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Reports

11 MARCH
2021



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Egyptian-Palestinian Relations Since the 2013 Coup

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The Palestinian-Egyptian relations have gone through many different stages, and witnessed several fluctuations, with each side having its own reasons. This applies to the different historical eras that the Palestinian cause has experienced with different regimes in Cairo.

However, the Palestinian cause has entered sharp turns and dangerous crossroads since the military coup in Egypt in 2013, which has left its negative effects on all Palestinian developments, both internally and externally, despite the attempts by Palestinians to restore their relations with Egypt and avoid a complete rupture.

This assessment aims to review the most important developments that the Egyptian-Palestinian relations have gone through in recent years, with expectations about future outcomes, taking into consideration a number of existing factors to both parties.

Introduction

Palestinian-Egyptian relations have been experiencing a state of instability and volatility, between tension that threatens to reach complete rupture, and chill that maintains a minimum level of communication between the two parties.

During the era of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Palestinian-Egyptian relations were characterized by severe tension, which prompted Palestinians to welcome the January revolution that toppled Mubarak in 2011, where Hamas expressed its optimism about the Egyptian revolution.

As for the era of late elected president Mohamed Morsi, Hamas considered it a kind of honeymoon that lasted no more than a year. At the time, Hamas organized massive popular celebrations for welcoming Morsi's victory in Egypt's presidential election of 2012. The resistance movement's relationship with Cairo was then boosted to the point that the latter sent former Egyptian prime minister, Hisham Qandil, to Gaza at the height of the war that was launched against the strip by Israel in November 2012, as the first historic visit of an Egyptian official of that level.

However, relations between Egypt and Hamas deteriorated significantly after the military coup that then defense minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led against Morsi in 2013, where relations became even worse than it had been during the Mubarak era, which resulted in destruction of commercial tunnels between Gaza and Sinai in February 2014. Furthermore, the Egyptian judiciary declared Hamas a “terrorist” movement in March 2015. The regime also launched harsh media campaigns against the movement, accusing it of being involved in armed operations that took place in Egypt in the post-January 2011 revolution era.

First: Halt of Hamas Activities in Egypt

The relationship between Hamas and the Egyptian regime has gone through successive stations of tension and anxiety since 2013, especially after the Cairo Court issued a judicial verdict in March 2014 banning all activities of the Palestinian movement in Egypt, seizing its funds, and closing its headquarters, after a lawsuit had been filed against Hamas accusing it of storming the border with Egypt in 2008 and involvement in storming Egyptian prisons during the January 2011 revolution, which the movement completely denied.

This judicial move added more fuel to the fire of the already tense relationship between the two sides, where their relations witnessed an unprecedented decline immediately after the ouster of the late President Mohamed Morsi in June 2013, including exchange of accusations. But the verdict issued by the Cairo Court greatly surprised Hamas that never expected its relationship with Cairo may reach such level that threatens a complete break and considered this as a stab in the back of the Palestinian resistance, and a free service to Israel.

Later, Cairo took a series of steps against Hamas with the aim of restricting its influence in the Palestinian arena, making Egypt’s continuation of playing the mediating role between Fatah and Hamas, or between Hamas and Israel, extremely difficult. How can Egypt lead the Palestinian reconciliation process, or the truce talks with Israel, while it considers Hamas a “terrorist” movement and prohibits its activities?

Despite this situation, geography imposed itself on Hamas's relationship with Egypt, as the latter is almost the only crossing into out of the Gaza Strip that is run by Hamas. This reality pushed the

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resistance movement to be keen more than any other party to maintain a good relationship with Cairo, despite the differences existing between them.

In fact, Gaza needs Egypt because of the Rafah border crossing that allows Palestinian population there to communicate with the outside world, as it is almost their only outlet; and the crossing is also used to supply goods and commodities that are not available in the Strip.

On the other hand, Egypt needs Hamas to control the security situation on the common border, and to confront the armed groups in Sinai which target the Egyptian regime. Therefore, since February 2017, Hamas and the Egyptian intelligence services have achieved remarkable cooperation in this regard.

Second: The Siege on Gaza

Since 2013, the Egyptian authorities have demolished hundreds of tunnels on the border strip between Sinai and Gaza, where those tunnels were an essential economic and commercial resource for the besieged Gaza Strip. The number of tunnels destroyed have reached nearly 1,350, representing 80% of the total tunnels. However, Cairo did not stop there, as it continued to demolish more tunnels, which exacerbated the economic problems in Gaza that mainly depends on tunnels in food supplies. The losses incurred by Gaza as a result of demolition of tunnels amounted to about \$ 230 million per month.

At the same time, the Ministry of Interior in Gaza, which is supervised by Hamas, announced in June 2017 creation of a security buffer zone on the Gaza-Sinai border, 12 kilometers long and 100 meters deep; and deployment of a camera system, surveillance towers, and a complete lighting network there. This measure was taken by Hamas in response to an Egyptian request to prevent infiltrators from using the common border to infiltrate into and out of Egyptian territory, which resulted in severing any relations between Hamas and the armed groups in the Sinai Peninsula.

It is worth noting that there was a rapprochement in Egypt's relations with Hamas in coincidence with the American preparations to announce the so-called 'deal of the century', as Egypt was looking to play a role in the deal by persuading Hamas to accept it, or at least not to oppose it on the ground, despite the fact that Hamas has always told Egyptian officials of its outright rejection of the deal.

However, in coincidence with declaration of the American 'Deal of the Century' in early 2018, the Egyptian army built a concrete wall on the border with the Gaza Strip, extending for 14 kilometers despite the unprecedented security stability there. The plan included construction of a wall extending from the Karm Abu Salem crossing in the south towards the Rafah crossing in the north, with a length of 2 km, as a first stage; and completing construction of the wall from the Rafah crossing to the seashore, with a length of 12 km, as a second stage, with addition of several surveillance posts for the Egyptian army at the border. The height of the wall is estimated at 6 meters above the ground, and 5 meters deep underground. This wall comes in addition to an old rock wall that Egypt had built on the border with the Gaza Strip in early 2008, with a distance of no more than 10 meters separating them.

These Egyptian fortifications aim to prevent the infiltration of any armed elements into and out of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, in addition to cutting off the remaining tunnels for smuggling goods between the Palestinian and Egyptian parties.

These measures had been preceded by the Egyptian army's establishment of a buffer zone inside Egyptian territory in two phases, the first of which included the establishment of a buffer zone of 500 meters deep in 2014, followed by expansion of this area in 2017, to become 1,500 meters, where hundreds of residents of the border areas were displaced in the Egyptian interior.

However, the Palestinians have always been asserting that the Gaza Strip remains an extension of Egyptian national security, and a protector of Egypt's eastern border from any attacks by armed groups that may take advantage of any security gaps on the borders.

The Egyptian authorities justify their steps on the Gaza border by seeking to protect their national security, as the Egyptian army in the Sinai Peninsula has been exposed from time to time to attacks from militant groups that take Sinai as their base, taking advantage of the vast areas and the lack of army deployment there.

Despite the Egyptian authorities' excuses to build this wall, in recent years, no cases of armed groups infiltration into and out of the Gaza Strip have been recorded, indicating that the Egyptian move is only consistent with the Israeli move of building fortifications on the eastern Gaza border, through

erection of a concrete wall with the same specifications of the wall that Egypt is constructing on the southern borders.

Although Egyptian authorities have the full right to act as it deems appropriate for its security within its own borders, unless it affects Gaza's sovereignty or the lives of its residents in one way or another, the tight Egyptian fortifications on Gaza's borders seem exaggerated, given the fact that Hamas monitors the borders around the clock for fear of infiltration of armed groups or Israeli security elements that may destabilize security in Gaza, especially that no case of infiltration by militant groups from Sinai into the Strip, or vice versa, has been recorded during the past period.

The 'deal of the century' announced by former US President Donald Trump, which was welcomed by Egypt, provided for the development of the border areas between Cairo and Gaza, with the aim of increasing the energy supply from Egypt to the sector with a capacity of 100 megawatts, with funding amounting to 20 million dollars, but the deal stipulated for implementation of these projects that Egypt would conduct logistical arrangements at the borders to secure their success, which means that Egypt's construction of the concrete wall, and the establishment of a buffer zone, was the first stage for implementing the terms of the 'deal of the century'.

Therefore, the Palestinians viewed Egypt's announcement of building a concrete wall on its border with Gaza, a threatening message to Hamas with the aim of tightening the screws on it in light of the decline in relations between them, where Palestinians realized that this measure carried political rather than security implications, given that Hamas is interested in controlling the borders to cut off any infiltration attempt by armed groups inside Gaza.

Third: Mediation with Israel

With the start of the 'Great March of Return' demonstrations at the Gaza border with the occupied Palestinian territory in March 2018, the heightened security tension between Hamas and Israel, and the fear that such situation would escalate into open confrontation; these developments required intervention of the Egyptian mediator from time to time to ensure that there is no military escalation between Hamas and Israel, as Tel Aviv has always resorted to Cairo to pressure Hamas to reduce the popular rallies, in light of Egypt's growing influence on the Palestinian resistance movement.

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It is clear that there is a common need for a stable relationship between Hamas and Egypt, for several reasons, most prominently deterioration of the security situation in the Sinai, Hamas's efforts to rein in militant groups and prevent their members from moving between Gaza and the Sinai, Cairo's need to control the borders with Gaza, and at the same time Egypt's fear that tightening the screws on Gaza might push the Palestinians to storm its borders, as happened in January 2008.

Despite the apparent improvement in relations between Hamas and Egypt, it is difficult for these relations to reach strategic understanding levels, because each the two sides are clearly different in the relationship with Israel, the settlement process, normalization, and regional alignments. Thus, such relationship is likely to remain within the tactical framework.

With regard to regional mediation in order to reach an agreement between Israel and Hamas for stopping mutual escalation between them, in recent years, there has been more regional and international mediation between the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli occupation than ever before.

In recent years, the Qatari, not the Egyptian, mediation succeeded in reaching several ceasefire agreements between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Qatar succeeded in concluding a truce agreement between them several times with the aim of ending all forms of tension, including stopping the launching of incendiary balloons, in exchange for Doha's maintaining provision of economic and relief aid to the sector. Meanwhile, Egypt was largely absent from the scene, although the Israeli military escalation was taking place on its border with Gaza.

While the presence of the Qatari role at the highest levels emerged in many rounds of the Israeli military aggression against the Gaza Strip to secure success of efforts to contain the escalation, Egypt withdrew early from the mediation efforts, after the Egyptian mediator had been directly responsible for the pacification negotiations whereas the Qatari role had been limited to only funding what is agreed upon. It seems that the two sides, Hamas and Israel, have recently preferred Qatari mediation to the Egyptian one, which raises many questions about this shift that constitutes a setback in Egyptian foreign policy.

It seems that the Israelis are interested in the presence of several players or mediators in the Palestinian arena, where Qatar is on top while Egypt comes in the second position due to what each

party possesses of the tools or cards for negotiation. The Qataris can fund the projects needed in the Gaza Strip to maintain the state of calm and prevent any upcoming confrontation between Hamas and Israel. As for Egyptians, despite the geopolitics, their presence has decreased dramatically in recent times.

Fourth: Regional Relations

Despite its small geographical area, the Gaza Strip is overcrowded with political and security developments, and it is a fertile arena for further regional and international influence. After the decline of the Egyptian role in the Palestinian arena since 2013, the influence of other countries in the sector have increased, which caused great discomfort to the Egyptians. However, Cairo has realized that other parties are ready to fill any vacancy resulting from its absence from the Palestinian affair.

Since 2013, Egypt has actively sought to prevent the Palestinians from communicating with regional countries to prevent any regional influence that might attempt to disrupt the political path adopted by the Egyptian regime regarding the Palestinian issue, in Cairo's view at least. However, the Palestinian factions and the Palestinian Authority have always reiterated that they have their own policy that cannot be affected by the carrot of this state, or the stick of that one.

But the Palestinian leaders have visited Cairo, either upon their request, or at the Egyptian side's invitation following a temporary suspension of contacts. Thus, relations between the two sides remain between ebb and flow, without reaching the level of friendship and alliance, or estrangement and hostility. It is worth noting that these visits are not far from coordination with Israel on the part of the Egyptians; and thus, they cannot address long-term strategic issues. Rather, they only focus on discussing procedural issues, maintaining the minimum level of relations between the two sides, and ensuring preservation of calm in the Gaza Strip, which is a mutually acceptable outcome. Although the talks that take place during these visits may be an acceptable alternative to the tension that had prevailed between the two parties before, there are no guarantees that their relationship will not deteriorate or worsen again!

In a related context, Egypt has shown remarkable anger through firm rejection to allow the Hamas leadership, especially Ismail Haniyeh, to leave the Gaza Strip for any tour abroad, although Hamas had submitted numerous requests to the Egyptian Intelligence Service to enable Haniyeh, the

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resistance movement's leader, to leave for a regional tour. Each time, the Egyptian leadership invoked new pretexts, which may indicate an Egyptian-regional decision, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, to keep Haniyeh under the radar, and not to allow him to move between regional capitals, in order to avoid increasing the influence of other regional countries in the Palestinian arena.

What is much more dangerous than that, is that it turned out later that Cairo had bargained with Hamas for allowing Haniyeh to make that tour in the region, especially to Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and others, provided that his tour would include visiting Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well, as both are allies and supporters of the Egyptian regime. However, Hamas assured the Egyptians that its decision is independent in this regard.

It should be noted that it is difficult to overlook the Israeli and Saudi influence on Egypt to impose their conditions on Hamas. At the same time, however, this has made Cairo appear as an agent state of Riyadh and Tel Aviv in the region, only for carrying out their political agenda.

In fact, Egyptian officials do not hide their concern about losing their influence in the Palestinian issue, specifically in the Gaza Strip, with Qatari and international parties becoming excessively involved in addressing the humanitarian crisis in the strip. The Egyptian regime was also uncomfortable toward the entry of the \$150 million Qatari financial grant to Gaza in November 2018. Moreover, Cairo does not encourage establishment of any waterway or port for Gaza as an alternative to the Rafah crossing.

It is no longer a secret that the Egyptian role in the Palestinian arena is gradually declining, whether due to failure to achieve truce between Hamas and Israel, against the success of Qatar in that; or in the reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, that were sponsored by Turkey, which revealed a deterioration in Cairo's regional position, in favor of the rise of Doha and Ankara, where the latest visit of an official delegation from Palestinian Fatah Movement to Turkey for talks with Hamas was a remarkable sign of that.

An official delegation from the leadership of the Palestinian Fatah Movement arrived in Ankara in September 2020 to hold talks with a delegation from the Hamas Movement leadership, for ending the Palestinian division, applying the outcomes of the early September meeting of the secretaries-general of the Palestinian factions in Beirut, and discussing activation of "joint leadership". The arrival

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of Palestinian delegations coincided with a phone call made by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, where he asked for "Erdogan's help in the ongoing talks for healing the inter-Palestinian rift," according to the official Wafa news agency. Abbas also asked the Turkish leader to support Palestinians to achieve reconciliation and go to elections, asking him to provide Turkish observers to monitor the upcoming elections. Meanwhile, there was remarkable absence of contacts between Abbas and Egypt's Sisi.

While the meeting of the general secretaries of the Palestinian factions in Beirut in early September 2020 constituted a shift of the regional weight from Egypt to Lebanon in the Palestinian file, the Istanbul meetings came as an introduction to the dialogue of all Palestinian factions, up to a meeting between the leaders of the Fatah and Hamas movements in Doha. However, Cairo was content with this situation and satisfied to play the role of a spectator to ongoing diplomatic activities, as if it were not concerned about them, after it had hosted most of the Palestinian reconciliation meetings before.

At a time when Istanbul witnessed the latest meetings between Fatah and Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which may indicate Ankara's presence in the Palestinian scene at the expense of Arab capitals whose role has been absent, especially Cairo. The Palestinians' focus on seeking support from Turkey comes after feeling disappointed by Cairo's behavior of siding with the ongoing regional normalization chorus and opposition to the official and popular Palestinian position that rejects normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel. However, the question remains about Ankara's ability to replace Cairo with respect to influence in the Palestinian arena.

While Turkey has been keen on embracing Palestinian meetings due to Egypt's preoccupation with internal and regional files, Egypt's absence from the Palestinian meetings and lack of enthusiasm for the reconciliation of Fatah and Hamas, is due to the fact that Cairo realizes that the whole matter does not appease Israel and the United States. Therefore, the recent dialogues between Hamas and Fatah in Istanbul come due to the Palestinian Authority's shift from the axis of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, feeling that this axis on which it had relied before is on the way of collapsing. This made the Palestinian Authority feel that it is in serious trouble as a result of the official Arab positions towards Israel, prompting it to move towards deepening its relationship with Hamas.

Fifth: Tension between Sisi regime and Palestinian Authority

The tension in Palestinian-Egyptian relations was not limited to Hamas, but Egypt's relations with the Palestinian Authority have also reached dangerous levels of tension, as the Egyptian policy towards the Palestinians since 2013 has been based on exploiting internal Palestinian disputes, whether between Hamas and Fatah, or between the internal currents within the Fatah movement, where the Egyptians excelled in using these cards and exploiting some personalities in the Palestinian interior.

Since 2013, Egypt has shown a clear interference in the details of internal Palestinian affairs, regardless of any diplomatic tact, and has not hidden its desire to have a fundamental role in choosing a successor to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. This manifested in the great efforts Cairo was making to achieve reconciliation between President Abbas and the dismissed leader of the Fatah movement, Mohamed Dahlan, where Abbas refused any reconciliation with Dahlan, and even excluded him from any opportunity to succeed him, which angered the regime in Egypt.

In general, it does not seem that relations between the Palestinian Authority and Egypt are going through their best conditions, in light of the political differences between them that are no longer secret, whether because of the Palestinian Authority's lack of enthusiasm toward the Egyptian peace initiative with Israel, or because of the PA's opposition to the Egyptian support to Dahlan that angered Abbas, as well as the continued the state of estrangement between Egypt and the Hamas movement.

The state of lukewarmness of Palestinian-Egyptian relations took a clear public dimension following the request made by the Palestinian Authority to Egypt in late July 2019 to hold an Arab summit in Cairo, for discussing the issue of Israeli settlements, and set a date for presenting the whole file to the UN Security Council, but Cairo rejected the Palestinian request without clarification of reasons, despite the fact that it held many diplomatic contacts with Ramallah. In the end, the summit requested by the PA was not held, which made the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Egypt deteriorate and further worsen following Abbas's rejection of the Egyptian peace initiative. On the part of Egypt, it kept seeking paving the way for Dahlan to succeed Abbas.

The Palestinians considered that Sisi's peace initiative with Israel, which he announced in May 2018, was harmful to Abbas's strategy that sought to drag Israel into international institutions and strengthen global boycott against it. Meanwhile, the Egyptian initiative called on Palestinians and

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Israelis to return to the negotiating table, without preconditions, which would cause Abbas to stop efforts at the international level to obtain United Nations and UN Security Council resolutions against Israel, in contradiction to the Egyptian initiative.

The differences between the Egyptian and Palestinian sides are based on their different interests. The Egyptian regime supports Mohamed Dahlan because it is in need of financial support from the United Arab Emirates, in light of the difficult financial crisis that Egypt is going through, given that the UAE considers Dahlan one of its arms in the region, which angered Abu Mazen, because he felt that Egypt was looking for a role for itself, even at the expense of the Palestinians.

This state of lukewarmness in the relations between Egypt and the Palestinian Authority coincides with a steady rapprochement in Egypt's relations with Tel Aviv, because Sisi seeks protection for his regime, given that one of the remarkable protection tools in the region is Israel, because of its security capabilities and its close political relations with the world's major countries. This ultimately results in a decline in Egypt's role and position among the Palestinians.

Conclusion

It is possible that Egyptians and Palestinians will seek to preserve what may appear to be good relations between them, but they cannot hide their differing views on issues like the relationship with Israel, the succession of the Palestinian Authority President, or the future of the relationship with the Gaza Strip. The differences between the two sides in these files may suggest continuation of the state of apathy in their relations, albeit at the minimum level, but they will not deteriorate to reach complete estrangement.