appointing a vice-president. The vice-president has no work except as he performs only directives of the president. This is the point and I'm not ready to appoint a vice-president..."[\[40\]](#)

Despite a constitutional provision specifying the temporary transfer of power to the speaker of parliament following the president's permanent incapacitation,[\[41\]](#) vice presidents have, in practice, assumed the mantle of leadership before. Thus, Mubarak's gambit in maintaining this vacancy has not only clouded the issue of succession, but has generated much unease in Egypt and elsewhere as well. In recent years, this decision appears to have cleared the path for heir apparent Gamal Mubarak, Husni's son and one of three deputy secretary-generals in his father's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP).[\[42\]](#) The liberal-minded Gamal continues to burnish his image at home and abroad. During the fourth annual NDP conference in September 2006, he proposed an Egyptian nuclear program and openly defied Washington's vision of a "new Middle East," stating: "We will not accept initiatives made abroad."[\[43\]](#) Still, his "inheritance" of the presidency is not a foregone conclusion.

In a January 1, 2004 press conference, the elder Mubarak reassured Egyptians that he would not emulate the "Syria model," which witnessed Bashar al-Asad's rise to power after his father's death in 2000. "We are not a monarchy. We are the Republic of Egypt... we are not Syria and Gamal Mubarak will not be the next president of Egypt," Mubarak declared.[\[44\]](#) Gamal echoed similar sentiments during 2005's "Cairo Spring," when his father introduced political reforms authorizing Egypt's first multi-candidate presidential election. Eager to shed the label of heir apparent, Gamal stated: "I am absolutely clear in my mind and the president's mind that this story of father and son has nothing to do with reality."[\[45\]](#)

Of course, actions speak louder than words in the Middle East. The recent consolidation of key policy positions by Gamal and his associates within the NDP belies such statements. However, in a country where the Free Officers Movement's 1952 coup d'état still resonates--every president since has been drawn from the military's ranks--Gamal's non-military background could present a problem. Edward S. Walker Jr., a former U.S. ambassador to both Israel and Egypt, warns that if Gamal is truly bent on economic reform, "...the entire military and security structure could easily lose its privileges, its special treatment, its informal retirement benefits..."[\[46\]](#) Such a development, in which the Egyptian military loses its patronage, could loosen the government's reins on the

armed forces and unnerve Israeli leadership. At the very least, the armed forces would be hard-pressed to accept such a monarchical-style transition.

Other potential successors do not elicit much Israeli confidence either where the military is concerned. One is current Defense Minister Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, who believes that only the "endless development of military systems and the arms race" will guarantee Egyptian national security.[\[47\]](#) Egyptian security sources revealed that had the 1995 plot to assassinate Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia succeeded, Tantawi, a Mubarak confidant for many years, would have become president "without a doubt."[\[48\]](#) Tantawi's advanced age and failing health, though, likely decrease his prospects of succeeding Mubarak.

General Omar Sulayman, the head of Egyptian intelligence, remains another candidate in the offing. Arguably the second most powerful man in Egypt, Sulayman, aged 70, raised his public profile considerably after he was handed the Palestinian dossier following the intifada's outbreak in 2000.[\[49\]](#) A career military officer and Mubarak's right-hand man, Sulayman was also responsible for quelling the Islamist insurgency in Egypt during the 1990s. Some Israeli policymakers suggest Sulayman's role as an interlocutor between the Palestinians and Israelis and between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, particularly during the 2003 *hudna* (cease-fire) negotiations, juxtaposes his tough anti-Islamist terror stance.

Sulayman has often met with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror chiefs in Cairo, Gaza, Ramallah, and Damascus--gestures which have not only conferred legitimacy upon such groups, but have also served to undercut a weakened and once-secular Palestinian Authority.[\[50\]](#) While he publicly sought to broker an unconditional cease-fire between Palestinian terror factions and Israel in 2003, as required by the Quartet's road map for peace, Sulayman privately demanded that the former only halt its attacks within the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and 1949 armistice lines for a period of six months.[\[51\]](#)

Though Sulayman did in fact engineer an official, albeit brief, cessation of violence on June 29, 2003,[\[52\]](#) his intervention came under close Israeli scrutiny. Oded Granot, an Israeli journalist, suggested that Sulayman's efforts were perhaps motivated more by an urge to "quiet" the Egyptian street during the Iraq War's infancy, lest anti-government protests break out, than by a genuine desire for peace. Israeli officials reserved harsher criticism for Sulayman. Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom believed that the general's efforts would implicitly endanger the Jewish state by creating a "ticking time bomb;" a respite that would allow Gaza's terrorist infrastructure to regroup and replenish via the Philadelphia Corridor and Sinai.

TUNNEL WARS

Seven weeks later, the *hudna* began unraveling. On August 19, 2003, a Hamas operative blew himself up while riding a Jerusalem bus.[\[53\]](#) At the same time, IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon reported that after the Israeli army discovered and destroyed several

smuggling tunnels in Gaza, smoke billowed from their opposite end--in some cases from inside Egyptian military posts.[\[54\]](#)

No picture of Egypt's de facto strategy toward Israel can be considered complete without examining the Gaza tunnel phenomenon. While in past years the IDF and Israeli intelligence have monitored Egypt's conventional arms buildup with unease, their attention has often been diverted to another front where Cairo's true intentions have increasingly been called into question--the Egypt-Gaza Strip border.

On August 22, 2005, the Israeli government completed its disengagement from the Gaza Strip after 38 years of occupation. Israel's Disengagement Plan had called for the evacuation of all Jewish settlements and military installations in Gaza, with one exception. The plan stated that the IDF would not redeploy in the Philadelphia Corridor, an eight-mile border zone between Gaza and Egypt notorious for its arms-smuggling tunnels.

As disengagement approached, the decision to retain control of the corridor became untenable, despite the concerns of Israeli policymakers that withdrawing troops from the area, including the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, would result in the militarization of Gaza as a terror base. Israeli leaders determined that maintaining an Israeli presence in the border strip would be a lasting source of Palestinian and Arab antagonism and would undercut their government's claims of complete withdrawal. The Israeli government looked toward Cairo as the most viable alternative to patrol the border and stem the flow of contraband into Gaza. Though some Israeli officials remained skeptical of Egypt's commitment, the two governments signed the "Agreed Arrangements Regarding the Deployment of a Designated Force of Border Guards along the Border in the Rafah Area" on September 1, 2005.[\[55\]](#)

Pursuant to the agreement,[\[56\]](#) Egypt dispatched a border guard force to the corridor (comprised of 750 armed personnel) to replace the Egyptian police force mandated by the 1979 peace treaty. Permitted weaponry included assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns.[\[57\]](#) Though subject to the treaty, which stipulates the Sinai Peninsula's demilitarization, the Agreed Arrangements raised fears in Israel over the Egyptian force's objectives in the Sinai and the overall stability of the peace agreement.

While observers often perceive the corridor's smuggling as an exclusive Palestinian enterprise, Israeli concerns have been augmented by what Major General Doron Almog, former head of the IDF's Southern Command, calls "a parallel Egyptian mechanism for smuggling and infiltration"[\[58\]](#) extending into Sinai and the mainland. Black market forces may often serve as the impetus for this mechanism--smuggling is a very profitable business--but in the end, it can only function with what Almog refers to as the "official acquiescence" of the Mubarak regime.

Several factors suggest that Egypt's failure to curb the influx of weapons at Rafah--a town physically straddling the Egyptian-Gazan border--is a product of inaction, not inability. First, an army general on active service presides over the Sinai governorate that

stretches 100 miles behind Rafah.[\[59\]](#) In an authoritarian country like Egypt, where the armed forces are the guarantor of internal stability, the military is cognizant of all that goes on under its nose. Second, there are only two access roads in the Sinai; countering the movement of weaponry bound for Rafah should be a relatively easy undertaking. Finally, while the IDF's counter-smuggling operations in the corridor have almost always met fierce opposition from local inhabitants, Egyptian patrols encounter no such armed resistance in Egyptian Rafah.

The Egyptian military has proven capable of reducing the security threat in the past. When the Israeli military outpost of Termit, located in Rafah, came under attack in 2001, Egyptian Rafah was conspicuously quiet.[\[60\]](#) That is, despite the presence of illegal arms and Palestinians in that area of the city, Israeli soldiers were only ambushed from within Gaza. The Egyptian army had restrained all violent activity on its side of the border. In past years, it is also true that Egypt has arrested smugglers and detonated tunnels, but only when it has been politically expedient. Unfortunately, these instances are few and far between.

Yuval Diskin, head of the Shin Bet domestic security service, and Avi Dichter, minister of internal security, are two of the outspoken leaders in Israel sounding the alarm. On August 29, 2006, Diskin referred to the Sinai Peninsula and Rafah border area as a veritable "Garden of Eden" for weapons smuggling. On September 27, 2006, he again spoke of the exponential increase in smuggling since Israel's 2005 Gaza withdrawal, estimating that nineteen tons of weapons and explosives were burrowed into the strip during the past year. Holding Egyptian officials directly accountable, he said, "The Egyptians know who the smugglers are and don't deal with them. They received intelligence on this from us and didn't use it. We're talking about an escalation that is endangering us."[\[61\]](#) Three days after his remarks, four Egyptian policemen were caught attempting to smuggle ammunitions and hand grenades to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.[\[62\]](#) Alluding to this incident and other tunnel discoveries, Dichter urged White House officials in October 2006 to ratchet up pressure on Cairo, criticizing its government's failure to employ the "considerable capabilities" at its disposal.[\[63\]](#)

Whether or not smuggling activities are officially sanctioned by the Mubarak government is irrelevant. What does matter is that the current regime's see-no-evil policy at Philadelphia--what Almog refers to as a "release valve for [Egyptian] public sympathy for the Palestinian armed struggle"[\[64\]](#)--significantly raises the stakes for Israel's national security by allowing arms and material to be pumped into Gaza at a dizzying rate.

THE ISLAMIST THREAT

Some suggest that Egypt's radical Islamist movement, closely allied with like-minded Palestinian groups, has been the prime beneficiary of the government's Philadelphia strategy. Not only has unimpeded smuggling at Rafah stoked the flames of Egypt's Islamist movement, it has permitted homegrown jihadists and those in the Palestinian territories the opportunity to attack the Mubarak government and Israelis simultaneously. The October 2004 suicide bombings at Tab'a, a popular resort location for Israelis in

Egypt, were perpetrated by Sinai Bedouins and Hamas operatives.[\[65\]](#) A Palestinian group in Gaza, Monotheism and Jihad, physically trained an Egyptian terror cell in the use of explosives and firearms before carrying out the April 2006 bombings at Sinai's Dahab resort.[\[66\]](#)

That the corridor and its environs could become a personal fiefdom for Egyptian extremists is one reason that Israeli prognosticators fear an Islamist takeover in Cairo. Although considered improbable today, the specter of an Islamic revolution following Husni Mubarak's rule should not be dismissed. Coupled with the Egyptian military buildup, it would have grave consequences for regional security.

To be sure, the toppling of the secular Mubarak regime by Islamist extremists would have far-reaching effects. The extensive American aid and assistance programs would cease automatically. The Egyptian military's already shoddy weapons maintenance would be exacerbated. Jihadists would annul the 1979 treaty. Yet it would be wrong to assume that Egypt would thus become nothing more than a massive arms depot to which somebody had thrown away the key. Despite government efforts to the contrary, Islamists and the military have not always remained mutually exclusive entities.

Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood's most violent offshoots--such as al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Jama'at al-Jihad--have had past success in infiltrating the military's ranks. Among the members of Jama'at al-Jihad, the group that carried out Anwar Sadat's 1981 assassination, were an army colonel on active duty and a reserve lieutenant colonel.[\[67\]](#) Other members were drawn from a broad swath of Egyptian society, including state security forces and military intelligence. In December 1986, a ring of four military officers and 29 Islamists affiliated with the same group was arrested and charged with waging jihad against the Mubarak regime.[\[68\]](#) By the end of the decade, the government's purge had resulted in the detention of some 10,000 Islamists suspected of infiltration.

That the regime has grown wary should not come as a surprise. In prosecuting its own "war on terror" against radical Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s, the state began implementing policies to counteract the threat. Yet rarely has the military entered into this calculus. Fearing its exposure to fundamentalist ideologies, the government has rarely summoned the armed forces into action.[\[69\]](#) Instead, counterterrorism operations have often been delegated to state security services, but even they have not been immune from this phenomenon. Thus, the regime has left no stone unturned in stemming the tide of infiltration. In addition to restricting the military's rules of engagement, it has begun constructing a host of military cities in remote locations, such as Mubarak Military City in the Nile Delta region, to ward off Islamist influence.

The regime's precautionary steps have often been supplemented by stern counterterrorism measures--measures which not only broke the Islamist insurgency's back in the 1990s but have also allowed relative quiet to prevail since. While the threat posed by al-Jihad and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya has not evaporated--even with the latter's renunciation of violence--the radical Islamist leadership in Egypt remains fractured and marginalized. Mubarak's

cooption of the movement's mainstream and less militant elements, coupled with the recent release of 950 al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya members in April 2006,[\[70\]](#) has further moderated their ranks.

Despite episodic violence, Mubarak's balancing act has thus far allowed him to secure the allegiance of the military--the regime's most significant pillar of strength--while thwarting the Islamists' attempt at regime change. Still, the latter's quest for power in Egypt lies within the realm of possibility, given Mubarak's border policies at Rafah and his failure to appoint a vice president and surefire successor.

CONCLUSION

As the Egyptian armed forces continue to upgrade the quantity and quality of their military platforms to unparalleled heights--levels rivaling those of Israel--they have positioned themselves to be a major player on the Middle Eastern block. The path charted by Egypt during the coming years, though, will go a long way toward determining the significance of its meteoric rise from an archaic, Soviet-styled military to a Western-armed, twenty-first century juggernaut.

While justifiably concerned about the neighborhood in which they operate, the Egyptian military's unrelenting buildup appears to have already met its stated objectives of deterrence. The continued integration of Western weaponry into Egypt's armored corps, air force, and naval fleet has thus raised the question: To what end? Egyptian defense officials will riposte that a strong military is essential for enhancing regional security, protecting strategic maritime routes, and strengthening U.S.-Egyptian coordination.

Though the Egyptian armed forces do serve these and other interests, one cannot neglect the fact that rearmament is also geared toward changing the military status quo *vis-à-vis* Israel. Of course, this is not to suggest that Egypt is on the warpath, moving toward a confrontation with Israel tomorrow or the day after. Full-blown hostilities, reminiscent of past Arab-Israeli wars, that would reap wholesale death and destruction are not, one would think, in Cairo's best interests. Yet in an explosive region such as this, policymaking is not often equated with best interests.

Viewed in the context of Egypt's regional ambitions, limited rapprochement with Israel, and potential succession crisis--with all its implications for the peace treaty and an Islamist resurgence--the military's buildup resembles a powder keg forming on Israel's doorstep. Three decades of peace notwithstanding, the Egyptian-Israeli front remains a tinderbox, one in which a cold peace may just become a cold war.

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NOTES

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