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Office Palestinian Territories

Egypt and the Palestinian Cause

An analysis of contemporary foreign and domestic political dimensions

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This report provides an integrated analysis of foreign and domestic political factors and developments since the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 that have shaped Egypt's contemporary stance towards the Palestinian cause. This report is the first case study of a wider research series by the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAS) Office in the Palestinian Territories that re-assesses the place the Palestinian cause holds within the Arab world a decade after the Arab Spring.

Introduction

The Palestinian cause, which gained momentum with the *Nakba*¹ in 1948, has long unanimously been referred to as the principle Arab cause, a contemporary source of unity among all Arab nations. Historically, it has captured the attention, respect and commitment of the Arab people and dominated their leaders' political relations with the Palestinians as well as Israelis. Its political terms and conditions were ultimately enshrined in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API), which until today constitutes the most established proposal for peace endorsed by Arab states. Most importantly, this includes Palestinian statehood with Jerusalem as the capital and a settlement of the Palestinian refugee question. In that sense, it can be regarded as a blueprint when attempting to define the Palestinian cause as a political endeavor within the Arab context.

Yet, throughout the last decade, this fundamental notion of Arab unity has been contested. Not only have the 2011 uprisings, commonly known as the Arab Spring, turned Arab citizens' attention to domestic problems and away from traditional Pan-Arab foreign policy topics, also more Arab States have normalized ties with Israel and supported policies against Palestinian interests that previously would have been unthinkable. A decade after the Arab Spring, it therefore seems timely and relevant to re-assess the place Palestine holds within the Arab world. We thus ask: How has the Arab world's stance towards the Palestinian cause evolved? And, do we possibly see an increasing "Arab fatigue" towards it?

Before being able to make an informed inference regarding the aggregated Arab position towards the Palestinian cause to date, it is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of a critical number of individual country cases first. Here, the country selected as the first case study is Egypt. Historically, Egypt has been *the* most important Arab player when it comes to the extent of influence it exerts on the Palestinian issue. Its relevance is derived both from its geographical proximity as well as long-standing engagement by which the different Egyptian leaders have shaped the Palestinians' fate significantly over time; from Nasser, who championed the Palestinian cause, to Sadat, the first Arab leader to make peace with Israel.

Therefore, when the Arab Spring shook the Middle East a decade ago, perhaps no one looked closer at the unfolding Egyptian revolution than the Palestinians, hopeful that their cause would gain renewed momentum and support. But did those hopes materialize? This study will provide an integrated analysis of the

¹ The Arabic word *Nakba* (نكبة) means "catastrophe", a term commonly used in the Arab world to refer to the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland after the creation of Israel in 1948.

most significant foreign and domestic political factors and developments affecting Egyptian-Palestinian relations since then. It will furthermore make an original contribution by going beyond the traditional definition of the Palestinian cause as a mere superordinate political construct and endeavor, and in addition integrate a “more human” level by looking at how recent Egyptian policies have directly affected Palestinians’ lives. The study will show that the Egyptian-Palestinian relation has different layers and is not purely bilateral.

Historic background

To accurately assess the current developments and events shaping Egyptian-Palestinian relations, it is imperative to have an understanding of the historic context that precedes them. Although these relations have existed for much longer, the modern political debate surrounding the subject starts with the events of 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel. In this year, Egypt and six other Arab nations were defeated by Israel in the First Arab-Israeli war; around 700.000 Palestinians, or 85% of the total population, became refugees. The loss of the war had grave ramifications for Egypt not only on a geopolitical level but also on a domestic one. As many Egyptians blamed the ruling British-backed Faruk monarchy for the monumental disaster, it was overthrown in 1952 and the Republic of Egypt was established. Similar developments took place across the region as nationalist movements, embittered by the 1948 Arab failure, viewed the abolishment of the imperialist-backed rulers as a prerequisite for an end to colonialism in general, and the liberation of Palestine in particular. This gave impetus to the formation of an organized ideological pan-Arab nationalist movement with no stronger unifying cause than the liberation of Palestine.

Egypt’s historic leaders and the Palestinian cause

In Egypt, the pan-Arab movement was championed by Gamal Abdel Nasser (president from 1956 to 1970). Throughout the Arab world, Nasser became known as the main defender of the Palestinian cause; a position he claimed for himself until 1964 when he facilitated the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with the purpose to represent the Palestinian people and to liberate Palestine through armed struggle. However, when Israel won the Third Arab-Israeli war in 1967, seizing the Sinai Peninsula as well as the Gaza Strip from Egypt, Nasser henceforth took a less belligerent stance. While he continued to supply financial support and weapons to the PLO, in private Nasser was said to urge Palestinian leader and later PLO chairman Yassir Arafat to think about peace with Israel and the possibility of a two-state solution.²

Egypt’s “path towards moderation” became more evident under Anwar Sadat (president from 1970 to 1981) and eventually materialized in the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, the first one between any Arab country and the Jewish state. Whereas Sadat was previously viewed as a hero in the Arab world for regaining the Sinai Peninsula from Israel in the Fourth Arab-Israeli War in 1973, the treaty was received with enormous controversy and anger. Especially the PLO under Arafat considered it a stab in the back of the Palestinians, also because the incorporated “Framework for peace in the Middle East” dealing with the Palestinian question, was signed without consultation or participation of the Palestinian leadership.³ Furthermore, by creating two separate frameworks for Egyptian-Israeli peace on the one hand, and peace between Israelis and Palestinians on the other, the so-called Camp David Accords marked the first departure from Arab unity against Israel. For this, Egypt was suspended from the Arab League from 1979 until 1989, and Sadat got assassinated by Egyptian Islamist extremists in 1981.

In essence, Egypt’s stance towards Palestine and Israel has moved within this framework ever since. Under Hosni Mubarak (president from 1981 to 2011), relations with Israel were noticeably frostier than under Sadat, which is why commentators began referring to it as a “cold peace”.⁴ Nevertheless, he safeguarded the peace treaty and built up Egypt’s position as principal regional mediator between Palestinians and Israelis, as

² The two-state solution is a political framework for settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by creating an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. See Aburish S., “[Nasser, The Last Arab](#)”, Thomas Dunne Books, New York, 2004. This and all following sources were last retrieved on December 1, 2021.

³ See United Nations Peacemaker, “[Israel and Egypt Framework for peace in the Middle East agreed at Camp David](#)”, 1978.

⁴ Korany B., “[The Cold Peace, the Sixth Arab-Israeli War, and Egypt’s Public](#)”, 1983.

for example during the Oslo Accords, the first agreement between the two latter towards a process for peace starting in 1993, which led to the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PA).⁵ When several Arab States led by Saudi Arabia formulated a new peace agreement called the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) - offering Israel peace with its 22 Arab member states in return for Israel's withdrawal to the 1967-borders, the creation of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and a solution to the Palestinian refugee question -, Egypt, as one of the Arab Leagues member states, endorsed the initiative.⁶ The API was a historic move with a flexible approach to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and a novel step towards peace and stability in the Middle East. It was reaffirmed in 2007 and constitutes the most established and widely agreed-upon peace plan among Arab States to date. In that sense, it can be regarded as a blueprint when talking about the definition of the "Palestinian cause" on a political level, and, thus a benchmark for the further course of this study.

Egypt, the Gaza Strip and the modern regional context

In the northern Sinai Peninsula, Egypt shares a 12 km-long border with the Palestinian territory known as the Gaza Strip. After 1949, Gaza was an Egyptian protectorate. Although it was initially administered by the so-called All-Palestine Government, the latter was largely symbolic and dissolved by Nasser in 1959. Subsequently, Gaza was put under Egyptian military rule. Egypt had never tried to annex the territory, firstly, to avoid the absorption of Gazans into Egypt and secondly, since this would speak against the declared goal of Palestinian statehood. In 1967, Israel captured the territory in the Third Arab-Israeli War.

In recent decades, Gaza became the combustion point of Egyptian-Palestinian relations once again. When Israel disengaged from the Gaza Strip in 2005, authority of the territory was ceded to the PA and shared PA-Egyptian control was established over the Gaza-Egyptian border. While Egypt was seen to equip and train security forces affiliated with Fatah, the secular nationalist party established by Yasser Arafat dominating the PA, Egypt was also said to push for a greater role and influence inside of Gaza for itself, something that Arafat rejected. Eventually, all these efforts did not suffice to forestall the worst-case scenario dreaded by Fatah, Egypt and Israel alike, namely the Palestinian Islamist Hamas party's takeover of Gaza after it won the 2006 Legislative Elections against Fatah. In light of this new reality, in which Palestinian territory effectively underlies split control, President Mubarak, like most other international leaders, made it clear that only the newly-formed government in the West Bank, which in turn was created by Fatah, would be recognized as the sole legitimate Palestinian representative and thus, in a stark sign of support of the former, moved the Egyptian embassy from Gaza to Ramallah. At the same time, on a domestic level, Mubarak was seen to increasingly counter Islamist political elements by curtailing and co-opting their agenda, as organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, of which Hamas is an offshoot, were considered illegal. Since then, while making attempts to mediate an agreement between the two rivaling Palestinian factions, Mubarak had reinforced Egypt's standpoint on the precondition that Palestinian unity must only come under its preferred partner, the PA.

In addition to political isolation, the Gaza Strip was put under territorial siege, not only from Israel but also from the Egyptian side. The construction of an underground barrier along the Egypt-Gaza border started in 2009 with the justification to preserve security and prevent tunneling by smugglers, leaving only a sole transit point, the Rafah crossing, which was infrequently opened for travel or trade. Who is in control of the crossing and border is a point of major contestation since then. For such measures Mubarak had repeatedly been called out by critics for acting as the Arab henchman for Israel and US in the region. In fact, Egyptian and US foreign policy regarding Palestine had become largely interchangeable. By this point, the so-called "camp of moderation", in support of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace process, consisted of Egypt, Jordan, the US, Israel and the PA; as opposed to the so-called "axis of resistance" including Syria, Iran, the Iranian-backed

⁵ The Palestinian National Authority was created as an interim governing body for partial rule over Palestinian territories within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip until a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is found.

⁶ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, "[The Arab Peace Initiative Official Translation](#)", 2002.

Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas, all of which do not recognize Israel and believe in resistance through armed struggle against what is seen as Israeli-American design for the region. This constellation is not incidental and especially the fact that the Sunni Hamas party finds itself in a Shia-dominated camp can be explained in view of the greater ongoing regional power struggle. Here, Egypt stands with its strategic partner Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-majority states against the regional expansion of Shia Islam as promoted by Iran via regional proxies and non-state actors. The fact that the two Palestinian factions have largely faced themselves on opposite sides of this wider regional conflict has added further layers of complexity to the Palestinians' dilemma and significantly impeded their cause ever since.

Egypt's contemporary foreign politics and the Palestinian cause

The Egyptian revolution: A new trajectory for the Palestinian cause?

In 2011, when mass protests later known as the so called Arab Spring, swept the Middle East, Palestinians were full of optimism that their cause would be high up on every Arab country's agenda. "The Mubarak regime was seen among Palestinians as a status quo regime - authoritarian, oppressive and willing to go along with Israeli policy to maintain the siege over Gaza. Therefore, the Arab Spring was welcomed by all Palestinians. This was the most positive thing that happened to them in a very, very long time", says Khalil Shikaki, Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) in Ramallah.⁷ What in fact happened was that Arab citizens' attention throughout the Middle East turned inwards to the dire state of their own countries' domestic affairs. Traditional pan-Arab foreign policy topics such as the Palestinian cause largely took a backseat. Conversely, however, especially the unfolding events in neighboring Egypt were of major concern to the Palestinians. Mubarak's military regime was toppled by the Egyptian revolution and Mohamed Morsi (president from 2012–2013), affiliated with the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, became Egypt's first democratically elected leader. In previous decades, the Muslim Brotherhood had repeatedly capitalized on criticism against Mubarak for his treatment of Palestinians as well as accommodationist policies towards Israel and alliance with the US. Morsi in particular was known for his anti-Israel rhetoric and pro-Palestine standpoint, in specific an ideological identification with the "Hamas cause". He had hitherto expressed his disfavor about the existent Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which he viewed as dictated by Israeli and US interests.

Unsurprisingly, when Morsi came to power, all sides anticipated significant changes to Egypt's foreign policy direction. On one hand, Hamas expected never-seen-before opportunities; the group was quick to neglect relations with its ally Syria and was consequently ostracized by Iran, therewith placing all its eggs in the basket of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. Hopes were high above all regarding the freedom of movement as well as the establishment of formal trade relations between Gaza and Egypt, a demand brought forth by the then Hamas leadership under Ismail Haniyeh.⁸ On the other hand, Israel and the PA, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, lost their most powerful and stable regional ally. The PA feared losing its exclusive place of being treated as the sole representative of the Palestinian people to Hamas. For Israel, the worst-case scenario, which was picked up by Israeli media at the time, was the cancellation of its peace treaty with Egypt as Morsi made references regarding the yet unfulfilled part of the agreement that ought to lead to Palestinian self-rule.⁹

The significance of the unfolding events was also reflected in Palestinian popular sentiment at that time. A poll by the PCPSR from March 2011, two months after mass protests started in Egypt, found that 92% of Palestinians sympathized with the demonstrators throughout the Arab World and that optimism regarding a positive impact on the Palestinians' situation was high. Particularly the conditions for Gazans were expected to improve as 66% of Palestinians thought that the fall of the Mubarak regime would lead to the permanent opening of the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza.¹⁰ Here, PCPSR director Khalil Shikaki notes: "As Egypt

⁷ Interview Khalil Shikaki, Director at PCPSR, October 13, 2021.

⁸ See Gulhane, Daily News Egypt, "[Egypt rejects Hamas free trade zone proposal](#)", October 1, 2012.

⁹ See The Jerusalem Post, "[Morsi's message](#)", September 30, 2012.

¹⁰ See PCPSR, "[Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No \(39\)](#)", March 17-19, 2011.

is a country that can bring immediate positive development to the lives of Gazans through freedom to travel, Gazans now expected a door out of the prison.”¹¹

However, these hopes did never fully materialize. While an easing of restrictions on Gaza and elevation of Hamas’ political role was observed throughout 2012 and 2013, Morsi’s rule was too short for the hitherto politically inexperienced Muslim Brotherhood to drastically subvert Egypt’s long-held foreign policy course as inherited by Mubarak and deeply embedded in the existing web of geopolitical alliances, diplomatic treaties and power politics. In fact, it is also doubtful that a radical change is what Morsi wanted but his time in office was too short to draw unequivocal conclusions regarding the full extent of envisioned foreign policy changes. It is clear, however, that his political survival was conditioned on striking a balance between following the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideological course, such as the natural affinity with Hamas, on one hand, and proving to his domestic critics as well as international community that he would be able to adopt a more moderate agenda for Egypt on the other; a short-lived endeavor that failed after barely one year.

Resuming the old order under Al-Sisi

The thread of continuity that characterized long-standing Egyptian foreign politics was fully resumed in 2013 after large-scale demonstrations against the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule swept across Egypt, eventually leading to the ouster of Morsi by the military under army chief General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Within the discussed political equation, undoubtedly, the player that was hit hardest by this was Hamas, which now stood totally isolated after having previously cut ties with all pre-Morsi allies and whose immediate political survival was thus at stake. Aside from political isolation, for ordinary Gazans, these developments were perceived as an imminent threat to their physical survival; often described as “Gaza’s lifeline”, the Egyptian army was quick to crack down on the underground tunnel networks through which inhabitants obtain construction material, food or fuel, yet, which were also known to be used by Hamas to smuggle weapons and money inside the Gaza Strip;¹² something that Morsi largely turned a blind eye on but which was once again treated as a major security threat under the new regime. All of this amounted to a tight blockade and iron fist policy towards Hamas, which was declared a terrorist organization by an Egyptian court in 2015. Thus, “in 2013 and 2014, since he came to office, we see an evolving animosity among Palestinians against Sisi as he was crippling Gaza’s economy”, says Khalil Shikaki.¹³ Especially amongst Gazans, who felt the impact of Egypt’s shifting policy towards them first-hand, sympathy for Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood increased in the months after his ouster.¹⁴

On the opposite side, the PA was visibly relieved about regaining its strongest Arab ally and congratulated Egypt on behalf of all Palestinian people, despite the fact that “65% regard[ed] the change in Egypt, which led to the dismissal of Morsi, as bad for Palestinians”, according to a poll from the PCPSR in September 2013.¹⁵ Israel’s initial reaction was one of caution. Here, one ought to consider the nature of civil-military relations in Egypt. Pre- as well as post-Morsi, the Egyptian military and political elite were one and the same, yet throughout the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule, there was a divergence and split control of the two. This meant that Israel continued steady working relations with the Egyptian military under then-commander in chief General Al-Sisi but faced estranging relations with Cairo’s political elite under Morsi, who, unlike the presidents before and after him, was not a general. Despite this, when it came to regional stability, Morsi had proven himself surprisingly useful to Israel by brokering a swift ceasefire as well as prisoner swap deal with Hamas, while toning down his previous anti-Israel rhetoric. Thus while, generally speaking, the re-convergence of Egypt’s military and political elite under a familiar, secular leader was Israel’s preferred option, an unstable neighbor erupting in chaos for the second time in less than three years was seen as problematic, particularly in view of stability and security at Israel’s southern border.

¹¹ Interview Khalil Shikaki, Director at PCPSR, October 13, 2021.

¹² See Al Bawaba News, “[Egypt flooded the Gaza tunnels at Israel’s request](#)”, February 7, 2016.

¹³ Interview with Khalil Shikaki, Director at PCPSR, October 13, 2021.

¹⁴ See PCPSR, “[Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No \(49\)](#)”, September 19-21, 2013.

¹⁵ See PCPSR, “[Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No \(49\)](#)”, September 19-21, 2013.

Mutual distrust, shared benefits: Cairo-Hamas rapprochement

The main determining factor for the course of Hamas-Egyptian relations has always been security. Since Hamas' rule over Gaza, except for the brief period under Morsi, who additionally cultivated open political ties and diplomatic channels with Hamas through the presidency office, Cairo has always dealt with Hamas through Egypt's powerful intelligence apparatus. Via this way, working relations with Hamas over security affairs have already existed under Mubarak but largely broke down when Sisi came to office, amongst others because Hamas regarded his rise to power against Morsi as a coup against a legitimately elected leader. However, due to the rising threat of jihadist groups in the Sinai Peninsula, Cairo-Hamas relations started to improve. As a last resort for its political survival, Hamas gradually opened up to enter into cooperation with Egyptian intelligence to contain extremist groups in the Sinai Peninsula as well as to carry out purges against Salafi jihadists inside the Gaza Strip. As a result, the epicenter of extremism remained stuck in North Sinai, not Gaza, where it was easier for Egypt to crack down on the operating Daesh-affiliates. In exchange for guaranteeing Egypt's security needs, Sisi was seen to pay greater attention to Hamas' needs including the improvement of Gaza's humanitarian situation and opening of the Rafah crossing for travel and trade.

This cooperation on a security level eventually paved the way for a formal political rapprochement. It occurred in 2017 and, on Hamas' side, was largely made possible by the group's new leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, who "decided that it was time to open a new page in Hamas-Egyptian relations", according to Mkhaimar Abusada, Professor and Chairman of the Political Science Department at Al-Azhar University in Gaza.¹⁶ Hamas presented an amended curriculum, declaring itself an independent Palestinian national movement, which - most importantly for Cairo - meant a detachment from the Muslim Brotherhood. In further alignment with Egypt's "course of moderation", Hamas also formally agreed to accept a Palestinian state within the 1967-borders, therewith softening its stance on Israel. While the latter called Hamas' apparent policy shift a farce, the strengthening of political ties between Egypt and Hamas even more so disgruntled the PA. Serving as an unpleasant reminder of the Morsi era, its leadership once again feared to be sidelined as it watched Egypt enter into direct negotiations with Hamas, receiving their delegations in Cairo and discussing sensitive issues such as the Rafah border or reconstruction efforts in Gaza without PA consultation. Yet, without much leverage on their side, the PA could hardly afford to act upon their disapproval, or else risk "to add Egypt as yet another Arab country to the list of those they have alienated", according to Ibrahim Dalalsha, Director at Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach.¹⁷

In hindsight, the emergence of radical groups in Sinai thus created an opportunity for Hamas to overcome total isolation and survive politically. According to Omar Shaban, Founder of PALThink for Strategic Studies in Gaza, Egypt was even seen to "try and strike a certain balance to give leeway to Hamas to continue its relationship with Iran."¹⁸ This is despite the fact that Iran is known to support Hamas with weapons and that in light of the greater regional power struggle, Egypt does not welcome expanding Iranian influence. For this reason and others, it is however unlikely at that stage that Hamas will come to replace the PA as Egypt's preferred Palestinian partner for peace negotiations or any other diplomatic endeavors; not the least because, as mentioned earlier, engagement with Hamas takes place strictly via Egypt's general intelligence, which does not confer any diplomatic legitimacy on Hamas, while concerning the PA, Egypt in addition cultivates formal political ties through the countries' Ministries of Foreign Affairs - albeit the latter holds much less influence than the powerful intelligence services. Conclusively, despite the lack of trust to build a strategic relationship, collaboration between Cairo and Hamas is expected to continue well on an operational level, at least as long as Yahya Sinwar is head of Hamas in Gaza.

¹⁶ Interview Mkhaimar Abusada, Professor and Chairman of the Political Science Department Al-Azhar University, November 22, 2021.

¹⁷ Interview Ibrahim Dalalsha, Director at Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach, October 13, 2021.

¹⁸ Interview Omar Shaban, Founder of the Gaza-based PALThink for Strategic Studies, November 20, 2021.

Egypt's unassailable role as the regional mediator

Intra-Palestinian dispute

Since the beginning of the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah, which gained momentum with Hamas' victory in the Palestinian legislative election in 2006 and subsequent rise to power in the Gaza Strip, Egypt under Mubarak has been involved in attempts to mediate agreements for a Palestinian national unity government. Especially during the Arab Spring, Palestinian frustration over the situation became apparent when, unlike in most other Arab countries at that time, demonstrators in the Palestinian territories did not demand the full overthrow of the government, but rather a united political leadership that could face the Israeli occupation. Given this protracted intra-Palestinian dispute, it came as a surprise to many observers when shortly after his election, Morsi succeeded in mediating the signing of a Fatah-Hamas unity agreement in Cairo. Here, Morsi's close relations with Hamas were acknowledged as a new, important factor for achieving the swift success, even though the agreement's implementation eventually did not materialize. Sisi, too, found himself caught up in the process of intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks. However, given the initially antagonistic relations between Hamas and Cairo, Egypt did not proactively invest in the issue at first.

This was recognized by the Palestinian population. In the months after Sisi came to power, an opinion poll by the PCPSR showed that optimism about Fatah-Hamas reunification dropped to a mere 12%, the lowest since their split in 2007.¹⁹ It was not until 2017 when Cairo's improved ties with Hamas raised hopes for potential progress on the issue as Egypt showed renewed willingness to mediate between the Palestinian factions. Yet, starkly diverging internal Palestinian interests beyond Egypt's control constituted an insuperable obstacle. "In the past couple of years, the Egyptians have made some good efforts but the Palestinian leadership did not give them enough help. It is not only about what Egypt wants to do; in the end it is about how much the Palestinian leadership cooperates towards these efforts." says Omar Shaban.²⁰

At present, on a rhetoric level, Sisi resumed the Mubarak foreign policy line by assuring that he will continue "efforts for the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip."²¹ Yet in practice, this is not an Egyptian foreign policy priority at the moment. Reaching Palestinian unity on PA terms, which are largely based on the interest to gain nominal control over Gaza, would mean that Egypt possibly had to return to an iron-fist stance towards Hamas; something that is not in Egypt's own national interests as long as collaboration with Hamas works well. In the same way, Hamas is benefitting from relations as it continues to elicit concessions from Cairo conditioned on security cooperation rather than the achievement of a Palestinian unity government. Hence, as long as Egypt and Hamas are both reaping tactical benefits from the current status quo, this does not seem to facilitate the Palestinian people's long-standing demand for a strong, unified political front in the near future.

Palestinian-Israeli conflict

As the only Arab state that cultivates formal relations with all three actors – Israel, the PA and Hamas – Egypt's unique position as mediator between Israelis and Palestinians is well-known and established. In recent decades, all truces in the major wars as well as several other important deals in peacetime were reached with the help of Egyptian interlocutors. Yet, the process and procedures by which such agreements were achieved varied significantly and were indicative of the evolving interests of the different parties.

Starting with Morsi's term in office, despite its brevity, two swift mediation successes between Palestinians and Israelis were reached. Contrary to Israeli fears that the newly gained support from Cairo would encourage Hamas' aggression, Morsi was seen to reign in Hamas to a degree that did not exist under Mubarak; firstly, a prisoner swap deal that failed under the previous administration was concluded with Egypt's help, exchanging one Israeli soldier for 1027 Palestinian prisoners - among them Hamas' current leader Yahya Sinwar; secondly, the short timeframe of only seven days in which the truce to the 2012 Gaza War was brokered

¹⁹ See PCPSR, "[Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No \(49\)](#)", September 19-21, 2013.

²⁰ Interview Omar Shaban, Founder of the Gaza-based PALThink for Strategic Studies, November 20, 2021.

²¹ See Abu Zaid, Arab News, "[Egypt continues efforts to return Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip, says El-Sisi](#)", October 7, 2021.

and the subsequent period of calm were unprecedented. In both cases, the rearranged regional political alliances and improved Egyptian-Hamas ties were said to have played a crucial role for the success.

Under Sisi, a ceasefire deal with almost identical terms was reached, ending the 2014 Gaza War, yet the mediation process that preceded it varied significantly. Whereas under Morsi Israeli aggression was condemned and an official delegation sent to Gaza to negotiate with Hamas, Sisi did not engage in direct talks with the latter during his negotiation efforts, which essentially were designed to weaken Hamas and instead strengthen the PA's role. A Palestinian observer, who was present during the mediation talks but wishes to remain anonymous, recalls: "It was not like one would expect, that Egypt would mediate between Israel and Hamas. In fact, Israel and Egypt treated the PA as the sole Palestinian representative and it was clear to any observer that Egypt and the PA's position were one and the same, and both were putting pressure on Hamas to accept their conditions for a ceasefire."²² This reflects the fact that trust between Cairo and Hamas was at an all-time low; a significant hindrance for the outcome of the war, which waged on for 51 days and became the deadliest period since the beginning of the blockade of Gaza. This clearly impacted Palestinian public opinion. A poll of the PCPSR conducted at the end of the war revealed: "Egypt's role is seen as weak and unhelpful. The public sees Iran, Turkey, and Qatar as the most instrumental in supporting Hamas and helping Gazans remain steadfast against the Israeli attacks."²³

Yet, after the Cairo-Hamas rapprochement, these dynamics changed and Egypt's increased mediation efforts were highly noticeable in May 2021, when clashes between Israelis and Palestinians spread not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank and Israel proper. Despite this widened scope, Egypt succeeded in brokering a truce after 11 days. This time around, an Egyptian intelligence delegation led by intelligence chief Abbas Kamel was sent to Gaza to negotiate directly with Hamas, while the PA was involved on a mere symbolic level. In comparison, according to Mkhaimar Abusada, "in 2021, Hamas was very receptive and appreciative of the Egyptian intervention as they felt this time Egypt can be trusted as a more honest broker than in 2014." Equally striking was Egypt's tone and behavior after the ceasefire. After every war, Egypt and other Arab countries typically send financial and material aid to Gaza for reconstruction. However, this time the Egyptian aid convoys to Gaza were accompanied by a large-scale media campaign. Dozens of Egyptian flags and billboards were seen in Gaza displaying the face of Sisi and with quotes such as: "The Palestinian cause is the central issue for Egypt."²⁴

While all of this was helpful to Gazans, it was even more helpful to Sisi, who boosted his domestic approval for supporting the Palestinian cause and, more importantly, gained diplomatic credit with the new administration of US President Joe Biden in a time when the US foreign policy focus is turning away from the Middle East and Egypt is being criticized over its human rights violations. Lastly, by asserting its unique and irreplaceable position as regional mediator, Sisi also pushed back Turkey's and Qatar's aspirations in this direction. Given Egypt's long-standing mediation experience and open channels with all sides, especially in light of the recent rapprochement with Hamas, Egypt is likely to remain better placed than any other player to negotiate between Palestinians and Israelis.

The Palestinian-Israeli peace process

Historically, Egypt's diplomacy has contributed to keeping the Palestinian-Israeli peace process alive, amongst others, because it is originally tied to the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. It includes the so-called "Framework for Peace in the Middle East" in pursuit of Palestinian statehood and Arab-Israeli peace, and which later on served as a template for the Oslo Accords. Yet, as this has not materialized, also Egyptian-Israeli peace has remained susceptible to criticism. Generally speaking, it is therefore in Cairo's interest to maintain calm between Palestinians and Israelis, as any reminder that peace is far out of reach undermines the credibility of Egyptian peace with Israel and, by extension, that of the "axis of moderation".

²² Interview anonymous source, October 15, 2021.

²³ See PCPSR, "[Special Gaza War Poll](#)", August 26–30, 2014.

²⁴ See The Economist, "[Egypt's dictator is aiding Gaza and boosting his image](#)", July 3, 2021.

Yet, as the US-led peace process collapsed in 2014 and initiatives to revive the 2002 API did not bear any fruits, entirely new proposals for peace were put forward. Here, former US-president Donald Trump's 2020 so-called Peace to Prosperity plan – largely based on economic and humanitarian incentives at the expense of a political settlement of the Palestinian question – generated widespread public attention and outrage. In effect, Trump's proposal meant a break with fundamental conditions for peace set down in 50 years of US-sponsored peace talks as endorsed by Egypt. However, not wanting to strain diplomatic relations with the new US administration, Sisi did not outright reject the plan, unlike both Palestinian factions and for example Jordan, another Arab state that has formally made peace with Israel.²⁵ While official Egyptian statements remained ambiguous and did not clearly indicate whether Cairo would abandon the 'two-state formula', sources from the PA as well as Hamas claimed that Egypt's intelligence officials made attempts behind closed doors to pressure the Palestinians into backing the plan.²⁶ Similar accusation circulated two years earlier, when the Egyptian government publicly denounced the US embassy move to Jerusalem, yet was said to instruct Egyptian media to create acceptance for the move among the Egyptian public.²⁷ Further, when Israel announced that it would pursue the annexation of the 30% of the West Bank allocated to Israel under Trump's proposal, Cairo was circumspect in its criticism thereof, much to the disappointment of the Palestinians.²⁸

However, the end of Trump's presidency also meant an end to his plan for peace, and since then Egypt has resumed more traditional ways of peacebuilding based on the terms of the 2002 API. This is despite the fact that in 2020, four Arab states signed normalization agreements with Israel, known as the Abraham Accords, thus in effect rendering the API inoperative. The fact that Egypt welcomed these agreements soured relations between Egypt and the PA further. An overwhelming 78% of Palestinians similarly believed "that the Egyptian position welcoming the agreement represents an abandonment of the Palestinian leadership led by Abbas."²⁹ Nevertheless, Egypt has undertaken various peace efforts bringing together Arab and European actors to discuss opportunities to revive Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. Sisi has also invited Israel's newly elected Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to Egypt for separate talks, although his far-right-wing party does not accept the two-state solution. In summary, regarding the Arab side, Ibrahim Dalalsha says: "The API is dead, but no one is willing to bury it; rhetorically all Arab states are keeping it alive." Regarding the Israeli side, "there is a consensus among all involved parties that under the current Israeli government, there will be no meaningful progress."³⁰ Yet, even if at present none of these dynamics seem very conducive to the ultimate goal of peace, traditional peacebuilding measures such as confidence building, cultivating relations and keeping diplomatic channels open to all sides may enable Egypt to contribute to calm and stability by preventing future violent clashes as well as – together with reconstruction efforts and economic support – significantly improve the day-to-day situation of Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip.

Egypt's contemporary domestic politics and the Palestinian cause

Egyptian national interests

Security is a reoccurring and ever-present theme that runs through numerous layers of Egyptian-Palestinian relations. However, these relations can never be fully understood on a purely bilateral level. Especially when it comes to national security, Egypt is also heavily dependent on cooperation with Israel, with which it shares a 270 km-long border in the northern Sinai Peninsula. Here, Egyptian-Israeli collaboration has been long-standing and conducted on a flexible basis as both countries recognized the need to move beyond originally agreed upon terms set out in their peace treaty, which demarcates Sinai as a demilitarized zone. Further, on a

²⁵ See Brakel, Höfner, Blumberg & Ranko, KAS, „[Trump's Nahost-Plan – Reaktionen aus der Region](#)“ (German), January 31, 2020.

²⁶ See Hosny, Al-Monitor, "[Egypt treads cautiously in response to Trump's deal of the century](#)", February 13, 2020. And Salah & Said, Mada Masr, "[Egypt's foreign policy on Israel and Palestine: Has there been a change?](#)", May 30, 2021.

²⁷ See Krikpatrick, New York Times, "[Tapes Reveal Egyptian Leaders' Tacit Acceptance of Jerusalem Move](#)", January 6, 2018.

²⁸ See Boxerman, The Times of Israel, "[Why Egypt is staying quiet on Israel's West Bank annexation plan](#)", June 29, 2020.

²⁹ PCPSR, "[Press Release: Public Opinion Poll No \(77\)](#)", September 15, 2020.

³⁰ Interview Ibrahim Dalalsha, Director at Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach, October 13, 2021.

wider security level, Egypt and Israel share a common concern regarding the discussed Saudi-Iran power struggle and growing Iranian influence in the Middle East, amongst others, through its support of non-state actors in close proximity to Egypt and Israel such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad.³¹ and the Lebanese Hezbollah. To a lesser extent cooperation between Egypt and Israel has taken place on an economic level and was mainly limited to natural gas exports by Egypt to Israel through a pipeline that was operational between 2008 and 2012. However, as insurgents in the Sinai Peninsula targeted the pipeline and Egypt's domestic gas production declined in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, it stopped operating. Since 2020, gas has been flowing once again, albeit in the opposite direction from Israel to Egypt. Now these quantities may reach new levels as most recent talks between the two countries in 2021 regarding the construction of a new onshore pipeline were termed "the most significant economic cooperation between the countries since the peace agreement."³²

While these bilateral relations with Israel are of great importance to Egypt, perhaps even more so are the extended benefits it unlocks with regards to the US. Egypt is one of the biggest beneficiaries of US security assistance. Since the signing of its peace treaty with Israel, which until today remains its most fundamental rationale, Egypt is receiving \$1.3 billion of US military aid annually, intended for counterterrorism, border security, and nonproliferation programs, therewith also contributing to Israel's security. Furthermore, these strategic ties with the US earn Egypt diplomatic support and leeway to pursue its own national interests, especially regarding a number of substantial domestic crises including threats to its water security in relation to disputes with Ethiopia and Sudan. Since the Sisi regime is in power, Egypt's authoritarian practices and worsening human rights record has been a matter of increasing tension between the two allies, yet the diplomatic success in brokering a swift ceasefire between Palestinians and Israelis in May 2021 has boosted Sisi's standing with the Biden administration, earning him much praise and gratitude.

In light of this, Omar Shaban remarks: "Egyptian-Israeli relations are not always a zero-sum game for Palestinians, who also do get benefits out of it, for example when it comes to the mediation of conflicts, reconstruction of Gaza, [and] resuming the peace process. I also expect that Gazans will benefit in the future from the Egyptian-Israeli agreements over the Gaza natural gas."³³ By contrast, critics of the Egyptian regime have remarked that Egypt has grown to instrumentalize the Palestinian cause as a mere means to push its own national agenda and fulfill self-interested goals, while in fact showing unprecedented little concern for the Palestinian people or their political interests.

Egypt's internal political dynamics and the "cause of the opposition"

Since the end of the Nasser-era, advocacy for the Palestinian cause in Egypt's domestic politics has largely been championed by the opposition. This means firstly, Egypt's Islamist opposition, of which the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest and most renowned. Since the group's foundation in the 1930s, Zionism was viewed as a threat to the Muslim world. By extension, for Hamas, which was created as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during the first intifada in 1987, this overarching Islamic ideology manifested itself in the direct confrontation with Israel. Around the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood gained strength in Egypt's political landscape, where it in part derived its popularity from championing the Palestinian cause. It had repeatedly condemned the government's course towards Palestine and Israel. Secondly, pan-Arab Nasserist movements, youth and student organizations as well as labor unions had historically formed a part of the opposition against Sadat's and Mubarak's policies towards the Palestinians and Israelis. Thirdly and more recently, leftist-secular and liberal opposition movements also advocated for resistance against Israel, while condemning its siege on Gaza and the Egyptian regime's complicity therein. Many of these diverse opposition groups came together in the 2000s during the second intifada. Large solidarity protests as they haven't been seen since the 1970s swept Egypt, proving rare common ground despite ideological differences and soon

³¹ The Palestinian Islamic Jihad is a Palestinian armed faction based in Damascus. Its objective is the establishment of an independent Islamic Palestinian state. It is opposed to the Oslo Accords and declared a terrorist organization by Israel and most Western states. It is thought to have good working relations with the Egyptian intelligence services.

³² Harkov, The Jerusalem Post, "[Israel to link Leviathan gas field to Egyptian LNG plants, says Steinitz](#)", February 21, 2021.

³³ Interview Omar Shaban, Founder of the Gaza-based PALThink for Strategic Studies, November 20, 2021.

gaining an anti-regime dimension. In hindsight, these protests were frequently described as “rehearsal” for what ultimately culminated in the 2011 revolution.³⁴ In the latter, whereas long-standing domestic grievances certainly constituted the primary reason for the nation-wide uprisings, the regime’s deeply unpopular foreign policy - particularly its accommodationist policies towards Israel and alliance with the US - were a reoccurring theme perceived as indicative of the widening moral gap between the ruling elite and the people.³⁵

Notwithstanding this traditional oppositional affiliation with the Palestinian cause, when Egypt’s short-lived Islamist parenthesis came to an end, the link between the two was starkly exaggerated to corroborate accusations against the Muslim Brotherhood; so was Morsi arrested, amongst others, for aiding Hamas’ activities to free him from an Egyptian prison in 2011. Further, the entirety of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood stood accused of preparing a terrorist plot inside of Egypt in collaboration with Hamas. Yet, as no proof was presented, the allegations regarding Hamas’ involvement remain elusive. Nonetheless, both Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood were declared terrorist organizations by Egypt and all activities were consequently outlawed. Moreover, dozens of repressive laws were passed since then, restricting civic participation and political space, freedom of speech and peaceful assembly, and a nation-wide state of emergency was declared in 2017 granting security forces unchecked powers including the detention of opponents. Even though in October 2021, upon increased domestic and international pressure, the state of emergency was lifted, with exception of the Sinai Peninsula, the majority of measures were instead integrated into Egyptian criminal law, thus having little real impact on civil liberties and much rather signaling Sisi’s determination to hold on to his current course of domestic affairs.³⁶

This has also affected individuals or groups that publicly tried to express solidarity with Palestinians. On a more general level, such show of solidarity is oppressed simply because “there is zero tolerance for any independent gathering, let alone demonstrations, of any kind, from anybody, for any cause and especially not when it is about criticizing the government”, according to Amr Magdi, Senior Researcher at Human Rights Watch MENA department.³⁷ Here, the pretext given by the regime is the preservation of national security against the internal and external threat of terrorism. Yet, more specifically, the subject of Palestine does also exhibit inherent features that may give the regime reason for heightened concern. On one hand, “the regime knows that if they would let Palestinian solidarity groups flourish in Egypt, this could cause them trouble with Israel and the Israel lobby in the US and they might risk losing some of their support”.³⁸ On the other hand, the Palestinian cause was also, time and again, seen to unleashed deep emotions of popular anger in Egypt and beyond. “It has historically been one of the few causes behind which the Left and the Islamist opposition could both unite, hence fermenting solidarity across ideological divides”, according to Dina El-Sharnouby, Professor at the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics at the Free University of Berlin.³⁹ A united and strengthened opposition is certainly not in the regime’s favor. Since he came to power, President Sisi has thus acted with increased authoritarianism against any kind of dissident, manifesting itself in a sharp decline of Egypt’s human rights record. Among those affected by widely-reported crackdowns, detention and forced disappearances are public figures such as leaders of the Egyptian branch of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) as well as sole protesters waving a Palestinian flag on Tahrir Square during the May 2021 clashes between Palestinians and Israelis.⁴⁰ It is therefore not surprising that street protests in Egypt were neither seen during the 2014 Gaza War nor in 2021. While many of these traditional protest formats have been reinvented through social media, providing an avenue for transnational activism and solidarity, also the online realm is known to be monitored by the Egyptian government. “This passivity should not be understood

³⁴ See Attalah & Zalat, Mada Masr, “[Where is Palestine in Egypt?](#)”, August 3, 2014.

³⁵ See Litvak, Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, “[The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas](#)”, January 1998.

³⁶ See Human Rights Watch, “[Egypt: Ending State of Emergency a Start But Insufficient](#)”, October 26, 2021.

³⁷ Interview Amr Magdi, Senior Researcher Human Rights Watch MENA department, November 25, 2021.

³⁸ Interview Amr Magdi, Senior Researcher Human Rights Watch MENA department, November 25, 2021.

³⁹ Interview Dina El-Sharnouby, professor Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics, November 17, 2021.

⁴⁰ See Al-Monitor, “[Egypt arrests citizens for showing solidarity with Palestine, while claiming support for Palestinians](#)”, May 21, 2021.

as a rejection towards the Palestinians but rather because showing solidarity nowadays means risking one's own life".⁴¹ Therefore, while few known activities have continued to take place far from the public eye, the opposition and any open calls for solidarity with Palestine within Egypt have at present largely been silenced and may resurface only once Egypt's overall human rights and democratic climate improves.

Palestine in the Egyptian media and popular sentiment

As was seen, events related to Palestine have sparked widespread anger, solidarity and even violence culminating in the 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat. However, already after the latter signed the peace treaty with Israel, anti-Palestinian propaganda started to surface and intensified under Mubarak. Palestinians and Hamas were frequently equated with the Muslim Brotherhood as a way for the regime to externalize threats and justify its blockade on Gaza as well as cooperation with Israel; so for example did the pro-government media during the 2011 revolution claimed that demonstrators on Tahrir Square were not Egyptians but in fact Hamas agents and other Palestinians.⁴² Despite his attempts to regulate the media, these deep-rooted, familiar accusations continued under Morsi, as for example the stifling power cuts in Egypt were blamed on the transfer of large amounts of electricity to Gaza by the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴³ After Morsi's ouster, media outlets supportive of him were immediately shut down and those channels remaining open largely upheld the same old narrative, although under a new regime. For instance, as security in Sinai continued to deteriorate, this was framed as retaliation of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas against the Egyptian people by the media.⁴⁴ Further, during the 2014 Gaza War, blame for the deaths of hundreds of Palestinians was largely put on Hamas, describing its rule over Gaza as a "second occupation" next to the Israeli one.⁴⁵ Yet, since Egypt's rapprochement with Hamas in 2017, the media's tone has changed. During the May 2021 clashes, Hamas was referred to as the "Palestinian resistance" against the "Zionist occupation" and, in stark contrast to 2014, its actions were lauded. This example signals best the extent to which the Egyptian media is nowadays controlled by the regime and thus catering to its political narrative at any given point in time.⁴⁶ In accordance, news that could potentially stain relations with Israel and the US are tuned down. According to Mustapha Sayyid, Professor of Political Science at Cairo University, "negative reporting on Israel is very rare. There are merely daily news pieces that factually inform for example about violations committed under the Israeli occupation but those are just news, no expressed opinions."⁴⁷ Moreover, when President Trump moved the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018, investigative reports emerged of Egyptian intelligence officers calling TV hosts and instructing them to create acceptance for the move among their audience.⁴⁸

The question that thus arises is whether the regime's narrative spread by the media actually influences Egyptian popular sentiment. For the largest part, the overall answer is no. Here, Mohamad Khairat, Egyptian journalist and co-founder of the news site "Egyptian Streets", notes that "the majority of comments on Egyptian media and news sites are overwhelming pro-Palestine and anti-Zionist."⁴⁹ His observation is confirmed by all existing opinion polls which find that the large majority of Egyptians across socio-economic and generational divides hold pro-Palestine attitudes. When asked about the importance of finding a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Zogby Research Service states in 2020 that 94% of Egyptians find it "very or

⁴¹ Interview Dina El-Sharnouby, professor Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics, November 17, 2021.

⁴² See Masad, Al Jazeera, "[Egypt's nouveaux riches and the Palestinians](#)", August 9, 2012.

⁴³ See Mansour, Committee to Protect Journalism, "[On the Divide: Press Freedom at Risk in Egypt](#)", August 2013. And Flensberger, Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik, "[Palestine in Egypt: From Solidarity to Fear to Common Struggle](#)", May 2014.

⁴⁴ See El-Dabh, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, "[Conflating Hamas and Palestine in the Egyptian Media](#)", September 8, 2014.

⁴⁵ See Attalah & Zalut, Mada Masr, "[Where is Palestine in Egypt?](#)", August 3, 2014.

⁴⁶ See El-Dabh, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, "[Conflating Hamas and Palestine in the Egyptian Media](#)", September 8, 2014.

⁴⁷ Interview Mustapha Sayyid, Professor of Political Science at Cairo University, November 1, 2021.

⁴⁸ See Krikpatrick, New York Times, "[Tapes Reveal Egyptian Leaders' Tacit Acceptance of Jerusalem Move](#)", January 6, 2018.

⁴⁹ Interview Mohamad Khairat, journalist and co-founder Egyptian Streets, October 1, 2021.

somewhat important.”⁵⁰ The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies states that 74% believe that “the Palestinian cause concerns all Arabs” and that furthermore 85% are “opposed to diplomatic ties between [Egypt] and Israel.”⁵¹ The underlying reason most often cited for this opinion relates to “the occupation and Palestinian rights”. In relation to this, El-Abed finds that this sympathy typically grows in times of Israeli aggression against Palestinians, behaving “in an inverse relationship: the more brutal the action, the greater the sympathy.”⁵² In regards to the peace process, 79% of Egyptians would approve of a “just and comprehensive peace with Israel” if the latter would agree to the terms and condition laid down in the 2002 API, yet half of those think that Israel will not agree. As a consequence, 42% think that, while the API is still relevant, “Arabs should do more to convince Israel of the benefits of peace.”⁵³

Nevertheless, when it comes to a concrete policy level, there are indications that Egyptians hold a more pragmatic view than when it comes to the Palestinian cause as a far-away, idealistic concept; for example, did 54% of Egyptians view Trumps “Deal of the Century” as “very or somewhat favorable”. While this is only a slight majority, it is definitely more than one would expect. Yet, reasons given for this view were not that the proposal was perceived as fair but rather as the most realistic path to ending Palestinian suffering.⁵⁴ Similarly, in 2020, after the normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab states, 42% viewed those as desirable. Here, the first reason given was that it would “stop the killing”; the second was a resignation “to the fact that it is happening anyway”; only the third-most frequently cited reason coincides with the justification Arab normalizer governments typically provide, namely that it would give them “greater leverage to apply pressure to help secure rights for Palestinians.” As the concern to end Palestinian suffering takes the highest priority, it also appears logical that Egyptians look favorable towards the regime’s practices whenever it is saving Palestinian lives. “Egyptians approve the government’s efforts to mediate ceasefires, end the fighting and transmitting goods and medical supplies to Gaza in times of conflict”, Mustapha Sayyid states.⁵⁵ Conclusively, given a lack of reliable information, it is hard to say whether the relatively moderate opinions of Egyptian’s regarding concrete political policies in relation to the Palestinian question is due to time-worn resignation or repeated, large-scale media influence.

Egypt’s invisible Palestinian diaspora

When it comes to Palestinian refugees, the political discourse mainly revolves around their right to return,⁵⁶ an issue central to any viable peace process. Yet, what is often overlooked or excluded when talking about the advancement of the Palestinian cause is in how far host countries’ treatment of their Palestinian refugee community has contributed to improving their living situation and has made their lives livable throughout the past 70 years. In the case of Egypt, especially the country’s important outward role in championing the Palestinian cause has often overshadowed its internal treatment of Palestinians that fled to Egypt. As a result, little attention has been paid to the approximately 70.000 Palestinians (refugees and their descendants) residing nowadays in Egypt.⁵⁷ To understand why this community remains largely invisible, a brief review of the historical context is needed.

In the wake of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, around 13.000 Palestinians fled to Egypt and again a similar number in 1967; a relatively small influx compared to other bordering countries, mainly due to the Sinai desert posing a natural, geographic hindrance. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Palestinians in Egypt experienced what is often referred to as “the golden era”, as they were treated on par with Egyptian nationals

⁵⁰ See Zogby Research Service, “[The Annexation Debate: Attitudes in Israel and Key Arab States](#)”, June 24 – July 5, 2020.

⁵¹ Arab Center Washington DC, “[The 2018-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief](#)”, November 16, 2020.

⁵² See El-Abed, “[Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948](#)”, 2009.

⁵³ See Zogby Research Service, “[The Annexation Debate: Attitudes in Israel and Key Arab States](#)”, June 24 – July 5, 2020.

⁵⁴ See Zogby Research Service, “[The Annexation Debate: Attitudes in Israel and Key Arab States](#)”, June 24 – July 5, 2020.

⁵⁵ Interview Mustapha Sayyid, Professor of Political Science at Cairo University, November 1, 2021.

⁵⁶ The Palestinian right of return is the political position that Palestinian refugees and their descendants have a right to return to the land from which they fled based on UN Resolution 194. See UN General Assembly, “[194 \(III\). Palestine – Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator](#)”, December 11, 1948.

⁵⁷ See Naoum, The Palestinian Return Centre, “[Palestinians in Egypt](#)”, December 2016.

and upward social mobility significantly increased.⁵⁸ Further, in 1965 the Arab League adopted its most significant treaty on the treatment of Palestinian refugees in Arab host countries called the Casablanca Protocol, of which Egypt is a signatory. Despite the fact that the agreement endowed Palestinians with basic rights and demand that host countries treat them on par with nationals, in Egypt, this was not granted to them anymore after 1978. This year, both the assassination of the Egyptian Minister of Culture by a Palestinian faction group and the signing of the Camp David Accords with Israel led to the annulment of any rights for Palestinians. Thenceforth, they were treated as foreigners, including second-generation Palestinians born in Egypt, which meant they were facing tight restrictions on access to state services, education, work permits and ownership licenses. Moreover, Palestinians in Egypt suffered under the deterioration of Egypt's relations with the PLO, leading to an upsurge of surveillance, detentions and singling out of Palestinians.

These historic developments have shaped Palestinians' lives in Egypt until this day. As a community of extremely small size, constituting less than 0.1% of the Egyptian population, they are dispersed among rural and urban areas across most of Egypt's governorates, where they inevitably blend in with the Egyptian host population. That there are no exclusive Palestinian areas also stems from the fact that, unlike in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, where the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was given an operational mandate to provide relief to the refugees, Egypt did not request UN support. Consequently, no permanent refugee camps were established, which on one hand has enabled Palestinians to better integrate into Egyptian society, yet on the other led to a lack of reliable information about them, which is typically collected by organizations; neither does the Egyptian government release any official data in regards to its Palestinian minority, making it difficult to accurately assess or study their situation. Moreover, there are no Palestinian social or cultural institutions as their creation is prevented under Egypt's restrictive laws for assembly. These entail tight scrutiny to obtain licenses, explaining the total absence of active Palestinian organizations to date. This has effectively impeded any sort of Palestinian social cohesion, identity-forming and cultural expression within Egypt.⁵⁹ Thus, while Palestinians' invisibility within Egypt's socio-spatial fabric may be understood as an integration success, the underlying reasons do not appear to be in the Palestinians' favor. An Egyptian judge, who wishes to remain anonymous, states: "If I was Palestinian, I would even not want to live in an all-Palestinian area. It would be too easy for the government to make you out. I would rather want to attract as little attention as possible."⁶⁰

This holds true especially for the time after the 2011 revolution. Here, the Palestinian community stood accused of having supported the Muslim Brotherhood, while the media played on old stereotypes describing Palestinians as spies or traitors that are ungrateful for the sacrifices Egypt has made for their cause. Furthermore, a dangerous conflation of Hamas with all Palestinians increased fear and vulnerability among the already minuscule refugee population that is heavily reliant on social capital. Amr Magdi recalls: "In recent times, the toughest period for Palestinians in Egypt was definitely between 2013 and 2014, when there was a hysteria against Palestinians fueled by rising xenophobia and the new regime's propaganda against the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Gaza in general. Sometimes, when people would encounter someone Palestinian, they would report him to the police for no reason and definitely if you're Palestinian and you would be stopped on the road you would be questioned extensively." Here, a Palestinian mother of three who has an Egyptian husband and lives in the suburbs of Cairo, states: "I always tell my sons not to speak politics because they have a Palestinian mother, I tell them: They consider you not Egyptian even though you have the nationality. Be aware and stay out of trouble!"⁶¹ She and her family report that in their daily lives discrimination by Egyptians does not affect them as much as the structural, top-down discrimination imposed by the state, for example when accessing state services, renewing documents, obtaining permits or when traveling in and out of the country.

⁵⁸ See El-Abed, "[Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948](#)", 2009.

⁵⁹ See El-Abed, "[Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948](#)", 2009.

⁶⁰ Interview anonymous source, September 19, 2021.

⁶¹ Interview anonymous source, October 3, 2021.

Especially the issue of naturalization remains elusive. Egyptian men married to foreign women transfer their citizenship to their children, but all Egyptian women married to foreign men have to apply for citizenship if their child was born before the 2004 amendment of the Egyptian National law. Although the law does not explicitly state that Palestinians are excluded, the great majority of applicants of Palestinian origin appeared to have been rejected. It was frequently reported that the oral justification given to them refers to a 1959 Arab League resolution that recommends that Palestinians should not be granted citizenship in order to prevent their assimilation into the Arab host countries and therewith permanent resettlement.⁶² This is indeed a common line of argumentation that has been continuously evoked by the Arab leadership since the very beginning of the Palestinians' dilemma; namely that granting Palestinians citizenship in the host state would jeopardize their right of return and thus the greater Palestinian cause. When the Palestinian community's frustration over the issue grew in 2011, after the ouster of Mubarak, citizenship was granted to several thousand applicants but later on, under Sisi, the data was re-examined and citizenship was withdrawn in multiple cases.⁶³ The exact data and full extent of the issue remains unclear as there is a lack of information from the Egyptian government's side. What is clear, however, is that the large majority of even fourth or fifth post-Nakba Palestinians born in Egypt have been left in limbo, with no hope for a secure legal status in Egypt or a return to their Palestinian homeland. Nowadays, without visibility, identity or a political voice, and in view of the general state of Egyptian domestic affairs, including widespread poverty, unemployment and an alarming human rights record, it is out of the question that in this climate and under this regime the rights and interests of refugees in the country – Palestinians or others – will take priority.

Conclusion

Before we answer the question of whether we observe an increasing Egyptian fatigue towards the Palestinian cause throughout the last decade, we shall assess Egypt's political actions towards the Palestinians on two levels: a superordinate political one, and a lower, "more human" dimension – a dichotomy that forms an important underlying theme to this study.

Egypt's impact on the Palestinian cause as a political endeavor

Egypt-Palestine relations can never be seen in purely bilateral terms. Within the last decade, Egypt's relation with the main political players has evolved as the following:

- Egyptian-PA alliance has remained steady but underwent ups and downs, depending on Egypt's positioning towards Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians as well as the PA vis-à-vis Hamas. Here, the schism among the Palestinian factions has divided the Palestinian cause and made it difficult for Egypt to extend consistent support to either side or mediate a unity agreement between them.
- Egyptian-Hamas collaboration over security matters has led to a political rapprochement despite obvious ideological differences. The nature of these relations, however, remain tactical and are unlikely to replace long-standing strategic ties between Cairo and Ramallah.
- Egyptian-Israeli ties have grown closer than ever before due to shared security, geopolitical and economic interests. Especially the Trump era has made it easier for Egypt to walk the diplomatic tight rope to balance between Israeli-US and the Arab world's stances as the latter increasingly follow in Egypt's footsteps and make peace with Israel.
- Egyptian-US relations continue to work in Egypt's favor as it largely derives its international relevance and leverage on the US from its mediator role between Palestinians and Israelis. In return, Egypt reaps various diplomatic and economic benefits. Despite causing major hits to Palestinian interests, Sisi was also seen to go along with Trump's foreign policy decisions.

⁶² See El-Abed, "[Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948](#)", 2009.

⁶³ See Taha, Palestinian Return Centre, "[Palestinians from Egypt and the Naturalization Issue](#)", August 13, 2018.

→ Overall, opinions on whether these developments and Egypt's role therein have helped or hindered the Palestinian cause throughout the last decade are divided:

- On one hand, Egypt's position as regional mediator remains thus far irreplaceable as it is the only country that cultivates open channels to all adversarial parties. This has enabled Egypt to build up sophisticated expertise to negotiate major Palestinian-Israeli and intra-Palestinian disputes as well as to keep the Palestinian-Israeli peace process alive, even though at present a solution seems far out of reach. In that sense, even strengthened Egyptian-Israeli relations are not always a zero-sum game for Palestinians, as without these trusted relations, political solutions and conflict prevention may be less likely.
- On the other hand, Egypt's critics have asserted that the leadership's calculations and willingness regarding when and how to intervene and engage with the Palestinian question is solely based on Egyptian national interests and benefits rather than a concern for Palestinian welfare and advancement of their cause. The two latest major Palestinian-Israeli clashes are indicative of this quandary; while in 2021, Egypt's proactive mediation effort has led to a swift ceasefire, the experience of the 2014 Gaza War showed that Egyptian security and political interests at that time were not conducive to de-escalate the situation, thus entailing significantly more death and destruction.

Egypt's impact on the Palestinian cause as a human endeavor

Thus, the Palestinian cause can be delineated as a high-level political endeavor as it is typically the case in the discourses surrounding this subject. However, the Palestinian cause can and ought to be extended to include a lower dimension, coming to be seen as a human cause that is about the lived experiences of individuals and impacts their lives and welfare on a daily basis:

- Firstly, Gazans greatly depend on Egypt during war and peace times given the immediate geographic proximity. Daily livelihood and even survival of Gazans depend on the opening of borders for travel and trade, the provision of medical and financial aid or reconstruction efforts. Here, too, opinions regarding the Egyptian commitment are divided; while on one hand, especially after each war, its efforts to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza are lauded, Egypt, on the other hand, has long been criticized for enabling the ongoing siege over Gaza and for subordinating Gazan's humanitarian needs to its own national interests in general and relationship with Hamas in particular. Furthermore, when turning our view inwards to Egyptian domestic affairs, regime-controlled Egyptian media was frequently seen to conflate the image of Hamas as an Islamist terrorist group with all Palestinians.
- Secondly, Palestinian refugees in Egypt have felt the real-life implications of such anti-Palestinian media incitement, which has led to increased suspicion against them, drawing on already existing stereotypes that portray Palestinians as traitors, spies and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates. This refugee community of minuscule size has thus been at the mercy of fluctuating media attitudes guided by external events in which they play no role and elusive governmental policies that grant them little to no rights. Although Palestinians have been born in Egypt for five generations, the justification for withholding rights from them remains the same; namely that facilitating their integration within of Egyptian will jeopardize the greater Palestinian cause and Palestinian statehood. Here, the pitfall of reducing the Palestinian cause to a mere far-way future political construct rather than also a human cause that concerns the welfare and lived experience of generations of Palestinians on a day-to-day basis becomes all the more apparent.
- By extension, Egyptian citizens are affected too, specifically those who would like to express solidarity with Palestinians. A state of emergency and restrictive laws against freedom of expression and assembly have made it impossible for Egyptians to publicly voice their support, let alone demonstrate or criticize the regime's course towards Palestine and Israel. While this holds true for dissenting opinions of any sort, the regime may perceive the topic of Palestine as particularly sensitive as barely any other cause in Egypt's modern history has sparked so much popular emotion and anger. In the past, the Palestinian question was one of the few causes behind which both the Islamist and secular opposition have united. Nowadays, the topic is thus feared to be an enabler for local opposition politics and trigger of popular unrest.

Finally, we would like to answer the question: Do we see an increasing fatigue regarding the Palestinian cause in Egypt within the last decade?

- On a political level: An Egyptian fatigue regarding the Palestinian cause cannot easily be considered. Egypt's appetite for engaging with the Palestinian question has been fluctuating based on perceived usefulness at a given point in time. The resulting policy decisions may therefore appear inconsistent and contradictory as they are based on a complex set of multifaceted objectives and foreign as well as domestic political interests. Overall, trust in the continuance of Egypt's traditional foreign policy course, which has largely remained unchanged since 1979, has been fully restored after Egypt's short-lived Islamic parenthesis. It has largely been characterized by self-interested pragmatism rather than ideological considerations. Nevertheless, due to both its continuous political engagement as well as geographical proximity, Egypt arguably remains *the* most important Arab actor when it comes to the amount of authority and influence it holds over the Palestinian cause, both defined as a political as well as human endeavor. Sadly, the definition that Egypt has increasingly employed throughout the last decade is that of the Palestinian cause as a security file that needs to be dealt with as such inside as well as outside of Egypt's borders. This position has grown to new heights under the current regime and is expected to solidify as long as it remains in power.
- On a popular level: It is hard to gauge the full extent of the importance the matter nowadays still holds for Egyptians but it is clear that the large majority of them continues to exhibit strong pro-Palestine attitudes. Yet, also here increasing pragmatism can be observed when it comes to the policies that are nowadays considered viable given the reality of the protracted conflict on ground. It is a primary concern of Egyptians to end Palestinian suffering, but the fact that, in an increasingly authoritarian environment, there is no space for citizens to voice their opinion, let alone influence political decision-making, has led to resignation. On top of this, the repeated anti-Palestinian attitudes furthered by Egypt's pro-government media are likely to have taken their toll on popular opinion too.
- Palestinian popular perception: Despite Egypt's uninterrupted outward rhetoric portraying itself as the primary defender of the Palestinians and their cause, nowadays, Palestinians themselves live under no illusion that their interests would take priority over Egypt's own national agenda. While Egypt's continuous efforts as a mediator – if perceived as honest and unbiased – are much appreciated, the contemporary developments and Egypt's role therein – especially its endorsement of contested Trump policies – have undoubtedly left Palestinian greater collective hope for a new momentum and trajectory for their cause, as seen at the beginning of the Arab Spring, unfulfilled.

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