

## After 45 Years: The Impact of the Gaza War on the Israel–Egypt Peace Accord

Haisam Hassanein and Ofir Winter | No. 1844 | April 8, 2024

In the shadow of the October 7 massacre and the subsequent war that erupted in the Gaza Strip, Israel and Egypt recently marked the 45th anniversary of signing the peace accord between the two countries. While the events of the past few months have presented Israel and Egypt with a formidable test, the repercussions of this situation have not exceeded the traditional ambivalence that characterizes their relationship. Although the public and official discourse on both sides has been full of inflammatory, hostile, wary, and mistrustful rhetoric, the quiet security dialogue, the mutual commitment to the peace treaty, and an understanding of the strategic interests involved have all continued. This duality, despite being an organic part of the so-called “cold peace” between them, is not a healthy situation. Jerusalem and Cairo should work, with the help of their allies, to construct an improved framework of relations, which would serve their bilateral and regional interests during the conflict and the day after.

On October 7, Egypt did not unequivocally condemn the massacre perpetrated by Hamas—an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood—which, until recently, helped to fuel acts of terrorism against the Egyptian army in the Sinai Peninsula. Cairo [merely called upon](#) Jerusalem to reign in its response and placed responsibility for any escalation firmly with Israel. In contrast to his usual moderate tone, Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi [warned](#) of mass demonstrations if Israel were to try and drive Palestinians out of Gaza and into the Sinai. At one stage, he even referred to Israel as “[the occupying power](#).” Senior Egyptian diplomats also [adopted](#) el-Sisi’s hardline approach and criticized Israel at the United Nations and the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Israel also made accusations against Egypt. Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich [said](#) that Cairo “bore considerable responsibility for what happened on October 7.” He argued that Egypt had willingly turned a blind eye to Hamas’s massive procurement of weapons over the years, and, as a result, the only role that Cairo should be able to play in postbellum Gaza is to allow the Palestinian residents of the Strip to leave and make their way to other countries via Egypt. To Egypt’s great concern, Israeli ministers, politicians, and pundits have called for the relocation of at least some of Gaza’s population to Egypt—a move that Cairo views as crossing a red line and a direct threat to its national security.

Notwithstanding the public and private messages of reassurance that were relayed from Jerusalem to Cairo, the Egyptian regime has been clearly skeptical that Israel could complete its mission of dismantling and disarming Hamas without causing—either inadvertently or purposefully—a mass exodus of refugees from Gaza into Egypt. That is why it [has sent](#) warnings to Israel, stating that any operation close to the Rafah border crossing could lead to dangerous ramifications. In addition, the critical rhetoric toward

Israel reflects el-Sisi's goal of defending his image on the Egyptian and Arab street, against the Islamist opposition forces at home and the radical voices from countries like Iran, who have accused his regime of turning its back on the Palestinians.

The war also has exposed the rifts within various circles in the Egyptian government, between those few who see Israel as a [useful](#) neighbor and those in the mainstream, who continue to espouse populist and hostile positions that have a Nasserist and even Islamist nature. An example of the dichotomy can be found in comments by the head of Egypt's State Information Service, Diaa Rashwan, who [warned](#) in January that if Israel were to capture the Philadelphi Corridor, this move would threaten the future of peaceful relations between the two countries. In contrast, a few weeks later, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry [stressed](#) that Egypt remained unequivocally committed to the peace accord with Israel.

The discourse of the Egyptian state-run media does not ameliorate the situation. Military commentators [tend](#) to refer to Hamas as a legitimate resistance movement. Al-Azhar, the leading religious institution in the Sunni world, has adopted an anti-Israel rhetoric reminiscent of that of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the day of the massacre, even before the IDF had launched its response, [al-Azhar praised](#) Hamas's terrorist operation and has been conducting a systematic smear campaign against Israel ever since. Media company al-Muttahida, owned by the General Intelligence Service of Egypt, produced an anti-Israel television drama for Ramadan, although for the past several years, Egyptian television did not air any such content. Antisemitic expressions [have also appeared](#) in some Egyptian media outlets.

Furthermore, few Egyptian media personalities or intellectuals have dared to condemn Hamas's brutal attack harshly and unequivocally on October 7. In fact, the official Egyptian media has not even reported on most of the atrocities that Hamas perpetrated. Anyone expressing support of Israel's right to defend itself has been silenced and faced a massive public backlash; in one case, a researcher was even [forced to flee Egypt](#) out of concern for her personal safety. At the same time, Egypt has been inundated with calls for a boycott of Israel and of any international company that supports it. Millions of Egyptians have installed the "Qadiyati ("My [Palestinian] Cause") app, which allows them to follow which companies should be boycotted, leading to the [dismissal](#) of thousands of Egyptian employees.

### **Pillars of Peace in Times of Crisis**

Notwithstanding the evident tensions between the two countries since October 7, the intimate military coordination that has developed over the past decade—primarily focused on border security and the war on terror—has served its purpose well even during the current crisis. At the start of the war, when Israeli fire accidentally spilled over into Egypt, the spokesperson for the Egyptian military not only refrained from expressing any anger—which could have led to an even more furious public response—but instead issued a balanced statement, helping to deescalate the situation.

Even though the leaders of the two countries have not spoken directly since the war began, there have been reports of high-ranking security delegations from Egypt and Israel who have shuttled between Cairo and Jerusalem, and engaged in the coordination between the two militaries, the establishment of a mechanism to deliver humanitarian aid from Egypt to the Gaza Strip after meticulous Israeli security checks, and, of course, mediation aimed at securing the release of the Israeli hostages. While Qatar wields a

great deal of influence on Hamas's leadership in Doha and enjoys huge financial and media power, Egypt's contribution to securing the hostages' release cannot be replaced; this is due to Egypt's geographical proximity to Gaza, its direct ties with the various factions there, and the pressure it can exert on them. Unlike Qatar, Egypt also shares Israel's fundamental aversion for Hamas and for the Islamist model it represents.

Moreover, the war has made Egypt the diplomatic frontrunner in the Middle East in the Israeli–Palestinian arena—a status it has not enjoyed for many years. Faced with a decade of stagnation in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, Egypt's role as a peacemaker had dwindled, as Ankara, Doha, and Tehran had challenged Egypt's influence in the Gaza Strip with funding to Hamas, hosting its leaders, and training their operatives. In these circumstances, Cairo was satisfied with mediating between Israel and the Palestinian factions in Gaza and its involvement in rebuilding the Strip after each round of fighting. Egypt's regional marginalization intensified after the Abraham Accords, when Israel's new partners in peace veered sharply away from the framework of the cold peace that Cairo had dictated. Washington and Jerusalem moved forward to expand the circle of peace with new partners and lavished less attention on the first Arab country that paved the way. However, this reality is now changing, given the war in Gaza, and it appears that the same will be true of any arrangements reached thereafter.

It seems that as Israel advances in its campaign against Hamas and reassures Egypt's concerns about the transfer of Gazan refugees to Egyptian territory, these steps will have a positive effect on the discourse in Egypt—even if only slightly. In February, Foreign Minister Shoukry attacked Hamas, saying that the organization is “outside of the Palestinian consensus.” Such a comment reflects Egypt's historical position since Hamas's coup in the Gaza Strip in 2007, but could also indicate that Hamas's standing in the Palestinian arena has been weakened. In addition, the spokesperson for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Ahmed Abu Zeid, [pointed out](#) the difference between statements from extremists on the Israeli political spectrum and the official line of the government.

Another positive aspect is the economic relations between Israel and Egypt, especially in the energy field, which have been relatively unaffected by the war. While the flow of natural gas from Israel to Egypt was temporarily halted at the beginning of the conflict, relations quickly returned to normal. Plans to expand them in the future have also continued apace. Israeli natural gas exports to Egypt even [increased](#) by 25 percent in 2023. This upward trend is expected to continue in the coming years, assuming that the necessary infrastructure is expanded. Despite calls for an economic boycott of Israel, in practice, a large amount of the gas that Egypt uses for cooking and electricity—also during the holy month of Ramadan—comes from Israel, benefiting both sides.

### **Recommendations**

The war serves as a much-needed reminder about the value of peace and the interests of both sides in maintaining it. Egypt should scale back the anti-Israeli rhetoric that it has adopted in the past six months. This kind of rhetoric does not contribute to efforts to restore regional calm; instead, it foment public opinion in Egypt and across the Arab world. Moreover, expressions of hatred toward Israel and Jews serve the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran, and the axis that seeks to undermine regional stability. A more balanced Egyptian approach of condemning Hamas—the instigator of this conflict—for its actions and, at the same time, pointing out the mistakes that Israel has made on the Palestinian front and in its war on terror would be far more useful and fair.

Israel, for its part, should show more sensitivity to Egypt's concerns and interests in Gaza and the Sinai, as well as to take into consideration Egypt's public opinion, to which Egypt's leadership pays careful attention. A massive Israeli incursion into Rafah needs to be coordinated with both Cairo and Washington and only after Israel has thoroughly examined all the alternatives. Similarly, Israel would be well advised to refrain from making any public statements that could embarrass Egypt. Jerusalem needs to prioritize finding solutions through quiet dialogue with Cairo, even if the IDF discovers smuggling tunnels used to transport weapons from Egypt into Gaza during its planned incursion into Rafah.

The pragmatic Gulf states, primarily the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which also have an interest in ending Hamas's rule of Gaza and finding alternative ways to resolve the Palestinian problem, can offer Egypt financial help to rebuild the Strip and can join forces to create a reality that will ensure long-term stability in Gaza, the Palestinian arena, and the region.

The United States should also encourage Egypt to take a leading role on the Israeli–Palestinian issue and has to put Egypt ahead of pro-Islamist countries like Turkey and Qatar, which are keen for Hamas to remain in power in the Gaza Strip. Egypt could also play a key role in training the Palestinian leadership in Gaza and can relay humanitarian aid directly to them. It can also increase its efforts to thwart smuggling between the Sinai and Gaza, both above ground and via subterranean tunnels. Egypt can also help to rebuild Gaza and initiate peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, when conditions are right for that. These steps will improve Egypt's regional standing and domestic stability.

Finally, Israeli–Egyptian relations will benefit if they are part of a high profile American initiative to encourage further normalization between Israel and additional Arab and Muslim majority countries. This will serve as a valuable lesson to the masterminds behind the October 7 attack that Arab/Muslim–Israeli/Jewish relations will not be hindered by Islamist terrorism.

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