



***The Middle East in the New Media***

**Special Issue**

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**Operation Protective Edge:  
Trends in Public Opinion in Social Media in Gaza and Egypt  
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My conversations with select leaders of public opinion in social media in Gaza and Egypt paint a complex picture, largely contradicting some Israeli working assumptions regarding Hamas and the situation in Gaza, which have been raised by leading voices in the traditional Israeli media. These opinions challenge the Israeli interpretation of Hamas' conduct, public opinion in the Gaza Strip, and Egypt's role as mediator between Israel and Hamas.

The four questions I posed to these leaders of public opinion in Gaza and Egypt were:

- a. Why does the Gazan public, the majority of which is opposed to Hamas' rule, not take to the streets and rebel against the organization, or at the very least, publicly criticize the organization's leaders?
- b. Is Abbas an alternative to Hamas? Are Gazans willing to accept the rule of the Palestinian Authority and Abbas should the Hamas regime collapse?
- c. What is the opinion in the Egyptian street regarding President el-Sisi's position on the operation in Gaza? Why is Egypt not ending the confrontation as soon as possible? Why are the Egyptians not pressuring the President on this matter, as they have in the past?
- d. Is Israel the winner and Hamas the loser? Why is Hamas in no hurry to end the fighting? What does the organization hope to gain from this round of fighting?

**If the Gazan public is Opposed to Hamas, why doesn't it Revolt?**

Although over the past year public opinion in the social media in Gaza has indicated waning legitimacy for Hamas (a recent survey taken by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy indicates the same trend), a civil uprising in Gaza has yet to take place and public criticism of the organization is not being heard. There are two principal explanations for this. First, "Hamas has the weapons and so when we [the Gazan public] see what's happening in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Iran, and Turkey, we understand that Hamas won't think twice about shooting us." The people of Gaza are exhausted and beaten after seven years of a blockade, and do not believe they can topple the Hamas regime and create a better alternative. Similarly, "If we fail, we will have to deal and live with them after the operation is over, and neither Israel nor Abu Mazen nor Egypt will help us then." The second answer is that as long as there is no reasonable alternative to Hamas, Gazans fear the potential ensuing chaos and infiltration of jihadists more than Hamas.

### **Is Abbas the Alternative to Hamas?**

Talk of a ceasefire has raised the possibility that the Palestinian Authority, led by Abbas, will return to the Gaza Strip. My question was: Will the PA's position and legitimacy as the Palestinian leadership be strengthened, if it is included in the ceasefire agreement? Can Abbas serve as an alternative to Hamas?

The discourse in the social media reveals that Gazans do not want the PA and Abbas to replace Hamas; they perceive both regimes as "corrupted to the core." Further confirmation came when Abbas decided to send the PA minister of health to Gaza to see what sort of aid to extend to the local population: the minister was pelted with stones and eggs, the windows of his car were smashed, and the streets of Gaza were covered in graffiti calling Abbas a traitor and demanding his death.

### **The Egyptian Angle: Hatred for Hamas is Greater than Solidarity with the Palestinian People**

Conversations with public opinion leaders in the social media reflect the following:

- a. "Gaza, unlike Libya, does not present a strategic threat to Egyptian stability." "Gaza is a humanitarian disaster, not a strategic threat." The threat of armed militias, Qaddafi loyalists, jihadist movements in Benghazi and Tripoli, and concern about Libya's dissolution with terrorism trickling into Egypt all worry the el-Sisi government and Egyptian public more than Gaza. The disintegration of Iraq and the rising power of ISIS are also seen as higher priorities for Egypt's national security than Gaza.
- b. After President el-Sisi announced that during his tenure there would be "nothing called the Muslim Brotherhood" in Egypt, it would be very hard for him politically to engage in talks with Hamas. Without domestic pressure, el-Sisi will not be in a rush to pay the minimal price of permanently opening the Rafah crossing. Similarly, social media discourse reveals that hatred for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas is greater than the solidarity with the Gazans. A growing number of Egyptians is interested in seeing Hamas collapse and therefore, despite the pain over the suffering of the Gazan public, many voices in Egypt are happy about Israel's continued war against Hamas and encourage its continuation, rather than condemn it.
- c. Most Egyptians are interested in their economic hardships, such as the rising prices of gas, fuel, and cigarettes. The Egyptian public, which has had its fill of demonstrations, is reluctant to take to the streets again, and certainly not on behalf of the Palestinians. "As long as Egypt is not affected by this crisis, it will not be willing to pay the price."

### **Is Israel the Winner and Hamas the Loser?**

There is a working assumption in Israel that since the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas is in trouble and fighting for its survival; Hamas' popularity is eroding and it has failed to foment a "popular awakening" (i.e., a third intifada). There is an asymmetrical struggle between "the strongest army in the Middle East" and a fading terrorist organization. Thus, Operation Protective Edge has weakened the organization further and has dealt the organization and its infrastructures a harsh blow. Furthermore, the Iron Dome system strengthens the resilience of Israel's civilian front and undermines the threat of Hamas' rockets, while the Gazan rear is vulnerable and exposed.

This question suggests an answer in the form of two equations. The first equation is: "It's either Hamas or chaos." In Hamas' view – as explained in the social media – the very fact that the organization positions itself in the equation as "us or chaos" is a point of strength. Neither Israel nor Egypt, the two countries most interested in the collapse of Hamas, are unable to topple the regime, out of fear of the

alternative. The fact that the two strongest countries in the region are worried about the alternative provides the organization with a life insurance policy.

The second equation is “rockets for prisoners and border crossings.” In response to the Israeli equation of “calm for calm,” Hamas is trying to generate its own equation, which is highly problematic for Israel: rockets for prisoners and crossings. Hamas, backed by the force of rocket fire aimed at the heart of Israel, has no intention of giving up. It will continue to launch rockets until Egypt and Israel agree to a ceasefire and the Hamas demands will be met: a renewed opening of the crossings, the release of prisoners and economic aid from Qatar and Turkey.

Perhaps most demoralizing among the social media discourse is the slogan of leading social media opinion shapers: “In the Middle East, there are no absolute winners and losers; the public in this region has become hostage to weak leaders.”