

# The Egyptian *Hudna* Initiative: Bypassing Israel

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At a meeting in Cairo in early June 2023, Egypt presented leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad the framework for a *hudna* in the Gaza Strip, i.e., a long-term ceasefire. Israel is not officially involved in the initiative, which would bring it some clear benefits, including prolonged security calm and Cairo's willingness for deeper involvement in Gaza. These benefits are not obviated by the fact that Hamas would also benefit from the initiative, which includes plans for broader infrastructure and economic projects, providing the organization with an opportunity to continue its political and military intensification. Nonetheless, Hamas is not enthusiastic about the Egyptian initiative. In any case, Israel would be well advised not to oppose the initiative, even though it involves giving up on three principles: (1) Israel would presumably give a "green light" to Hamas and Islamic Jihad to continue to execute terror attacks in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Israel itself, as well as from southern Lebanon. (2) Israel would concede its demand that any arrangement include the return of soldiers' bodies and civilians held hostage in Gaza. (3) The lack of an effective response to Hamas and Islamic Jihad's growing strength would continue.

On June 4-6, 2023, senior Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders visited Cairo at the invitation of Major General Abbas Kamel, the director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate. The Palestinian delegation was headed by Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (accompanied by his deputy, Saleh al-Arouri, and the head of the organization's "external" bureau, Khaled Mashal), and the leader of Islamic Jihad, Ziyad al-Nakhleh. At the meeting, the Egyptians presented an initiative for a long-term ceasefire – a *hudna* – in the Gaza Strip. Discussions were influenced by the results of Operation Shield and

Arrow, which highlighted Israel's capability to carry out targeted killing operations, as well as by the atmosphere of recent agreements across the Middle East, leading to reduced tensions and violence. The basis for the discussions was a proposal for a long-term ceasefire coupled with Cairo's willingness to help calm the security situation on the Gaza front and participate in reconstructing the area, with the political support of the United States and financial assistance from Qatar.

Cairo's motivation for becoming more involved in Gaza lies in the economic and political rewards it would enjoy in this context, as well as its success in launching local infrastructure projects. For example, three Egyptian construction projects of high-rise housing in Jabaliya and Bet Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip have already reached an advanced stage and are nearly ready for occupancy. Similarly, there are plans to develop the a-Rashid coastal road, which runs parallel to the sea in northern Gaza.

The Egyptian Initiative includes the following projects:

- Expansion of the el-Arish port in the northern Sinai Peninsula, allowing it to become a cargo port for all of the Gaza Strip; a paved highway for trucks to enter Gaza; and expanded trade between Egypt and Gaza via the Salah al-Din crossing.
- Connected electricity systems that would distribute power from Egypt to the Strip.
- Development of the Gaza Marine natural gas field that lies off the coast of the Strip. This would require the involvement of the Palestinian Authority, since the PA is recognized as the Palestinian government, which has the rights to the gas reserves. It is possible that this is reason that Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh visited Cairo a week before the Hamas and Islamic Jihad delegations.
- Establishment of a free-trade zone between the northern Sinai and the Gaza Strip.
- Egyptian insistence that the Palestinian Authority remain in the picture by reestablishing its control over the Palestinian side of the

Rafah border crossing between Hamas-run Gaza and Egypt – just as it was until four years ago.

It was also reported that to enable the conditions for long term ceasefire in Gaza, Egypt, in its talks with Iran, demanded that Tehran refrain from using its proxies – primarily Palestinian Islamic Jihad – and that it do nothing to undermine the nascent agreement between Cairo and the Palestinian factions that are under the influence of the Islamic Republic.



At this stage, Israel is not directly involved in the talks, but it has apparently been briefed about them. As part of the Egyptian proposal, Israel will be required to make certain commitments, including adhering to a long-term ceasefire, refraining from carrying out targeted killing operations against senior Palestinian commanders, further easing of the restrictions on movement of people and goods from Gaza into Israel, and agreement on gas production from Gaza's exclusive economic zone.

## Perspectives

The absence of two important Palestinian leaders from the meeting in Cairo – Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, and President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas – suggests that Egypt exerted no pressure on the Palestinians regarding internal reconciliation or elections. It is much more convenient for Sinwar to allow Hamas's external leadership to be in the front of the negotiations so that he will not have to explain the missing elements in the *hudna* settlement, including the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and the total lifting of what they see as the Israeli siege of Gaza. In his current situation, Abbas is not a relevant actor on the Gaza front, with the exception of the agreements over gas production, and it even seems that Cairo has given up on its efforts to persuade him to promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

The Egyptian incentive includes the promotion of Egyptian economic projects in the Gaza Strip, which will be highly beneficial to Cairo (expansion of the el-Arish airport and electricity infrastructure in Rafah and el-Arish, construction of a highway to allow quick access for goods, and development of the Gaza Marine gas field). In addition, the most recent round of fighting between Israel and Islamic Jihad in May – which coincided with Ramadan – made it clear to Egypt the challenge in mediating in an event with multiple actors and addresses, some of whom are located outside the Gaza Strip and are under the influence of Iran and Hezbollah. Therefore, Egypt wants to make the rules of the game clear yet again: as far as it is concerned, there is only one Palestinian actor that is responsible for what happens in the Gaza Strip, namely Hamas. Moreover, it wants to safeguard its exclusive role as mediator with Israel.

The Israeli game: It is convenient for Israel to remain outside of the negotiations – certainly the open talks – whether or not by choice. This frees Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from having to explain to his radical right partners in the coalition why Israel is making deals with Hamas and why the agreement does not include the return of captive Israelis and the bodies of Israeli soldiers held by Hamas. In addition, Egypt is responsible for all the initial elements of the agreement, so Israel can downplay the significance of what it is being asked to concede (beyond the

understandings that currently exist, especially its policy vis-à-vis the border crossings and permits for some 18,500 Gazan laborers to enter Israel). Israel is not being asked to change its policy on the Temple Mount or in Jerusalem, or to limit its own freedom of operation to conduct counterterror missions.

### **Consequences if Egypt Succeeds in Achieving a *Hudna***

- a. Strengthening Hamas's role in the Gaza Strip: Hamas is the force factor with which Israel must advance a long-term ceasefire in Gaza, while neutralizing Islamic Jihad. Hamas would benefit from the arrangement, with the continued easing of the closure of Gaza and the implementation of infrastructure and economic projects in the region – without any commitment to Israel that it would refrain from supporting terrorism in Jerusalem, the West Bank, inside Israel, and from southern Lebanon. Saleh al-Aroui will be free to continue initiating terror attacks and preparing for further violence during Ramadan next year. At the same time, Hamas will retain its bargaining chips – the missing Israelis and the bodies of fallen soldiers. Similarly, an agreement of this kind – especially if the United States is involved, even with a low profile – will increase the legitimacy and international recognition of Hamas.
- b. Deeper Egyptian involvement in Gaza and Cairo's willingness to engage in the Gaza quagmire: The greater Gaza's dependence on Egypt, the less it will rely on Israel. At the same time, Egypt has not shown particular effectiveness when it comes to prevention of arms smuggling via Sinai into Gaza. The concern is that the expansion of trade and movement of goods from Sinai will provide increased opportunities for smugglers, while Israel's ability to respond to such incidents would be limited because of its reliance on Egypt and the desire to maintain the special relationship with Cairo.
- c. Israeli tension between the expected benefits and the price it will be asked to pay: On the one hand, Israel would consider it an achievement if there were a long-term ceasefire in Gaza and if its own responsibility for the Strip were reduced. On the other hand, this would reduce Gaza's dependence on Israel, which would lose

whatever influence it has over events in Gaza. In addition, the prevalent Israeli belief is that improving the economic conditions in Gaza is the way to rein in Hamas, which is why it supports easing the closure for civilian matters and the ongoing reconstruction of Gaza. However, if the proposed Egyptian ceasefire is accepted, the extreme right wing elements in Netanyahu's government are likely to oppose any Israeli concessions, such as a sweeping easing of the closure or Israeli approval for a Palestinian gas field – without a deal that includes the missing and fallen Israelis.

- d. Can the rogue elements be contained? One precondition for implementation of a long-term ceasefire is that Islamic Jihad accepts the authority of Hamas and Tehran agrees to this, at least tacitly. However, it is not clear to what extent Iranian influence over Islamic Jihad would be curbed, also in light of the improved bilateral relations between Cairo and Tehran.
- e. Another stage in the increasing irrelevance of the Palestinian Authority: A negotiated ceasefire on the Gaza front would be another nail in the coffin on the Palestinian Authority, which fails to reap any significant economic or political benefits – comparable to those that Hamas will enjoy if the proposed ceasefire comes into effect – in the territories under its control. Against this backdrop, Hamas is likely to intensify its efforts to take control of the Palestinian Authority the day after Abbas is no longer in power.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Egyptian initiative on a *hudna* in Gaza does not include any measures to curb Hamas's consolidation or to limit its freedom of operation on other fronts, and it does not advance a deal for the return of missing Israelis and the bodies of fallen soldiers. Moreover, the *hudna* would ensure the survival of Islamic Jihad and other terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip. One of the main demands that Islamic Jihad made before agreeing to the May 13 ceasefire that ended Operation Shield and Arrow was an end to the Israeli policy of targeted killings against its senior militant commanders – to which Israel responded, "Quiet will be met with quiet." If a *hudna* is achieved, Islamic

Jihad – like Hamas – will have the freedom to rebuild its ranks and its military capabilities.

It seems doubtful that Egypt will manage to broker a long-term ceasefire, especially given Hamas's likely rejection. Notwithstanding the benefits that a *hudna* would give Hamas, the organization might find it acceptable if it felt it was in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis Israel – but that is not the case today. The Hamas leadership believes that the organization's strength on the Palestinian and regional fronts is growing, while it believes that Israel's strength is waning and that its international and regional influence is on the decline. Therefore, Hamas will likely prefer to maintain the status quo of "quiet," with certain embellishments that would allow it to continue reconstructing the Gaza Strip, increase its own military strength, and solidify its political position – but without being asked to make any ideological compromises or grant any rewards – even indirectly – to Israel or the Palestinian Authority (e.g., the gas field).

Although the chances of the Egyptian *hudna* initiative bearing fruit are slim, Israel should refrain from opposing it, and it should likewise support the expansion of Egyptian infrastructure and economic projects in Gaza. Improved living conditions in the Strip and increased Egyptian involvement will advance Israel's strategic goals – ensuring long-term quiet and deepening the rift between Gaza and the West Bank. The continued promotion of the Egyptian initiative would allow Israel to examine whether Hamas is motivated enough to exercise control over the "rogue" terror organizations in Gaza – mainly Islamic Jihad – and to what extent Sinwar is committed to security quiet in the long term. At the same time, in order not to invalidate the *hudna*, Israel will have to come to terms with the following: continued freedom of operation for Hamas and Islamic Jihad to commit terror attacks on other fronts; improvements for Hamas in Gaza without a solution to the issue of the missing and fallen Israelis; and the absence of an effective solution to the growing military power of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

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