

In the Wake of Operation Cast Lead: Egypt's Regional Position Revisited

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The past several weeks have seen interesting developments that are potentially significant for Egypt's regional stature. In the Middle East balance of power, Egypt has been losing ground over the past years, a trend dramatized by the fact that even Hamas and Hizbollah seem to have no qualms about openly humiliating Egypt in their statements and actions. However, indications from the campaign in Gaza that Egypt is seeking to reassert its regional prominence more determinedly could have important ramifications for regional politics, including ongoing efforts to counter Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

As in 2006, Egypt once again refrained from automatically pointing the finger at Israel upon the launching of Operation Cast Lead. In fact, similar to the situation at the start of the Second Lebanon War, when Hizbollah was castigated for its adventurism, Egypt blamed Hamas for having invited Israel's military reaction by unilaterally ending the six month ceasefire eight days earlier and firing rockets at Israel. Still smarting from Hamas' rejection of its attempt to mediate between the two Palestinian factions, Egypt was unrelenting in its blame, even though the firm stance it assumed against Hamas was highly unpopular in some other Arab states and certainly within the Arab population across the Middle East.¹ Egypt's refusal to open the Rafah border crossing, coupled with the open and repeated trips of Amos Gilad to Egypt for consultations, fueled accusations of complicity with Israel. Tzipi Livni's visit to Egypt two days before the operation began even allowed some to go so far as to accuse Mubarak of having given Israel a green light to attack.²

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Egypt's direct interest in developments in Gaza and the concern it shares with Israel as to the dangers of Hamas' radicalism set the stage for Egypt to advance mediation efforts between Israel and Hamas in the context of the raging conflict. With the initiation of Israel's ground campaign Mubarak became much more critical of Israel's actions,³ and at the same time began earnestly pursuing efforts to broker a ceasefire, inviting representatives from both Hamas and Israel for consultations. Within days, Egypt's potential as a principal mediator between the two sides was firmly established. Egypt is of course not an uninvolved third party in this conflict: as a country bordering the Gaza Strip it has a direct stake in curtailing Hamas' ability to stir up trouble in this area, and Hamas is also deemed a direct threat due to the connection between the organization and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. From Israel's point of view, Egypt also has a crucial role to play in instituting the necessary mechanisms to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza.

Mediation between Israel and the Palestinians has traditionally served Egypt as a means to establish and underscore its leadership role in the Middle East, and at the end of the three weeks of Operation Cast Lead, Egypt emerged as the primary regional mediating party, although there were other contenders for the position. The regional status benefits that it stands to gain are further enhanced by the fact that it prevailed over Turkey, a rival in the Middle East "mediation game." Turkey had scored important points over the past year mediating the Israel-Syria indirect talks, and there were even hints that it might assume a similar role between the US and Iran. However, Turkey's harsh condemnation of Israel during the operation – to the point of calling for Israel to be

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barred from the UN – sparked a crisis in Israeli-Turkish relations that diminished its prospects as a successful mediator. Israel refused to accord Turkey a role in ceasefire negotiations, and Egypt's orchestration of the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting when hostilities came to an end indicated its undisputed primacy.

Significantly, talks with the Egyptians continued post-ceasefire. A week after the ceasefire came into force, new border security arrangements were under discussion between Israel and Egypt with regard to Israel's major concern: weapons smuggling into Gaza,

long a contentious issue due to Egypt's resistance to the presence of international monitors on its soil to help stop this phenomenon.⁴ Focus was on a possible increase in the presence of Egyptian security forces along the border.⁵

Egypt's determination to reassert itself in Middle East politics thus surfaced in Operation Cast Lead in two ways: adopting the unpopular stance of blaming Hamas for the outbreak of hostilities – and sticking to its position; and then orchestrating mediation efforts for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. An important question goes beyond the Gaza context and extends to Egypt's potential willingness to stand up to Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions as well. Indeed, Iran also played a central role on the sidelines of the recent round of fighting, and it was likewise hoping to use the conflict in order to reap regional benefits. In contrast to Egypt, however, Iran's strategy was based on its expectation that its proxy Hamas would be able to declare victory over Israel, which would further underscore its regional clout and in turn enhance its bargaining position with the West.

Hamas' poor performance undermined Iran's plans, and the question is whether this might encourage Egypt to channel its regional assertiveness to the Iranian arena in a more direct and overt fashion. Generally speaking, instances of lack of respect toward Egypt that emerged surrounding the recent war – and that were apparent even in attempts by Qatar to interfere in Egyptian mediation efforts – unleashed a fierceness in Egyptian reactions that has not been seen for some years.⁶ In the days following the end of the campaign, Egypt continued its harsh line against Iran when Mubarak declared that he would not allow Iran to rehabilitate Gaza. Moreover, in a strongly worded message, Egyptian foreign minister Aboul Gheit related to Iran's attempts during the war to push Egypt to actively confront Israel, reconfirming Egypt's rejection of Iran's radicalism and underscoring Egypt's strategic choice to follow the path of peace.

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Egypt's interest in regional leadership, which is integral to its national identity, means that it is a natural rival to Iran. A more openly assertive Egyptian position would be useful in the overall effort to

confront Iran's nuclear ambitions: in negotiations with Iran, the US would have stronger cards to play if moderate Arab states were to voice their opposition to Iran's hegemonic designs more clearly. It is, however, too early to predict whether the trend that has emerged with regard to hostilities in Gaza will continue in a way that will offer concrete help to undermine Iran's attempts to bolster its own power in the Middle East.

Notes

- 1 Volkhard Windfuhr, "Egypt in Quandary as Gaza Raids Divide the Muslim World," *SpiegelOnline*, December 30, 2008.
- 2 See Steven Erlanger, "Egypt Pressed on Gaza from Without and Within," *New York Times*, January 3, 2009.
- 3 *Ynet News*, January 4, 2009.
- 4 Sebastian Abbot, "Egypt FM Dismisses US-Israeli Anti-Smuggling Deal," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2009. According to reports, however, Egypt agreed and has begun to install advanced cameras and sensors as part of its effort to curtail smuggling: *Jerusalem Post*, February 1, 2009.
- 5 "Israel to Allow Egypt to Boost Force on Gaza Border to Fight Smuggling," *Haaretz*, January 23, 2009.
- 6 *Ynet news*, January 28, 2009.