

A Decade since Hamas's Takeover of Gaza: The Egyptian Perspective

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Hamas's takeover of Gaza in June 2007 created a new reality on Egypt's northern border, which constitutes the only border of the Gaza Strip that is not under Israeli control. Over the past decade, Egyptian interests have evolved in accordance with regional changes as well as the respective postures of the three presidents who ruled Egypt in this period: Husni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. In tandem, Hamas's control over Gaza has incurred a range of implications for Egyptian interests at the military, political, economic, and public levels. What follows is an overview of the principal trends that Egypt experienced over the last decade relating to Hamas's rule in Gaza, which have led Cairo to increase its involvement in the intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts, reach security and economic understandings with Hamas, and seek to prevent violent escalation between Hamas and Israel.

Military Implications

From the outset, Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip created new multidimensional threats to Egypt's national security, and these became more pronounced after the rise to power of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, against the backdrop of his struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the branch of the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula.

Gaza is seen as a base for terrorism that has affected the security and stability of Egypt in general and Sinai in particular, due to the ties that have developed between Hamas and Salafi jihadist groups in Sinai as well as among Salafi jihadist groups in both Gaza and Sinai. The network of smuggling tunnels on the Gaza-Sinai border has been the main source of

tension between Egypt and Hamas, as Cairo sees Hamas as undermining Egyptian sovereignty. Tensions between Egypt and Hamas are also linked to the friction between Egyptian military forces and Hamas operatives along the Rafah crossing, as well as to Egyptian concerns about Hamas or other Gaza groups using Sinai as an alternative or additional base for their military struggle against Israel.

Toward the end of the Mubarak presidency, Hamas had already begun expanding significantly the network of tunnels between Gaza and Sinai, and these enabled the smuggling of activists and weapons, including rockets, missiles, and explosives. In order to operate this network, Hamas recruited smugglers from among the Bedouin population of Sinai, fertile ground for recruitment due to the lack of adequate employment opportunities for local residents in Sinai, and because of their anger at being neglected by the central government in Cairo. Mubarak cooperated with Israel in imposing a blockade on Gaza, but refrained from investing all of the necessary resources to block the underground smuggling, due to both a lack of technological tools as well as a reluctance to bring about a deterioration of relations with Hamas. In 2009 and 2010, however, following American and Israeli pressure and increasing tensions between Cairo and Gaza, Egypt bolstered its efforts to crack down on tunnels; for example, an underground steel wall was built along the Philadelphi route, although its effectiveness was largely limited.¹

After the January 25, 2011 revolution, the unchecked smuggling network between Gaza and Sinai evolved from a mainly Israeli problem into a national Egyptian challenge and a major threat to Egyptian national security, against the backdrop of increased attacks on Egyptian soldiers in Sinai and given the extensive undermining of stability, security, and sovereignty in Sinai. The situation worsened further following the collapse of the Libyan army, which led to an increase in the smuggling of weapons taken from Libya to Sinai and Gaza. The terrorist attack on Highway 12 in Israel, which was launched from the border with Egypt in August 2011 – and which Israel attributed to the Popular Resistance Committees in Gaza – demonstrated that Sinai had become a shared security threat for Egypt and Israel. The attack also revealed the threat posed by the Sinai-Gaza terrorism connection to Israeli-Egyptian relations and demonstrated the growing necessity of military cooperation between them in order to cope with this threat.

Evidence of the mutual Egyptian-Israeli interest in working together to tackle the Gaza threat can be seen in that even under President Morsi, who represented a movement fundamentally opposed to peace with Israel, Egypt intensified its struggle against the smuggling tunnels and increased security cooperation with Israel. In this context the serious attack launched from Gaza in August 2012, which claimed the lives of 16 Egyptian soldiers, forced Morsi – under pressure from the army and the public – to renew the restrictions on the opening of the Rafah border crossing. In the wake of the attack, dozens of smuggling tunnels were sealed or flooded with sewage, and Hamas again blamed Egypt for participating in the blockade of Gaza.

The overthrow of Morsi and the rise of the el-Sisi regime raised the hostility between Egypt and Hamas to another level, due to the deepening ideological rift between the two parties and to the escalation of the security situation in Sinai. At the same time, there was an increase in Salafi jihadist activities in Sinai. In November 2014 the organization Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis declared the establishment of Wilayat Sinai, the “Sinai Province,” which swore allegiance to the Islamic State. The el-Sisi regime accused Hamas directly of aiding the Salafi jihadist camp in Sinai and of having supported some of the attacks carried out against Egyptian army forces in Sinai. The most severe breaking point in relations between the two sides occurred after the assassination of Egyptian Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat in July 2015. According to Egyptian security forces, the assailants received training in Gaza on preparing car bombs. Against this backdrop, Egypt warned Hamas that it must revise its policies, or else Egypt would promote sanctions against it in Egypt and in the Arab world, including by labeling the group as a terrorist organization. The Egyptian threats were accompanied by a media campaign designed to tarnish Hamas’s image; the Egyptian press began referring to Hamas as the “military wing” of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood disguised as a Palestinian resistance movement against the Israeli occupation.²

Egyptian pressure yielded results in March 2016, when a Hamas military delegation visited Egypt. In the discussions, Cairo hinged improved relations, and in particular the opening of the Rafah crossing, upon a series of military and political demands, including: stopping the smuggling of weapons and terrorists through the tunnels; extraditing wanted persons to Egypt; officially severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood; and improving relations with

the moderate Sunni axis at the expense of the Shiite axis led by Iran and the Islamist axis led by Turkey and Qatar. In April 2016, in the wake of the talks and as a confidence building measure, Hamas increased security on the border with Egypt.³ Another improvement in Egypt-Hamas relations occurred throughout 2017, with Hamas political and military delegations visiting Cairo in an attempt to create broader understandings. These visits occurred in parallel to a deterioration of Hamas's relations with Wilayat Sinai, following the arrest of hundreds of Salafi jihadist activists in the Gaza Strip and the imposition of mutual restrictions between Hamas and the jihadists on the use of the smuggling tunnels.⁴

In talks held in June-September 2017, Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate and Hamas reached an overall understanding whereby Hamas's help in fighting Wilayat Sinai would be met with an easing of the Egyptian blockade on Gaza. In a related development, the Statement of Principles issued by Hamas in May 2017 erased any mention of the link between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood (a connection that appears in the original Hamas charter) and expressed a commitment to end interference in Egypt's internal affairs.⁵ At the practical level, as part of beefing up security along the Gaza-Egypt border, Hamas began building a 12-kilometer long, 100-meter deep buffer zone in June, complete with security cameras and watchtowers. The Gazan Interior Ministry stated that the buffer zone will become a closed military area, which will make it easier to control the border and stop infiltrations.⁶ Hamas also provided Egypt with information about connections between terrorists in Gaza and Sinai. In tandem with these steps, Egypt began to sell electricity and diesel fuel to operate the Gaza Strip power station to prevent further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis that erupted following the PA's decision to reduce the supply of electricity to Gaza. It was reported that within the framework of the talks in Cairo in September, Egypt agreed to the appointment of a permanent Hamas representative in Cairo and is preparing for a gradual opening of the Rafah crossing to regular traffic of people and goods.⁷ The actual implementation of the Egyptian steps is conditional on Hamas's cooperation in the eradication of the smuggling tunnels and Wilayat Sinai, and in the successful implementation of the agreements reached in the framework of the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, signed in October 2017 under Egyptian auspices, regarding transfer of control of the Rafah crossing to the Palestinian unity government.

Economic Implications

The extensive network of smuggling tunnels that Hamas created after its takeover of Gaza, which gradually became a significant threat to Egyptian national security, could not have existed and thrived without the cooperation of the Bedouin population on the Egyptian side of the border. It follows that the Bedouin population is the key to stabilizing the security situation in Sinai.

Whereas Mubarak directed meager budgets toward the Bedouins living in Sinai (a population that in 2013 was estimated at some 300,000), the undermining of the security situation after his overthrow made it clear to the central government in Cairo that a comprehensive plan for developing the economy in the peninsula represented the key to restoring Egypt's overall national security. As a result, as early as 2012 the Egyptian transitional government implemented a series of measures for the benefit of Sinai residents, including cancelling debts, connecting areas to water sources, establishing a university, and easing land acquisition permits.⁸ After the fall of Morsi, el-Sisi also recognized the need to address the economic-security distress in Sinai. Since 2015, the regime has increased its investments in developing Sinai in order to regain the loyalty of the Bedouin tribes and achieve their crucial cooperation in the struggle against the terrorism in Sinai.⁹

Furthermore, from an economic perspective, the failure to establish legal trade between Egypt and Gaza prevented fulfilling the potential inherent in developing relations between the Egyptian and Palestinian populations. Since the Mubarak era, Egypt has participated in the blockade of Gaza out of political considerations, driven primarily by the goal of weakening Hamas's rule and fearing any Israeli impetus to pass on to Egypt the responsibility for managing life in Gaza. However, the lack of Egyptian supervision of goods sold to Egypt through the tunnels has had economic consequences: first, the smuggling of subsidized basic goods such as fuel and medicines, at Egypt's expense; and second, forfeiture of legal trade, which could have benefited all parties involved. The understandings reached between Egypt and Hamas in 2017 showed a new openness on the part of Egypt toward development of mutual trade relations between Sinai and Gaza, through the establishment of an industry zone and a free trade area.¹⁰ Indeed, in August 2017, an agreement on the establishment of such an area was reached between both parties.¹¹ Research conducted by the Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies claimed that it would be a solution for some

of the economic problems of the residents of Gaza and Sinai and supply Egypt with an estimated annual income of \$2.5 billion.¹²

Political Implications

Throughout the past decade, Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip has challenged three strategic Egyptian political interests: maintaining its peace with Israel, advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and preserving Egypt's hegemonic status in the Gaza Strip vis-à-vis competing regional players.

Maintaining peaceful relations with Israel: Despite the upheavals and political changes Egypt experienced over the past decade, peace with Israel has remained a strategic asset of the utmost importance. However, the deterioration of the security situation in Sinai since January 2011 created a new threat at the shared border between the two countries and raised question marks regarding the validity of the demilitarization agreement mandated by the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. This reality made the countries reevaluate the restrictions stipulated in the security appendix to the peace treaty. Shared interests, as well as the trust between the military and political leaderships in the two countries, created the conditions for Israeli flexibility and de facto changes to the demilitarization agreement, with the coordinated entry of significant Egyptian military forces into the Sinai Peninsula.¹³

Advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process: Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip created a significant new obstacle to the advancement of a political agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, another key Egypt interest over the past decades. Unlike Fatah, Hamas has refused to recognize Israel, commit to the signed agreements with Israel, or renounce violence or the strategic objective of eliminating Israel.¹⁴ Mubarak saw the difficulty inherent in advancing the political process between Israel and the Palestinians as long as Hamas ruled Gaza. He worked to restore Fatah's rule in Gaza, both through Egyptian participation in the blockade of Gaza and by conditioning the opening of the Rafah crossing upon Fatah's restored control, as well as through attempts to promote reconciliation agreements between Fatah and Hamas to establish a national unity government that could represent all Palestinians in peace talks.¹⁵ The short period of Morsi's rule was characterized by reaching out to Hamas, as reflected in gestures recognizing Hamas's rule in Gaza, such as opening the Rafah crossing for visits by official Egyptian as well as representatives of Arab and Islamic

countries to the Gaza Strip, and easing restrictions at the Rafah crossing.¹⁶ In contrast, President el-Sisi has worked throughout most of his rule to tighten the blockade of the Gaza Strip, while pressuring for Palestinian reunification, based on his seeing the renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as a necessary condition for the struggle against extremism and for achieving regional stability.¹⁷

However, late 2016 saw a crisis in relations between Cairo and Ramallah due to the Palestinian Authority's improved relations with Qatar and Turkey, and Mahmoud Abbas's unwillingness to include Muhammad Dahlan, who has close ties to Egypt, within the PLO leadership. While Abbas dismissed Dahlan from Fatah in mid-2011 following Dahlan's public harsh criticism of his leadership, Egypt saw him as a possible successor to the Palestinian President and hoped for his return to the Palestinian political arena.¹⁸ The crisis was reflected in the fact that Egypt did not invite Fatah representatives to two conferences – one political and one economic – held in October and November 2016 in the resort village of Ain Sokhna, with the Palestinian representatives coming mainly from Dahlan's supporters in Gaza.¹⁹ The shared interests of Hamas and Dahlan in opposing the rule of Abu Mazen have served as a basis for improved relations between Egypt and Hamas. This is reflected in initial signs of de facto Egyptian recognition of the Hamas government in Gaza, perhaps out of pragmatic acceptance of its sovereignty over Gaza and of the difficulty of achieving intra-Palestinian reconciliation,²⁰ and perhaps out of hope that Hamas will in the future be willing to soften its stance toward Palestinian unity in light of its deep dependence on Egypt and the weakness of its other regional supporters.²¹

A breakthrough in Egypt's mediation efforts between Gaza and Ramallah occurred in September 2017 when Cairo succeeded in imposing on Hamas and Fatah a promise to make another attempt to end the decade-long Palestinian rift. The effort ended the following month with the signing of a reconciliation agreement, which is an opening for additional agreements between the sides.²² Following Egypt's demand, Hamas announced that the administrative committee it had established would be dismantled, and called on the Palestinian unity government in Ramallah to resume its functioning in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, Hamas stated its agreement to a general election and the reopening of the dialogue with Fatah over the implementation of the Cairo agreement signed by the two parties in May 2011. For its part, Fatah

welcomed Hamas's announcement and thanked Egypt for its efforts.²³ The Egyptian pro-government daily *al-Ahram* expressed its hope that Palestinian reconciliation would serve as a base for a permanent agreement between the PA and Israel, whereby an independent Palestinian state would be established, with its capital Jerusalem.²⁴

Ensuring Egyptian hegemony in the Gaza Strip: Iran, followed by Turkey and Qatar, saw Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip as an opportunity to strengthen its influence at Egypt's expense. The struggles for hegemony between Egypt and these parties are part of the wider regional struggles that have taken place over the past decade between the pragmatic Sunni axis – during the Mubarak era, as today, Egypt was considered one of the leaders of this axis – and the two other competing axes: the Shia axis led by Iran, and the Islamist axis identified with the Muslim Brotherhood and a certain extent with Turkey and Qatar as well.²⁵

The struggle for Egyptian hegemony in Gaza has gone through a number of stages. During the Mubarak era, Egypt focused on the blockade of Gaza in order to create pressure on Hamas. In addition, toward the end of his rule, Egypt intensified its underground struggle against the smuggling of Iranian weapons and against Hamas activists leaving Gaza for training in Iran.²⁶ Morsi, in contrast to Mubarak, enabled the countries that are part of the Shia and Islamist axes to gain a foothold in the Gaza Strip, and made it easier for them to strengthen their influence.²⁷ The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood regime and the rise of el-Sisi turned the clock back and restored the Egyptian stronghold on Gaza through the blockade policy and a more forceful and determined struggle against the smuggling tunnels. In early 2017 and thereafter the mutual pressure tactics led to an understanding between Egypt and Hamas, conditioned upon the latter's distancing itself from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and from the regional axes competing with Egypt.²⁸ It appears that based on these understandings, bolstered by the reconciliation agreement reached between Fatah and Hamas, Cairo hopes to solidify its status as the regional player with hegemony over the Gaza Strip as well as the country able to unify the Palestinian ranks and lay the groundwork for the renewal of the peace process. In its view, it is preferable to reach mutual understandings with Hamas than to wage a zero sum struggle against it that could push it into the arms of Egypt's regional adversaries and

cement its role as a subversive force that supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and serves as an obstacle to a political agreement with Israel.

Public Implications

The ongoing Israeli blockade of Gaza, and the three military confrontations between Israel and Hamas during 2008-2014, forced the changing regimes in Cairo to maneuver carefully between demonstrating solidarity with the plight of the Palestinians and criticizing Israel on the one hand, and denouncing Hamas's terrorism while continuing to develop strategic peace relations and military connections with Israel on the other.²⁹

This duality was reflected in the rhetoric adopted by the Mubarak regime, which condemned Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, demanded that Hamas honor the agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel,³⁰ and even blamed it for the outbreak of Operation Cast Lead, while at the same time denouncing Israel's actions against Hamas in order to avoid being labeled as an Israeli collaborator.³¹ Morsi increased the expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, and in 2012 recalled the Egyptian ambassador in Tel Aviv to Cairo in protest of Operation Pillar of Defense. Yet on a practical level, he too refrained from actively supporting Hamas in a way that could endanger the peace agreement with Israel.³² The el-Sisi regime has likewise been torn, perhaps even more so, between hostility toward Hamas (as a Muslim Brotherhood subsidiary) and traditional Egyptian solidarity with the Palestinians. This dilemma reached its peak during Operation Protective Edge, when Hamas accused the Egyptian "coup regime" of conspiring with Israel to impose a surrender agreement on Hamas.³³ In response, Egypt, placed most of the responsibility for the "Israeli aggression" on Hamas and accused it of preferring a vision of the Islamic caliphate over the interests of the Palestinian people.³⁴ This critical tone was softened once Hamas agreed to accept Egyptian mediation of the conflict instead of Turkish-Qatari mediation.³⁵

The improved relations between Egypt and Hamas in 2017 could extricate Egypt from the internal and pan-Arab publicity problem inherent in maintaining its conflict with Hamas and the Palestinians in Gaza. Instituting a mechanism for opening the Rafah crossing would undermine the allegations of those who accuse Egypt of collaborating with Israel in the blockade of Gaza and turning its back on the humanitarian plight of the Palestinians there.³⁶

Conclusion

Ten years after Hamas seized control of Gaza, it is clear that Egypt has succeeded in adapting to the new reality. On the one hand, Egypt recognizes Hamas as the dominant force controlling the Gaza Strip and the political address; on the other hand, Egypt wields effective carrot-and-stick leverage vis-à-vis Hamas in order to promote realistically security, political, and economic interests it considers vital. Egypt sees Hamas a necessary partner in eradicating terrorism in Sinai, considers the end of the intra-Palestinian rift as a vital national interest and an opportunity to enhance its regional role, and views favorably the possibility of closer economic ties between Gaza and Sinai. At the same time, Egypt does not delude itself into thinking that Hamas has changed its worldview, and remains skeptical regarding the organization's intentions and actions. Egypt's policy presumes that Hamas's dependence on the opening of the Rafah crossing, the weakness of the Arab and international systems, and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza will force Hamas to place pragmatic considerations above ideology and maintain the understandings with Cairo that suit the current circumstances. The fulfillment and preservation of the understandings requires the cooperation of the PA and Israel, as well as continued willingness among all sides to allow concessions and compromises.

Notes

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