

GAZA AFTER THE WAR: EGYPT'S EQUITIES AND LIMITATIONS

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Egypt demonstrated during the recent Israeli military operation and subsequent efforts to reach a durable ceasefire that it has two principal interests related to Gaza: first, avoiding taking on responsibility for the one and a half million Palestinians living there and second, transferring control of Gaza back to the Palestinian Authority led by President Mahmud Abbas to the extent possible. These interests spring from longstanding Egyptian support for the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as from concerns about stability inside Egypt itself.

There are at least two ways in which Egypt might be forced to take on responsibility for many, or all, Gazan Palestinians, and Egyptian President Husni Mubarak will try to avoid either one of them. First, there is the possibility that due to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, tens or hundreds of thousands of Palestinians could flood across the border into Sinai and stay on a semi-permanent basis. Egypt would then have to house them in refugee camps, creating a large and most likely restive refugee population in Sinai. This is not an idle fear; hundreds of thousands of Palestinians crossed the border illegally in January 2008 after Hamas militants bulldozed the fence to protest the closed border. President Mubarak thought it politically unwise to use lethal force against the unarmed Palestinians, and it took him nearly two weeks to persuade them to leave and then to regain control of Egypt's international border. Egypt has since constructed a sturdier barrier—but it could still be breached.

Egypt will also resist suggestions that it should once again administer or occupy Gaza as it did between 1948 and 1967. Although the Israeli government has not adopted this idea as policy, the notion that Egypt and Jordan might take on much greater responsibility for Gaza and the West Bank respectively to secure their national interests has gained currency as prospects for the near-term creation of an independent Palestinian state have receded.¹ Mubarak has addressed this prospect directly, warning in a December 30, 2008, speech that Egypt would resist attempts by Israel “to shirk its responsibility for Gaza and to overtask Egypt with its consequences.”

Realizing that governing hundreds of thousands of Gazans either in Sinai or Gaza itself would be a thankless task, President Mubarak also has reason to be concerned about the implications for his own country's stability. Sinai is already a troubled area, populated largely by Bedouin with little loyalty to the Egyptian state, in which terrorists have carried out several large-scale attacks in recent years. The introduction of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians—perhaps including many militants from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—would undoubtedly increase tensions.

Although many Egyptians have called on their government to extend greater diplomatic and humanitarian support to Gaza, actual Egyptian rule there (or a large Palestinian refugee presence in Egypt) would inflame anti-government sentiment. Egypt is already at a sensitive political juncture, facing widespread popular unhappiness with government performance and a likely presidential succession in the next few years. Protests against the government, mostly expressing local grievances related to the economy or human rights, have become a daily phenomenon. Since the 2000 outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising, a tradition has also developed of protests that begin by criticizing Israeli or U.S. actions but quickly turn to target Mubarak and demand an end to his rule of nearly three decades. Egypt's principal opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, supports Hamas fervently and often organizes such protests, either on its

¹ See, for example, Efraim Inbar, “The Rise and Demise of the Two-State Paradigm,” The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies No. 79, January 2009.

own or in conjunction with other opposition groups. While such protests currently do not threaten internal stability, that picture could change if Egypt were to take on significant responsibility for Gazans, a move many Egyptians would see as serving the interests of Israel more than those of the Palestinians.

The second principle motivating President Mubarak's diplomatic efforts is the desire to restore the Palestinian Authority to a role in Gaza to the extent possible. Egypt takes a realist approach to Hamas; it would prefer that Hamas not rule Gaza but acknowledges that it is impossible to ignore the group. One constant in recent mediation efforts has been Egypt's insistence on enforcing the terms of the 2005 Rafah agreement, which treats the Palestinian Authority as the responsible party on the Gaza side of the border. Egypt has also pressed Hamas to agree to resume reconciliation talks with Fatah (broken off in November 2008) under the supervision of Egyptian General Intelligence Director Omar Sulayman. Egypt would rather play the principal mediating role between Hamas and Fatah than allow another Arab country to do so in order to preserve some influence over the terms of Palestinian reconciliation.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit and other officials have repeatedly denied that significant arms have entered Gaza via the Sinai (claiming they have instead entered Gaza by sea), but in any case Egyptian officials are undoubtedly aware that there is now a spotlight on the arms smuggling issue. With the recent implementation of technical assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (a \$23 million program funded out of annual U.S. military assistance to Egypt) to detect tunneling and underground movements, Egypt should be able to improve significantly its performance in preventing arms trafficking into Gaza. The restoration of normal commerce in food and other essential goods through Rafah would also relieve pressure for smuggling, though not eliminate it altogether. Egypt has consistently resisted the idea of deploying international forces along its side of the border. There already are international troops in the Sinai under the guise of the Multinational Force and Observers provided for in the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, and Egypt will try to avoid what it sees as further infringements on its sovereignty.

The aftermath of the Gaza crisis affords some opportunities for the United States and Egypt to strengthen ties, which have been strained in recent years due to disagreements over U.S. actions in the Middle East as well as human and civil rights violations in Egypt. Egyptian goals in the region are generally consonant with U.S. goals, and this is true regarding Gaza. One difference is that Egypt is working explicitly for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, which the United States considers a terrorist organization. Even so, Egypt's unspoken agenda in mediating between the two groups has always been to promote a greater role for Fatah in any unity government and the smallest role for Hamas that the traffic will bear. In addition, Egypt is playing a leading role in attempts to shore up Arab support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization headed by Abbas as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

In the short term, U.S.–Egyptian cooperation on Gaza and other regional issues can help to restore bilateral ties. Over the longer term, however, it will be necessary for the two countries to reach an understanding on progress on human and civil rights in Egypt in order for the partnership to flourish.