

## Iran and Sadat: The ongoing battle over history

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JAN 5 2009

The assassination of the former president Anwar Sadat and the subsequent endorsement of the action by Tehran has been a source of tension between Iran and Egypt. For about twenty-seven years, conflicting interpretation of Sadat's role in history has caused hostility between the two states. Although, the nature of animosity is multifaceted, disagreement over Sadat is an issue that symbolises the problems between the two countries.

According to Egyptian authorities, Anwar Sadat was a national hero who restored the Arab pride. During the early days of October War in 1973, he led the Arab army and made some unprecedented advancements into Israeli territory. Within the first two days, Egyptian and Syrian militaries crossed the cease-fire lines in Sinai and Golan Heights, which were under Israeli occupation since 1968. Although, the unexpected military campaign overwhelmed the Jewish State, they retaliated and eventually pushed the Arab forces back. Nevertheless, political history is not always about collective memory, it is also about collective forgetfulness. Egyptian authority pays no heed to Sadat's unpopularity during the last years of his presidency and equally they close their eyes to the fact that he failed to achieve victory in the real sense of the term. They are more interested in his initial triumph, which indeed challenged the status of Israel as the invincible state. The event in 1973 had a profound impact on collective political consciousness of the nation. In that light, people in the corridors of power are very sensitive about Sadat and his place in history. Today, in the Egyptian capital there are various manifestations of political symbolism portraying Sadat as a historic leader who reinstated Egyptian confidence after two humiliating defeats by Israel. There are streets, stations and museums named after him and his war in 1973 to remind people about his important role in contemporary Egypt.

Despite his emblematic role in Egypt, the post-revolutionary government in Tehran has been insensitive towards Sadat and his socio-historical importance in Egypt. They blame him for being the first Arab leader to recognise the Jewish State. In the eyes of the hardliners in Tehran, Sadat betrayed the Muslim resistance against Israel. Moreover, the Islamic regime never forgave Sadat for providing refuge for the fugitive Shah of Iran. In the early 80s, the radical revolutionaries were pressing to extradite the Shah. However, Sadat was indifferent to the demand of new order in Tehran and he warmly welcomed the Iranian royal family in Egypt. When the Shah passed away, Sadat organised a state funeral and buried him in the prestigious Rifai Mosque where the other Egyptian royals were buried. Last but not the least; Sadat was extremely critical of the leader of the revolution. He called Ayatollah Khomeini "lunatic", "the man of hatred" and regarded his policies as "disgrace to Islam". Ayatollah Khomeini also called upon Egyptians to overthrow Sadat. When a militant soldier affiliated to Egyptian Islamic Jihad assassinated Sadat, Tehran did not hesitate to publically endorse the action and support his motives. When Khalid Islamboly the assassin of Sadat was executed, the Islamic Republic regarded him as a martyr and named a major street after his name in the capital. His pictures were glorified and displayed throughout the country. Lately, there was hope for re-establishing the ties. However, the recent production of Iranian controversial documentary reinforced Iran's unfriendly position towards Sadat. The documentary, which was named *The Death of the Pharaoh*, glorified the assassin of Sadat and once again jeopardised any hope for the possibility of diplomatic relations in the near future. The Islamic Republic attempted to distance itself from the documentary. Nevertheless, as Egyptians argued, nothing in Iran could be produced without the official green light from the state, hence Cairo still holds Tehran responsible.

There are some serious implications for deterioration of the relation between Iran and Egypt at the given time. Although, Egypt no longer enjoys its old status as the leader of the Arab World, it is still an influential country within

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the region. Closer ties with Egypt can instrumentally help Iran to improve its relations with other Sunni nations, who are afraid of emerging Shia militancy in the region. Hence, re-establishing the relations can boost the Iranian image and it will be seen as a diplomatic triumph for a state that is often perceived suspiciously by its Arab neighbours. Due to the ongoing row over the Iranian nuclear programme, the West has shunned Tehran and there is a visible pressure to isolate her at the regional level. Although, in the given situation, Iran desperately needs to improve its regional diplomatic ties, confused ideology of the hardliners constitute obstacles to normalise relations with a key regional player. They may argue that their anti-Sadat sentiment is connected to their uncompromising position towards Israel, as he was the first Arab leader to recognise the Jewish State. However, ironically, their ideological antagonism towards Sadat is only benefiting Israel, as it makes Iran even more isolated in the region. Egypt has made it clear; they will not even start the negotiation as long as Iran glorifies the assassin of Sadat. The anti-Sadat sentiment has turned to an ideological dogma, which more than anything undermines the interest of the Islamic Republic. In the current situation, alienating Egypt as the largest Arab nation is a grave mistake with tangible consequences. Animosity with Egypt over interpretation of their history will only contribute to the ongoing deterioration of Iran's image in the Arab World. Egyptian reaction towards Iran's policy can indicate that, Sadat is not only a crucial figure in the past; he is also part of the present. Hence, as long as Iran maintains its antagonistic approach towards him, re-establishing the ties are going to be unlikely and Iran continues to be increasingly isolated in the region.

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