

Egypt, between Islam and the West

By Amir Oren

Now these are the required languages in Israeli intelligence for 2006: Farsi, Korean and Kurdish. At the end of December the Mossad started seeking, on its official Internet site, expert translators from these three languages into Hebrew and English. Iran is developing nuclear arms and missiles; North Korea is selling Iran and other countries deadly know-how and equipment; there are Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Kurds, it appears from the Mossad's job proposals, also need translations from Hebrew.

The Mossad does not disclose whether these will be operative orders for subversive action, or perhaps merely an initiative to turn Hebrew into the language of the region, in the spirit of Winston Churchill's ideas. According to the cabinet secretariat minutes in London, which were released last month, Churchill demanded in the midst of World War II that ministers act to spread English in the world and turn it into the language of the 20th century.

Reading the Times requires a knowledge of 50,000 words, said Churchill; an average citizen's vocabulary consists of some 10,000; and the British empire deems it sufficient to retranslate the holy scriptures into spoken English and to make sure everyone is familiar with 850 basic words.

Israel's focus of interest is now so Iranian, and alternately so local-Palestinian, that it seems the traditional targets of political and security surveillance have been pushed aside. This refers mainly to Egypt, which is sending out mixed signals. Hamas' victory in the Palestinian election has shaken it out of its complacency, and the Egyptian forces posted in Sinai and along the border have improved their fighting against al-Qaida cells and smugglers. But at the same time Egypt is lagging far behind Israel, the former French North-African states and even the Gulf states in strengthening its ties with the NATO Alliance.

Egypt is acting as though "Western" is the opposite of "Arab," and its Foreign Ministry has not recovered yet from the scars of the British military

presence until the mid-'50s.

Israel, Algiers and Morocco hastened to register to NATO's interception operation in the Mediterranean Sea "Active Endeavor." Egypt is out, continuing to fluctuate over whether to sign a secrecy agreement with NATO. Shaul Mofaz and the defense ministers of the six additional Mediterranean countries have been invited to NATO's defense ministers' convention in Sicily. Egyptian Defense Minister Mohammed Hussein Tantawi stayed home and sent the air force commander in his place due to the objection of Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit.

Cairo argues that the ties with NATO should be political rather than military, and Tantawi, a general in active service, is a military man. This has not stopped Tantawi from meeting civilian heads of defense establishments on his world travels. Aboul Gheit is acting to water down the security character of NATO's relations with countries of the region. To appease him, NATO Deputy Secretary General Alessandro Minuto Rizzo appeared in Cairo last week and

publicly reiterated one by one the calming statements uttered by Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at a previous visit last October. The explicit name "Israel" did not appear in Rizzo's speech.

A former senior IDF source, who used to serve in the Foreign Ministry and Prime Minister's Office and took part in many secret talks with Egyptians, Jordanians and Palestinians, this week recalled the hopes that were pinned on the cease-fire agreements in 1949 and on the group of disaffected officers' gaining control in Egypt.

Like in the story of Hamas versus Fatah, he said, it was about getting rid of the corruption and appeasing the people's wishes; and as Nasser's pan-Arab leadership aspirations led to more wars against Israel, so Hamas will not compromise because it is part of a larger front, albeit more Muslim than Arab.

The difference is, this time Egypt is not in the center of the front but threatened by it, and if it doesn't pull itself together quickly – it risks losing its unique moderate political style, as well as the peace with Israel.