



INSS Insight No. 898, February 16, 2017

[Israel and the New Leaf in Egypt-Hamas Relations](#)

[Shlomo Brom](#) and [Ofir Winter](#)

Without any formal ceremonies and far below the media's radar, Egypt and Hamas have reached a series of security, political, and economic understandings in early 2017 aimed at establishing a basis for better relations between them. A Hamas delegation, headed by Vice-President of the Political Bureau Ismail Haniyeh and members of the Political Bureau Mousa Abu Marzook and Rawhi Mushtaha visited Cairo for several days in late January, during which the delegation met with Egyptian security personnel, led by Khaled Fawzy, the director of the General Intelligence Directorate. A Hamas security delegation, which included a senior representative of Hamas' Izz ad-Din al-Qassam military arm, went on a follow-up visit in early February. The visits by the official delegations were the culmination of unofficial feelers conducted in October–November 2016, which included visits to Egypt by media, academic, and business figures from the Gaza Strip.

According to media reports, the political delegation accepted Cairo's demands that Hamas stop the smuggling of weapons and infiltration of fighters along the border between Gaza and Sinai and prevent extremist jihad groups from using the Gaza Strip as a base for preparing attacks against Egyptian military forces in the Sinai Peninsula. The announcement published by Hamas stressed that it was scrupulously observing "non-intervention in the internal affairs" of Egypt, a hint at a commitment to refrain from taking sides in the struggle between the el-Sisi regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, the mother organization of Hamas. The talks between the sides also dealt with a list of wanted people which Egypt gave to Hamas; the arrangement of an agreed-upon mechanism for opening the Rafah border crossing; expansion of trade relations between Egypt and the Gaza Strip; the ceasing of media attacks; and Egyptian mediation between Hamas and Israel and between Hamas and Fatah.

A Convergence of Mutual Interests

Since July 2013—when the Egyptian army overthrew President Mohamed Morsi, who had been elected president from the Muslim Brotherhood party—relations between Hamas and the Egyptian regime have been tense, and high-level meetings have not taken place between the two sides. Hamas has had difficulty in maintaining its relations with Egypt, due to its identity as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the ideological and operative connections between members of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Salafi-jihad groups in the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt regarded Hamas as the unofficial "military arm" of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and accused it of aiding terrorism in Egypt, including involvement in the attempted assassination of Egyptian Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat in July 2015. The recent developing turnaround in Egypt-Hamas relations is a result of the convergence of mutual interests between the two sides on a series of matters:

The security sphere: Egypt, which has suffered the loss of hundreds of soldiers in Sinai, recognizes the crucial importance of cooperation with Hamas so that it can be victorious in its struggle against the branch of the Islamic State in Sinai, which uses the Gaza Strip as a training base and as a two-directional source for smuggling weapons, soldiers, and its wounded. Hamas is also interested in preventing the connections between Salafi-jihad groups who are subverting its authority in the Gaza Strip and their ideological counterparts in Sinai.

The political sphere: Egypt wants to boost its status as the dominant regional player in the Gaza Strip, capable of uniting the Palestinian ranks and preparing for a renewal of the peace process. From Cairo's perspective, the possibility of reaching mutual understanding with Hamas is preferable than conducting a zero-sum struggle, which is liable to push Hamas into the arms of Egypt's regional rivals, such as Turkey, Qatar, or Iran, and to perpetuate Hamas's role as a subversive group that supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and constitutes an obstacle to a political settlement with Israel. Furthermore, Egypt wishes to position itself as an acceptable mediator in the internal Palestinian reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, in crisis situations, and in future prisoner deals between Hamas and Israel. In Egypt's view, these roles will enhance its regional and international stature as an anchor of stability in the Middle East, and will provide Egypt with valuable cards in dealing with the new American administration. As for Hamas, its attempts to bypass Egypt with the help of other regional patrons have been unsuccessful so far, because transferring aid to the Gaza Strip depends on Egyptian cooperation. These patrons have also not proved themselves as effective at mediating as Egypt had been between Hamas and Israel.

Another political aspect related to the rapprochement between the parties is the crisis that has emerged in recent months between Cairo and Ramallah due to the Palestinian Authority's (PA) warming of relations with Qatar and Turkey and Mahmoud Abbas's unwillingness to include Mohammed Dahlan, who is close to Egypt, in the PLO leadership. The alliance of interests between Hamas and Dahlan, who serves as the opposition to Abbas' leadership in the PA, constitutes a convenient basis for dialogue with Egypt.

The economic sphere: Egypt demonstrates more willingness to expand trade relations with the Gaza Strip. This would help the economic welfare of the tribal population in Sinai, particularly given the economic damage it has suffered due to the blocking of the smuggling tunnels to Gaza. Arrangements facilitating the legitimate movement of goods through the Rafah border crossing will help to ease the economic distress on the Egyptian side of the border and recruit the residents to the side of the Egyptian regime in its conflict with the branch of the Islamic State in Sinai. At the same time, Hamas also has an economic interest in improving its relations with Egypt, because the legal border crossing at Rafah is the Gaza Strip's only way of reaching the external world that is not under Israel's control—especially after the blow suffered by the smuggling tunnels, which Hamas also used for economic and civilian purposes.

The public sphere: Egypt hopes that better relations with Hamas will also improve the legitimacy of the Egyptian regime among Egypt's public and the Arab world in general. Arranging a mechanism for opening the Rafah crossing will pull the rug out from under those who accuse Egypt of cooperating with Israel in the blockade of the Gaza Strip and of turning its back on the humanitarian distress of the

Palestinians. For Hamas, also, better relations with Egypt and opening the Rafah crossing is likely to be an achievement for which it can take credit in internal public discourse.

The emerging understanding between Egypt and Hamas derives their validity from the common interests and the mutual levers of pressure as well as the balance of deterrence. They reflect political pragmatism at this specific point in time, but should not be interpreted at this stage as a profound strategic change on either side. Egypt's softened stance towards Hamas does not moderate the struggle being conducted by the regime against the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, Hamas' willingness to accept some of Egypt's security demands does not constitute a retreat from its commitment neither to the principles of Muslim Brotherhood ideology nor to conflict against Israel. Consequently, a considerable degree of suspicion, skepticism, and distrust still prevails between the two sides. This state of relations is reflected in the Egyptian media's widespread use of the term "normalization" to describe the warming relations with Hamas, a concept that reflects—as in the Egyptian-Israeli case—the conditional and reserved nature of any progress in relations between them. Egypt's skepticism will grow stronger whenever Hamas has difficulty in satisfying Egyptian wishes in matters such as in extraditing jihad operatives.

A Test for Israeli-Egyptian Strategic Relations

From Israel's perspective, the turnabout in Egypt-Hamas relations constitutes an important test for the flourishing security cooperation in recent years between Israel and Egypt, which face shared terrorist challenges in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. In the framework of this coordination, Israel must ensure that the security understandings taking shape between Egypt and Hamas do not leave the latter a "legitimate" opening for weapons smuggling, with Egypt turning a blind eye intentionally or not to a military buildup aimed against Israel. To prevent a recurrence of the Mubarak regime's impotent struggle against the smuggling tunnels, Jerusalem must make clear to Cairo the inevitable failure—which is also hazardous for Egypt—of any arrangement that gives Hamas concessions at the expense of Israel's security, and which does not address the struggle against terrorism in Sinai and the Gaza Strip as an integrated whole.

At the same time, if the understandings between Egypt and Hamas conform to Israel's security requirements, they are likely to serve Israel's interests in several aspects. First, it can relieve the humanitarian distress in the Gaza Strip, which can affect Israel, and the continuation of which is liable to fuel a new military outbreak with Hamas. Second, it can undermine the reciprocal relations between Hamas and the Salafi-jihad groups in Sinai, which constitute a possible threat to Israel's security and an obstacle to Egypt's efforts to attain internal security stability and to improve its economic situation. Third, enhancing Hamas' dependence on Egypt will weaken that movement's motivation to embark on a military conflict with Israel, and will reinforce Egypt's status as an effective mediator capable of bringing a swift end to future crises between Israel and Hamas.

In summary, Israel's position on the understandings between Egypt and Hamas should be derived first and foremost from the quality of the security mechanism formulated within their framework. Furthermore, Jerusalem and Cairo would do well to take advantage of this opportune time for

conducting a strategic dialogue aimed at formulating a long-term understanding about the future of the Gaza Strip in order to shape a new reality that will serve the interests of both countries. The multi-dimensional internal and external distress to which Hamas is subject to at the current time enables Israel and Egypt to sharpen Hamas' choice between facing political pragmatism in exchange for economic reconstruction or adherence to the violent struggle that will deepen its isolation. In addition, it is best to strive to ensure that the economic benefits given to the Gaza Strip do not lead to an uncontrolled strengthening of Hamas' standing—and that of the Islamist alternative that it represents—at the expense of Fatah. These benefits should be focused, judicious, and channeled towards improving the lives of the Gazan population.

