

Amid regional upheaval, Egypt and Israel seek to strengthen ties and border security

Despite intelligence-sharing between the neighboring countries, Cairo has not invited an Israeli prime minister to visit since 2013, the year Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power.



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met with Egyptian Intelligence Minister Abbas Kamel in Israel on Aug. 18, 2021. Source: Twitter/PMO.

(August 24, 2021 / JNS) Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi invited Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett for an official visit in the coming weeks, which would be the first state visit by an Israeli leader in nearly a decade.

The invitation, offered last week, comes amid the backdrop of ongoing violence emanating from the Gaza Strip, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the ongoing Iran nuclear threat, which Israel and its Arab regional partners perceive with alarm.

Zvi Mazel, Israel's former ambassador to Egypt and a senior analyst with the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, told JNS that he views the state visit as a possible sign of warming relations between the two countries.

"It's good news, especially that the invitation is for an official visit, which means an honor guard at the airport and lots of journalists present—a message to the Egyptian people that the government favors business with Israel," he said.

While Israel and Egypt have maintained a cold peace since the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978, their mutual ties are largely limited to top government officials and secretive visits. They also both actively work to keep the volatile enclave that is Gaza and the Hamas terror organization that runs it in check.

Samuel Tadros, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of *Motherland Lost: The Egyptian and Coptic Quest for Modernity and Reflection on the Revolution in Egypt*, told JNS that the visit is a positive step, and that "Egypt has always shied away from an open relationship with Israel and discouraged its own citizens from normal relations, as well as fomenting anti-Semitism in its own state media."



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2015. Credit: 360b/Shutterstock.

“Egypt has not invited an Israeli prime minister to visit despite increased intelligence cooperation since Sisi came to power in 2013,” noted Tadros.

The decision shows that the Egyptian government is more welcoming of working with this Israeli government, despite its possible reservations about Bennett’s ideological background, he assessed.

However, Mazel said that interest in Egyptian relations with Israel is narrowly based, with one main goal being the selling and buying of gas. He said this is not normalization in the plain sense of the term but a move based on commercial interests.

‘Old pattern of Hamas attrition war against Israel’

The head of Egypt’s General Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Gen. Abbas Kamel, met in Israel last week with Bennett, who later tweeted a photo of the two. The prime minister said they discussed “diplomatic, security and economic aspects” of the two countries’ relationship, as well as Egyptian mediation vis-à-vis the security situation regarding Gaza.

For years, Egypt has served as a mediator between Israel and Hamas leaders.

Indeed, the visit comes as tensions in Gaza have flared up in recent days.

“Surely, Egypt is very important to Israel, and its role of mediator with Hamas is vital,” said Mazel. “Yet I don’t see any important achievement that would have changed the situation, and it seems we are going back to the old pattern of a Hamas attrition war against Israel.”

“Egypt only intervenes to stop Hamas attacks against Israel when it is afraid of a major flare-up that might endanger it,” he added.

Multiple fires broke out near the border with Gaza on Monday, which Israeli authorities believe were started by explosive-carrying balloons launched from the Hamas-controlled enclave, reported *Ynet*. In retaliation for the arson attacks, Israeli fighter jets struck several Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip on Monday

night.

It comes as Israel and the United Nations allow the transfer of Qatari funds to Hamas-controlled Gaza.

Meanwhile, Egypt closed the Rafah border crossing in the southern Gaza Strip on Monday amid increased tensions with Hamas. It represents the first time the crossing has been shut down during a workday since early 2021, reported the *AP*.

Israel's *Kan* news reported on Sunday night that Cairo is also furious with Hamas leaders over violent riots at the Gaza-Israel border on Saturday that resulted in an Israeli Border Police officer being shot in the head. Bar-El Hadaria Shmueli, 21, was wounded as Gaza rioters at a Hamas-run rally surged toward the security fence; he remains in critical condition at Soroka Hospital in Beersheva.

'A mediator in the conflict'

The announcement of the Egyptian invitation comes as Bennett is scheduled to meet with U.S. President Joe Biden at the White House on Thursday. Egypt and Israel, close allies of America, certainly view power changes in the Middle East with concern, and the perceived success of the Taliban in the eyes of terror groups affects regional stability.

At the same time, the Biden administration has prioritized human-rights concerns as part of its foreign policy, a matter that Egypt has long been accused of violating by outside groups.

The Israeli media has reported that el-Sisi seeks Bennett's help in making its case to Biden this week, said Mazel, which has been part of a working system that has gone on for years.

According to Tadros, the Egyptian invitation signifies "a realization in Egypt after the last Gaza war that its historical role as a mediator in the conflict is highly beneficial to its position and relations with Washington."

He added that "Egypt may thus see its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict as again useful in overcoming criticism of its human rights record, especially with the Biden administration."

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