

Egypt: The Non-Neutral Broker

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In the end, it was Egypt that headed the negotiations for a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, and perhaps it will also lead the discussions about an arrangement in the Gaza Strip. Although Egypt has been a mediator between Israel and Hamas in the past, this time its involvement could not be taken for granted. Preoccupied with domestic problems, Egypt's standing in the Arab world on the eve of Operation Protective Edge was at a low point, and there were other candidates to lead the negotiations: the United States, Turkey, and Qatar, and perhaps the Palestinian Authority (PA). Most importantly, Hamas did not want Egypt as a mediator because it believed – correctly – that Egypt was hostile to it, that the Egyptian position was biased in favor of Israel, and that Egypt was an interested party and not a neutral mediator. For these reasons, Hamas announced at an early stage of the negotiations that it did not recognize the Egyptian ceasefire initiative and would not accept Egypt's proposals.

Despite these difficulties, Egypt led the negotiations to their conclusion in the first stage, with three factors contributing to this outcome. First, the other candidates for leading the talks were out of the picture. Other than Hamas, no relevant player wanted Turkey and Qatar as mediators, and the US administration preferred to support Egypt and assist it behind the scenes, especially since others – the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, the PA, and Israel – supported it. Second, Hamas needed the ceasefire urgently, and in the absence of alternatives, it had no choice but to accept Egyptian mediation, in spite of what from its point of view were decided disadvantages. Third, since the Gaza Strip borders Egypt and the geographical connection has central importance in the talks, it would have been impossible to reach an agreement without Egyptian participation.

Egypt had its own interest in leading the talks and reaching a settlement. It was important for Egypt to act as mediator to improve its standing in the Arab world, restore its position of influence, and strengthen President el-Sisi's domestic status as the element addressing the Palestinian problem and stabilizing the region. It was even more important for Egypt to influence the arrangement in the Gaza Strip in accordance with its own interests, given the connection between the situation in Gaza and the security problems in the Sinai Peninsula.

For Egypt, there is a twofold consideration concerning the arrangement in Gaza. On the one hand, Egypt seeks to rein in Hamas as much as possible. The Egyptian regime views the group as a terrorist organization associated with the Muslim Brotherhood that endangers Egypt's security, especially in Sinai, and damages Egypt's efforts to rebuild its economy. For this reason, Egypt has banned Hamas activity on its territory, including activity by associations and institutions connected to the organization and acceptance of funding from the organization. This is also the reason why Egypt closed the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Sinai after Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007, and made its reopening conditional on the PA's return to power in Gaza. From Egypt's perspective, opening the crossing means recognizing the Hamas government in Gaza, giving Hamas strategic depth by means of Sinai, and strengthening the Muslim Brotherhood. During Operation Protective Edge, Egypt allowed only limited openings of the crossing for humanitarian purposes, mainly to transport the wounded and bring in medicine and food. More importantly, much more than its predecessors, the current Egyptian regime is working to destroy the smuggling tunnels on the border with Gaza. While Egypt identifies with the suffering of the people in Gaza and is committed to helping the Gaza population, it distinguishes between the people and the Hamas leadership, which it perceives as an enemy. During Operation Protective Edge, some elements in Egypt even took a positive view of Israel's efforts to strike Hamas and blamed the organization for causing the deterioration in the situation.

During the ceasefire negotiations, Egypt took advantage of Hamas' weakness and distress to dictate terms that were not acceptable to the organization. Thus, Egypt did not allow several Hamas leaders, in particular Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh, to come to Cairo for the talks and preferred to conduct the negotiations with Mousa Abu Marzouk, who lives in Cairo and has a relationship with the Egyptians. In general, Egyptian proposals on the

contents of the arrangement were closer to the position of Israel, which in principle was also ready to accept them, than that of Hamas.

Egypt's second consideration concerns the PA's status in the Gaza Strip. From the outset Egypt demanded that the PA head the Palestinian delegation to the ceasefire talks and that the discussions with the delegation be conducted through the PA. More importantly, in order to prevent smuggling of arms and materials that could be used to enhance the rocket industry or dig tunnels, Egypt insisted that the opening of the Rafah border crossing as part of the easing of restrictions on Hamas be made conditional on PA security control of the crossing, and Hamas was forced to accept this condition. The Egyptian regime's interest in strengthening the status of the PA in Gaza and ultimately returning it to power there reflects its perception that Hamas is a threat to Egypt, its view that the PA is the authorized representative of the Palestinian people, and the assumption that consolidating the government in the West Bank and Gaza under the PA and weakening Hamas are crucial for promoting a solution to the Palestinian problem.

To Egypt, the most desirable arrangement would apparently be to demilitarize Gaza in exchange for its reconstruction. Even if no such arrangement is agreed on – and apparently the chances are slim – Egypt will do its best to block the arms smuggling routes through Sinai and the sea and from Sudan and Libya into Egypt, while taking advantage of the destruction of the Hamas military infrastructure during Operation Protective Edge and the difficulty in rebuilding it. At the same time, Egypt is likely to actively help rebuild the civilian infrastructure destroyed in Gaza and raise money from abroad for this purpose.

Despite the hostility between Egypt and Hamas, both sides consider improved relations to be of fundamental importance. Hamas has a significant interest in rehabilitating its relations with Egypt for several reasons. Opening the Rafah crossing depends on Cairo, and Hamas' connection to Egypt is the critical economic route for the movement of people and goods to and from Gaza, especially since it lost Israel as its main source of employment. On the other hand, Egypt also has an interest in binding Hamas to itself again in order to moderate the organization's approach to the PA and Israel, prevent another Hamas military conflict with Israel, cut it off from the Muslim Brotherhood, and sever its ties to states like Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Qatar. In addition, Egypt has an interest in leading the reconstruction of Gaza. It is therefore possible that Hamas, because of its distress, its political isolation

in the Arab world, its damaged relations with traditional allies such as Iran and Syria, and its need for substantial outside financial aid to rebuild Gaza, will seek ways to build a closer and more balanced relationship with Egypt.

Egypt's position toward Operation Protective Edge also reflects the current regime's relations with Israel. For several reasons, the security ties between the two countries are closer than in the past and are certainly stronger than when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power. First, Egypt is concerned by the wave of terrorist attacks it is suffering, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, and it sees Hamas as the Muslim Brotherhood's partner in these attacks. Egypt's view of Hamas as an enemy, or at least a threat, has created a common Egyptian-Israeli interest, which was reflected in the Egyptian aim in mediating the ceasefire: to weaken Hamas, reduce its capabilities, and if possible, restore the PA to the helm in Gaza. Second, Israel is helping Egypt strengthen its control of Sinai, including through willingness to allow Egypt to position larger military forces there than is stipulated in the military appendix to the peace treaty. And third, Israel has attempted to help Egypt in Washington with the delay in the shipment of weapons by the US administration in response to the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt.

However, the regime in Egypt also feels it has an obligation to consider the mood in the country concerning the Palestinians, which is not excessively sympathetic to Hamas but shows great sensitivity to the suffering of the Palestinian population in Gaza and anger at Israel. For this reason, the regime publicly expresses its attitude toward Hamas but plays down security coordination with Israel. Moreover, Egypt still considers it very important to progress in solving the Palestinian problem, which the regime sees as the key to a fundamental and open improvement in its relations with Israel. Thus as long as there is no progress on the Palestinian track, despite the improvement in security coordination and President el-Sisi's more positive attitude to Israel, the Palestinian issue will continue to trouble Israeli-Egyptian relations.