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Hamas-Egyptian Relations Deteriorate

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The Israeli military campaign in Gaza has exacerbated the already strained relationship between Hamas and Egypt, and threatens to further undermine their ties. Under increasing stress from Israeli air operations over the past week, Hamas has been pressing Egypt to open the Rafah Crossing to provide sanctuary to ordinary Gazans and the organization's targeted leadership. Instead of helping Hamas, however, Cairo -- which views its own Islamists with increasing concern -- seems more interested in weakening the organization. Although the relationship appears poised for a breakdown, Hamas, with only Israel and Egypt on its borders, will continue to depend heavily on Cairo if it hopes to remain in power in Gaza.

Background

Egypt is the only Arab state that shares a border with Gaza. The border, known as the Philadelphia Corridor, runs 12.6 km and separates the southern part of Gaza from the Sinai Peninsula. In the aftermath of the September 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the corridor became the sole responsibility of Egypt. Today, the Rafah Crossing is the only official border station with Egypt and is governed by an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) signed in November 2005. Per the agreement, European Union monitors, in addition to Egyptians and Palestinians, supervise customs and border crossings.

While Egypt has maintained strong ties with the PA and its Fatah leadership since the PA's establishment in 1994, Cairo has largely avoided a direct relationship with Hamas. In 1996, at Fatah's request, Egypt met with Hamas officials in Cairo in an attempt to halt the group's suicide attacks inside Israel. More recently, in March 2005, PA president Mahmoud Abbas asked Egypt to sponsor talks among the Palestinian factions to persuade Hamas and others to accept a ceasefire with Israel. High-level contacts were initiated only after Hamas abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006, when Cairo acted as a mediator in an attempt to return Shalit to Israel. After the Hamas military takeover of Gaza in June 2007, ongoing senior-level exchanges between Cairo and Hamas became routine.

Despite the ongoing contacts, Cairo has clearly indicated to Hamas that it recognizes only the authority of Abbas and highlighted this policy by moving its diplomatic representation to Ramallah after Hamas's takeover of Gaza. Today, Egypt's relations with Hamas are handled through security channels and specifically by Egypt's intelligence chief Omar Sulaiman.

Contradicting Interests

Hamas has a vital interest in maintaining good relations with Egypt. Cairo is the group's only avenue to the outside world other than Israel, and Hamas sees an open border with Egypt as a necessary condition to empowering its ministate in Gaza. Likewise, Hamas continues to have strong ties with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the precursor to Hamas, which first established its presence in Gaza in the early 1950s. Perhaps most importantly, Egypt remains Hamas's main source of ammunition, materiel, and much of the currently available consumer goods, which the group smuggles by means of tunnels connecting Gaza to the Sinai.

In order to maintain these links, Hamas leaders have resisted internal pressure, as well as the entreaties of allies Iran and Syria, to end Egypt's mediation role in the Shalit affair. Hamas likewise accepted the Arab League decision granting Cairo exclusive authority to mediate internal Palestinian disputes, despite Cairo's clear bias in favor of Abbas and Fatah.

Even as Hamas has taken a conciliatory public stance, it is increasingly clear that Egypt sees Hamas as a national security threat. In particular, Cairo is concerned that an enduring Islamic mini-state on its northern border would embolden Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps encouraging the organization to once again adopt violent tactics to unseat Hosni Mubarak's regime. As the chairman of the Egyptian parliament's foreign affairs committee said, "Egypt won't tolerate the existence of an Islamic state at its border." At the same time, Egypt's support for Gaza's isolation secures the goodwill of Washington and Israel, while preserving its regional role vis-a-vis rivals Iran and Syria.

In light of these interests, Egypt continues to keep the border with Gaza closed, with the exception of a few humanitarian missions and Red Crescent evacuations. For the past thirty years, Egypt has been trying to disassociate itself from responsibility for Gaza. Egyptian officials say that reopening the Rafah Crossing would only "allow Israel to export its crises to Egypt" and that it will not "release Israel from its obligations toward the people in Gaza." Cairo insists the crossing will only reopen under the terms of the 2005 PA-Israel agreement -- that is, when the EU employees return to work.

Signs of Breakdown

Tensions between Hamas and Egypt have been escalating since January 2008 when Hamas destroyed a border fence, allowing an estimated 700,000 Palestinians to stream into the Sinai. Initially, Cairo welcomed the Palestinians, but soon sought to reestablish control over its territory. Over a hundred Palestinians were eventually arrested, including a large cell of Hamas operatives carrying explosives and grenade launchers, and in March 2008, Hamas officials accused Egypt of torturing its detained members. As Egypt took steps to reseal the border, Hamas dispatched bulldozers to undo progress. At the same time, Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh pledged that his organization would not allow the border to be resealed. Shortly after, Egyptian border guards were injured by Hamas gunfire.

The conflict between Hamas and Egypt reemerged in November when Hamas refused to attend a meeting in Cairo to reconcile Palestinian factions. Hamas accused Egypt of bias and wanting to broker an extension of Abbas's term of office (which is set to expire later this month). Cairo responded by declaring Hamas responsible for the breakdown in the talks and convinced the Arab League to legitimate the extension of Abbas's term as president.

In the aftermath of this episode, Egypt, frustrated with Hamas, refused to mediate between the organization and Israel to extend the truce in Gaza. Then, a few days prior to Israel's Operation Cast Lead, Hamas republished an article that appeared initially in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, which claimed that some Arab countries [i.e., Egypt] had "asked Israel to behead Hamas's leaders." Hamas subsequently accused Egyptian intelligence chief Sulaiman of telling the Israelis that "Hamas is so arrogant" that "only military action against it will bring it to reality."

Implications

The opening of Rafah is the lynchpin of Hamas's exit strategy from Operation Cast Lead. Hamas believes that the Egyptian regime will capitulate under pressure from public demonstrations in Egypt and the Arab world, and eventually open the border crossing. The organization is also hoping that the next ceasefire with Israel includes a new arrangement leaving Egypt with no choice but to permanently reopen Rafah, effectively ending pressure on Hamas and providing it with a strategic gain.

Despite pressures, Egypt so far has demonstrated little sympathy for Hamas and gives little indication that the

border policy will change. Egypt hopes the Israeli campaign will either oust Hamas from Gaza or weaken it sufficiently to change the diplomatic dynamic when Cairo engages in Palestinian political affairs.

Hamas will likely emerge from this round of fighting battered but standing and still in need of a strong relationship with Egypt. If Cairo does not budge on Rafah, it may gain renewed leverage vis-a-vis Hamas in its future dealings in intra-Palestinian politics, but it is unlikely to affect Hamas support for terrorism. Nevertheless, for Cairo, which faces its own internal Islamist challenge, its policy on Hamas and the border will send a strong message to would-be regime opponents. When it comes to Islamists, Egypt will do what is necessary to protect its national security.

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