Are Egypt and Israel Stumbling Toward War?

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 13.02.2025

The Gaza drama is putting Egypt's peace with Israel under new strain. This is not the result of only events in the past weeks but is rather the culmination of much longer-term dynamics that cannot easily be mastered and reversed at this stage. The conflagration that Hamas began on October 7, 2023, may have triggered a chain of events that exposes these long-term trends and failures and brings them to a head — perhaps even including a broader war.

Egypt's abysmal behavior in allowing its common border with Gaza to be used for the dangerous smuggling of weapons, money, and material to Hamas built the problem that exploded on October 7. Hamas could arm only to the level that Egypt enabled it. Once exposed, rather than help Israel fix the problem it enabled, Egypt manufactured tensions with Israel to divert attention from its own culpability. Egypt tried to bury the legacy of its failure by focusing on Israel's taking control of the Philadelphi Corridor along the Gaza-Egypt border. The Egyptians claim, inaccurately, that Israel's presence violated the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

The Philadelphi diversion did not solve the basic problem, which was that, for Israel, October 7 had rendered obsolete the reemergence of a Gazan population under the control of either Hamas or the Palestinian Authority. After October 7, for Israel to allow Palestinian agency so close to its heart became too dangerous, a threat to Israel's existence. Resurrecting the status quo, even dressed in some modification, was no longer feasible. But this meant Cairo could no longer contain the Gazan problem across the border at arm's length. So it began to reinforce its border — not to stop smuggling, but to stop the potential outflow of Palestinians. This, however, solved nothing, and again dumped the entire Gaza problem — a problem that Egypt had inflated by failing to control the border — on to Israel. Further complicating the situation, Cairo recently began to deploy armor and troops nearby, in violation of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. The demilitarization of the Sinai is the alpha and omega of the treaty. Its violation is itself a gravely serious affair.

What has unfolded since October 7, and is accelerating now, is no doubt a failure of immediate policy in the Biden presidency, as well as Obama's. But it is a far greater failure that is indigenous to the region and dates back for most to the last century. Egypt's policy on Gaza was just one manifestation of the typical regional pattern of dealing with problems emanating from ideological danger: indulge and reconcile with the problem by exporting it to others who will deal with it.

That pattern solves nothing. The problem returns, but having acquired a far more dangerous form. Egypt did that with the Gamaat al-Islami, and it returned. Saudi Arabia did that with bin Ladin, and it exploded back on 9/11. Syria mobilized the Palestinians in the camps in Tripoli, Lebanon in the 2000s to create Ansar al-Islam and al-Qaida Iraq (Musab al-Zarqawi). Both eventually returned to haunt them as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra/Haya at-Tahrir ash-Shams (HTS). The Arab world's proclivity to export its problems outward for someone else to deal with rather than directly resolve or erase them consistently comes home to roost. Gaza, indeed the Palestinians as a whole, are no exception.

So, the Palestinian/Gaza problem returns to haunt Egypt. Egypt's 75-year policy of appeasing and paying the Palestinian piper under the assumption it is Israel's problem has finally come home for Egypt itself. Israel can no longer tolerate Palestinian agency in Gaza, and the destruction there will leave no real option for Israel other than the removal of the population of Gaza — perhaps temporarily, but more likely permanently. Both Jerusalem and Washington have now come to this conclusion, resulting in the Trump plan for Gaza. Egypt opposes the American plan to resettle Gazans to safer lands because doing so would import the problem it so desperately exported. It would move it inside the house.

Though this is a circumstance of Egypt's own making, it places Egypt in a difficult position.

On one hand, Egypt fears for its regime's survival if it *accepts* the Trump plan. It would position Cairo as a participant in a second disaster, or "Nakba." It knows from its own history; King Farouk was overthrown in 1952 in part for his failure to prevent the first Nakba in 1948. Any leader that fails to stop a second Nakba, let alone participates in it, risks losing legitimacy and being seen as weak. The perception of buckling on the Palestine issue also resulted in Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981. Egyptian President El-Sisi risks being seen by his own population as too weak to stand up to Israel or the United States, as

not upholding his manliness.

Ultimately, this could prove fatal. If Egypt buckles, El-Sisi would be seen as a wounded fish by the region's sharks. Turkey, Qatar and Iran — Cairo's true enemies — will gather around the limping Egyptian nation and incite the population against the government in an invigorated attempt to carry to power in Cairo the Islamist sweep that in December seized Damascus. That threat could topple the government.

On the other hand, *refusing* the Trump plan will drive a wedge in US-Egyptian relations, and likely will terminate the U.S. aid and weapons sales, which have totaled more than $80 billion since 1978. El-Sisi may figure that he can weather the U.S. opposition but cannot weather an upheaval from below fomented by Qatar, Turkey, and Iran. And indeed, if current reports coming out of Qatari news channels are true, El-Sisi already has made his choice and decided to postpone indefinitely the trip to Washington that had been scheduled for next week. In these circumstances, it is possible that Egyptian-U.S. relations may have already entered into a much deeper crisis than is widely appreciated.

How far can this go?

The context includes signs that Iran has made a decision to move toward confrontation. That means the Iranian proxies, Hizballah and the Houthis, will escalate. Within 48 hours of Hamas leaders visiting Tehran for consultations, Hamas announced it is suspending the ceasefire agreement. At the same time, Ayatollah Khamenei slammed the door shut on negotiations with the US over its nuclear program. Then, during anniversary celebrations this week of the Islamic Revolution, billboards with facsimiles of a death notice for President Trump appeared, as well as a passion play of his trial and hanging. Iran has clearly decided to escalate against the United States. That pushes Hamas to return Gaza to war — the last thing Egypt needs right now.

While the current Egyptian threats, training, rhetoric, and deployments are increasingly belligerent to Israel, the assumption of most Western analysts and intelligence agencies is that it is chest-beating. Most in the West assume that an Egyptian-Israeli war is unthinkable. That assumption should be reexamined. Unfortunately, the idea that war is off the table for Egypt is not solid. There are scenarios in which Egypt would see it in its interest to go to war, even though it

knows it would be devastating, that it would lose the Sinai, and that it would terminate the U.S. alliance and aid.

Brigadier General (Reserve) Amir Avivi, the founder and chairman of Israel's Defense and Security Forum, said in a recent briefing that the Israel Defense Forces should be prepared for a war with either Egypt or Turkey in the next 20 years. "Look not at intentions, but capabilities," he advised.

Why would Egypt see it in its interest to invite the destruction of its army and Air Force, alienate the Americans, and lose the Sinai? Losing assets and territory would damage the Egyptian regime deeply, but perhaps not as deeply as would El-Sisi's evincing unmanly weakness. Regimes survive in the region on their ability to project ruthless, confident resolve to survive. Any sign of fear, weakness, or faltering confidence can quickly turn fatal almost immediately.

As painful as it would be for El-Sisi to lose a bit of his army and the Sinai, it may yet to him be viewed as preferable to the damage he would sustain in appearing to cower to Israel and accept, even participate in, a second Nakba. China and Russia can replace the materiel. Qatar can replace the funding.

But nobody can restore El-Sisi's or his regime's honor, and nobody in Egypt will forgive him for forfeiting it. Especially not Egypt's real enemies — Turkey, Qatar, and Iran.

Under those circumstances, El-Sisi may decide to assert his manliness and make a stand, knowing that he would lose a good bit of the military as well as the Sinai. He may imagine he would emerge from this looking tough, willing to accept risk and inflict lots of losses, even on his own people, in order to survive and uphold the stature of the Egyptian military government.

Added to this is an unfortunate dynamic that has previously gripped Egyptian-Israeli relations, a pattern of actors whipping themselves into a frenzy over which they lose control and wind up in a war they may not have originally intended.

It would thus be wise for Western intelligence agencies and other interested observers to at least consider that there is a real potential for an Egyptian-Israeli war. If such an unfortunate turn of events is thrust onto Israel, then it is one from which Israel would need to emerge with a victory as decisive as 1967. It was that Israeli victory, after all, that eventually led Sadat, Begin, and Carter to the Camp

David Accords and nearly half a century of uneasy peace.

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