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Hamas Nears the Breaking Point

Why Egypt Is to Blame

By Benedetta Berti and Zack Gold / February 18, 2015

At a rally for Hamas in Gaza in early February, a spokesman for the group, Sami Abu Zuhri, warned that the continued blockade on the area "will push Hamas to carry out actions which could be described as crazy." When it comes to Hamas, such rhetoric is par for the course—except for one thing: the target of the group's threat was not Israel. Demonstrators were there to protest Egyptian policies.

Since the end of the summer 2014 Gaza war, Egypt has increased the political and economic pressure on Hamas. The moves are in line with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's crackdown on Islamist opposition at home. After all, Hamas originally grew out of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Egyptian government claims that the broader group is part of a well-organized international conspiracy against Egypt and that destroying it is an existential necessity. Egypt's Gaza policy must be viewed through this lens: to neutralize the Brotherhood at home, it aims to undermine the group's potential allies elsewhere, including by breaking Hamas's hold of Gaza.

But by treating the Gaza Strip as a national security threat and pushing both Hamas and the broader population into desperation, Sisi only increases the likelihood that Hamas will lash out. After all, last summer's 50-day war between Hamas and Israel was a result of the Egyptian-Israeli pincer around Gaza. For Cairo, that war was the best possible outcome of its Gaza policy. Hamas went to war with Israel, not Egypt, and the Israel Defense Forces took responsibility for knocking the group down a peg (and bore the brunt of international criticism for worsening Gaza's already dire humanitarian situation)……

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