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## Triangle of Egypt, Hamas, and Israel Relations

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Several months after the Egypt-brokered humanitarian understandings between Hamas and Israel, there is growing talk in Israel that the Egyptian mediation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza serves Israel's strategic objectives in the Gaza Strip.

Israel is concerned with stabilizing the Egyptian role in Gaza through the hypothesis of conflict management. The Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement has been successful for 40 years in addressing the security threats in the Sinai Peninsula and facing the external challenges in the Mediterranean, especially after the new gas discoveries.

The Egypt-Israel partnership in Gaza, even without an Egyptian military presence there, is considered a new building block in the relations between the two sides for neutralizing Hamas' jihadist concepts. This means that the growing Egyptian role in Gaza, especially that of the General Intelligence Service, represents a strategic value for Israel and its partners in the region.

Through the Israeli-Egyptian partnership in Gaza, direct messages are sent from Israel to the Hamas leadership, and thus a tripartite diplomatic process is being carried out by Egypt, Israel and Hamas with the aim of achieving as much calm in Gaza as possible. Israel does not hide its preference for the Egyptian role which proved effective in the recent Israeli wars against the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014 as well as some other small skirmishes. In all these military confrontations, Egypt succeeded in curbing Hamas, to avoid Israel's going to land military options in Gaza that could threaten the peace agreement between the two sides (Egypt and Israel).

Although Egypt's role vis-a-vis Hamas during the era of Mohamed Morsi (2012) differed so much from that of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, we can say that the policy adopted by the current Egyptian leadership has succeeded in exercising more pressures on Hamas, taking into consideration that Israel is above all interested in deepening cooperation with Egypt which has recently reached impressive levels.

In fact, the Egypt-Israel peace agreement has undergone several important tests during the past 40 years, including:

- The Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981,

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- The first Lebanon war in 1982,
- The two Palestinian uprisings in 1987 and 2000,
- The military confrontations with the Palestinians over the past decades, and
- The momentous events that Cairo has experienced in recent years.

However, the peace agreement between the two countries has managed to survive because of their common interests.

In addition, the security threat in the Sinai Peninsula and the increase of Turkish influence in the East Mediterranean have led both Cairo and Tel Aviv to raise the level of their coordination in an unprecedented manner. The cooperation between Egypt and Israel in Gaza has strengthened their bilateral relations, taking into consideration that explosion of the situation in Gaza could push the Palestinians to rushing towards the Egyptian border, a nightmare scenario for Cairo. However, the Egyptian mediation in Gaza does not and will not hold Israel back from any military action against Hamas and other armed organizations there.

In addition to the Israeli-Egyptian coordination, geography continues to impose itself on the Hamas-Egypt relationship. The Rafah border crossing with Egypt is the only Hamas-run crossing of the Gaza Strip, which leads the latter to maintain a strong relationship with Cairo, despite the major differences between them.

Hamas' relations with Egypt are volatile and unstable, ranging between tension that could lead to total rupture and a chill that maintains minimal communication between the two sides.

The relationship between Hamas and Egypt has gone through many stages during the last decade. While it was characterized by great tension during the era of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, which led the movement to express its optimism about the popular protests against his government in 2011; and the Palestinian people later took to the streets to celebrate the success of the Egyptian Revolution.

Although the stage of President Mohamed Morsi was the culmination of prosperity of relations between Egypt and Hamas, however, it lasted for only one year. At the time, Hamas held popular events in Gaza to celebrate Morsi's victory in the presidential elections (2012). The relations between

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Hamas and Egypt was so strong that the Egyptian leadership at the time dispatched former Prime Minister Hisham Qandil to Gaza at the height of the Israeli war on the Strip in November 2012, as the first visit ever paid by a senior Egyptian official to Gaza.

But relations deteriorated between Egypt and Hamas after the military coup led by Abdul Fattah al-Sisi against Morsi; and their relationship had become even worse than the situation during the era of Mubarak. Accordingly, this led to:

- Closure of commercial tunnels between Gaza and Sinai in 2014,
- The Egyptian judiciary declared Hamas as a terrorist organization in March 2015, and
- Egyptian media outlets escalated its harsh campaigns against Hamas and accused the Palestinian movement of involvement in armed operations in the Egyptian territory during the January Revolution (2011).

Although the relationship between Egypt and Hamas has fluctuated in recent years, the essential need for maintaining ties between the two sides has forced them to keep this relationship at the lowest level of tension, while trying to improve it as much as possible.

Gaza needs Egypt because of the Rafah border crossing, the only outlet for the residents of the Gaza Strip, to communicate with the outside world and allow the supply of goods and commodities that are not available in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, Egypt needs Hamas to control the security situation on their common border and to confront the Sinai armed groups that target the Egyptian regime, where Hamas and the Egyptian General Intelligence Service have achieved remarkable cooperation in this regard since 2017.

We can say that development of the relationship between Hamas and the current Egyptian regime is primarily related to achievement of interests. While Egypt hopes Hamas will strengthen Cairo's role by maintaining a truce with Israel, reaching a prisoner swap deal with Tel Aviv and achieving reconciliation with Fatah, Hamas hopes Egypt will make efforts to remove the movement's name from European and American terror lists.

The recent months have witnessed tidal waves in the Hamas-Egypt relationship, most recently the release of four Hamas members (in February) that had been abducted in Egypt four years earlier.

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However, the Egyptian media continued its campaigns against Hamas although the movement was keen to condemn any armed operations against the Egyptian army in Sinai, considering them terrorist acts that targeted Egypt's security and stability.

The Ministry of Interior in Gaza, under Hamas, announced in June 2017 creation of a buffer zone along the Gaza and Sinai borders, 12 kilometers long and 100 meters deep, and installation of a camera system, observation towers and a complete lighting system in response to an Egyptian request to prevent infiltrators from using the common border in infiltration to and from Egyptian territory, which caused a severe rupture of relations between Hamas and armed groups in Sinai.

Hamas' relationship with Egypt acquired more significance with the start of the return marches in Gaza since March 2018 and the heightened security tension between Hamas and Israel that could lead to an open confrontation at any time. However, the Egyptian mediator intervened in attempt to calm the situation to avoid more military escalation, where Tel Aviv usually resorts to Cairo for exercising pressures on Hamas to ease the popular marches, in light of the growing Egyptian influence on the Palestinian movement.

Egypt's rapprochement with Hamas coincides with the U.S. preparations for the so-called deal of the century, where the United States counts on the Egyptian role in convincing the movement of the deal, or at least refrain from opposing it on the ground.

Egyptian officials do not hide their fear of losing their influence in Gaza, with the entry of Qatar and other international parties for dealing with the humanitarian crisis in the Strip; the Egyptian government has expressed dissatisfaction with the entry of the \$ 150 million Qatari grant to Gaza since November 2018 and does not support establishment of any waterway or port for Gaza as an alternative to the Rafah crossing.

Despite the apparent improvement in the relations between Hamas and Egypt, it is difficult for such relations to reach a stage of strategic understanding because of the clear differences in the two parties' positions, most notably the relations with Israel, the settlement process, the normalization with Israel, as well as their different regional positions. This is likely to keep the relationship between Egypt and Hamas within the tactical framework only.