

U.S.-Egyptian Rapprochement after Gaza Ceasefire: Media Responses and Repercussions

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Brief Analysis

While media responses to U.S. rapprochement with Egypt and Egypt's warming towards Hamas differ, it is clear that Sisi has used the Israel-Hamas ceasefire to his advantage.

Egypt has long been a major partner of the United States and received significant annual U.S. military assistance of approximately \$1.5 billion. However, since the arrival of the Biden administration in January 2021, Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi has been completely ignored and marginalized. He was never contacted by the Biden administration, nor was he invited to Washington, and no U.S. officials have visited Cairo. Moreover, while campaigning, [Biden announced \(https://twitter.com/joebiden/status/1282419453939113989?lang=en\)](#) that there would be “no more blank checks for Trump’s ‘favorite dictator,’ referencing Sisi. In short, U.S.-Egyptian relations have seen a major setback since Biden took office.

However, following the eruption of violence between Israel and Hamas and Biden’s subsequent inaugural call with Sisi on May 20, Egypt managed to broker a ceasefire between the two sides. While Biden and Sisi discussed [strengthening the Gaza ceasefire \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-says-primary-focus-lasting-gaza-ceasefire-aid-too-early-peace-talks-2021-05-24/\)](#), they also discussed the latest developments in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam negotiations and the issue of human rights in Egypt, along with their “commitment to engage in a transparent dialogue... in this regard.”

Egyptian media reactions to the apparent U.S.-Egyptian rapprochement were divided: one narrative presented the rapprochement as a sign of Egypt’s indispensable regional role, while the other described the ceasefire derisively as a “new assignment” from the United States to Egypt. Moreover, the media also presented different reads on Egypt’s surprisingly mild discourse towards Hamas. Pro-regime sources mainly justified the rhetoric as a product of both regional transformations and Hamas’s changing behavior. And on the issue of human rights, U.S.-Egyptian rapprochement is expected to deal a heavy blow to the human rights groups in Egypt. Regardless of differing media coverage, what does seem clear is that in terms of both global relevance and human rights issues, Sisi has come out a winner from Egypt’s role in brokering the ceasefire.

Media Responses to the U.S.-Egyptian Rapprochement

Pro-regime media, intellectuals, and officials have all presented the current rapprochement as a key indicator of Egypt’s indispensable regional political and geopolitical importance. In this context, political analyst and senator Dr. [Abdel Moneim Saeed \(https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2746635.aspx\)](#) held that the U.S. administration finally has begun to realize the importance of Egypt’s regional role and its capabilities on the ground, especially regarding Egypt’s professional management of the situation in Libya, where it supported stability. [Mustafa Kamel el-Sayed \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/sissi-israel-gaza-ceasefire-biden-egypt/2021/05/21/fb054dc8-b9c9-11eb-bc4a-62849cf6cca9_story.html\)](#), a political science professor at Cairo University, likewise said the Egyptian president has “demonstrated to the U.S. that he could be an effective actor on the Middle East scene.”

Moreover, prominent journalist and writer [Abdel-Aziz Hammad \(https://arabi21.com/story/1360922/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%805-%D8%A3%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1\)](#) characterized the call between the U.S. and Egyptian heads of state as “Neither a personal favor nor an American grant to the Egyptian state. Rather, it is an explicit recognition of Egypt’s regional role, its weight, its accumulated experience, and its security considerations which are intertwined with the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

Opposition Media Responses to U.S.-Egyptian Rapprochement

In contrast, some opposition media affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and secular opposition figures have discredited Sisi’s role in the crisis. In this regard, journalist [Moataz Matar \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h30UpPuc-++\)](#) held that the U.S. rapprochement with Sisi was originally motivated by Netanyahu, who urged Biden to call Sisi and asked him to broker a ceasefire after Biden failed to use the UAE as a mediator. Matar added that if the Palestinians were given the choice between Egypt and the UAE, they would prefer Egypt, since the UAE had recently engaged in normalization with Israel and worked to dry up Hamas’s [sources of funding](#).

[\(https://alkhaleejonline.net/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B%D8%9F\)](#)

Moreover, according to the Egyptian historian and academic [Dr. Assem El-Desouki \(http://albosala.com/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A/\)](#), Biden’s talks with Sisi are nothing but a mere “new assignment” to Egypt, which can only restrain Hamas rather than impose conditions on Israel. In addition, writer and politician [Hassan Hussein \(https://arabi21.com/story/1360922/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%805-%D8%A3%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1\)](#) claimed that “communication between the U.S and Egypt about the Palestinian issue in the last 50 years aimed to serve the Zionist entity” and that “Sisi has spared no effort in providing service to this entity.”

The Repercussions of the U.S.-Egyptian Rapprochement of Human Rights in Egypt

While the Biden-Sisi talks emphasized the "importance of constructive dialogue on the issue of human rights," Egyptian NGOs remain skeptical about the Sisi administration's commitment to human rights and democracy in Egypt. According to a phone interview with several NGO chairmen, M.M.—the Head of an Egyptian NGO which focuses on election monitoring and raising public awareness—raised the concern that the current U.S.-Egyptian rapprochement poses a serious threat to the human rights movement in Egypt. He suggested that it likewise opens the doors for more crackdowns on NGOs, which are already besieged by an range of draconian laws.

Moreover, M.M. believed that the serious issue of foreign funding scarcity—a needed revenue stream for cash-strapped NGOs—will continue to persist because dwindling U.S. pressure will allow the regime to supervise, deny, or stipulate the allocation of the NGOs' funding. Restricting international sources of funding of NGOs may push many of them to shutter, since local funding is scarce.

Moreover, E.A.—Chairman of an Egyptian NGO working in the field of supporting transparency and good governance—expressed the view that the Egyptian regime will significantly benefit from the current rapprochement because it will be relieved from the reach of U.S. pressure. Therefore, if the current rapprochement results in a release of U.S. pressure on Egypt, there will be no way to keep the regime accountable for its serious human rights violations. E.A. also emphasized that U.S. pressure should be more effective and consistent. Otherwise, the Egyptian regime will continue to enact some cosmetic reforms and laws or release small groups of political detainees in order to improve its image within the U.S. government without real change.

Furthermore, H.Y, a human rights activist and chairman of an Egyptian NGO working in the field of legal awareness, maintained that the Egyptian regime has been successful in adapting to successive U.S. administrations and evading serious U.S. pressure. As a result, H.Y. said, Sisi has ensured the continued flow of the \$1.3 billion military aid. As a part of this strategy, the Egyptian regime has skillfully manipulated U.S. concerns security about religious and political terrorism to distract from the human rights issue and keep U.S. pressure at a minimum. H.Y also added that Biden's appreciation of the efforts that Sisi exerted on the ground in Gaza perhaps confirms the fact that the Egyptian regime has managed to tame the current U.S. administration.

Media responses to Rapprochement with Hamas

Though communication between the Egyptian government and Hamas, mostly limited to private security meetings, has never been interrupted, Egyptian media has generally pursued a hostile public discourse towards Hamas. However, following the outbreak of the conflict in Gaza, media and official discourses appeared to shift this tone and present themselves as being in support of Hamas.

Likewise, following the Israel-Hamas ceasefire, Egypt rushed to provide direct assistance to Gaza—including \$500 million in aid—and positioned itself as a patron of the Palestinians. Egypt then proceeded to open its borders with Gaza to transfer wounded Palestinians to Egyptian hospitals and dispatched a fleet of ambulances to Gaza. Furthermore, phrases such as "the Israeli occupation", "the Palestinian resistance", and "the martyrs" appeared regularly in most official Egyptian media outlets. Most notably, the official Egyptian newspaper, "Al-Ahram

(<https://gate.ahram.org.eg/daily/News/203751/25/807536/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84%D9%89/%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%A2%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF.aspx>)" labeled Israel as a force of "occupation" in contrast to Hamas, which it characterized as "resistance".

This shift in tone suggests an unexpected soft rapprochement towards Hamas, astonishing political observers and even ordinary citizens who have been exposed to hostile and systematic media reporting about Hamas since 2013. Since Sisi came to power, Hamas has been portrayed as a terrorist organization that supports the insurgency in North Sinai. Egyptian media also accused Hamas—in coordination with the Muslim Brotherhood—of storming and torching police stations during the Revolution and attempting to free ex-President Mohamed Morsi.

To explain this remarkable shift in relations between Hamas and Egypt, professor of political science at Cairo University Mustafa Kamel Al-Sayed (https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202105191049008577-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%82%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/) cited larger political adjustments in the region. The recent wave of normalization between some Arab countries and Israel has raised Egypt's concern about its historical role in the peace process and the repercussions of those transformations on its national security and strategic interests. This concern has then motivated Egypt to seize the opportunity to restore its role in the peace process by demonstrating a conciliatory tone towards Hamas as well as the larger Palestinian cause.

Al-Sayed also added that the success of the Egyptian-sponsored Palestinian reconciliation and the efforts to hold long-delayed Palestinian elections played a major role in softening the relations between Egypt and Hamas. Most importantly, terrorist operations in Sinai have almost ceased. The Egyptian authorities realized that those who carried out these terrorist operations were Egyptians, not Palestinians from Hamas, and they supported by Hamas.

In the same vein, Egyptian political analyst and academic Hassan Nafaa (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2021/5/22/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1>) maintained that the key underlying reason behind the changing Egyptian discourse towards Hamas is Egypt's realization that Hamas is no longer a faction affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but rather a "faction devoted to defending its cause".

On the contrary, as with the U.S.-Egyptian rapprochement, the Egyptian discourse towards Hamas was conceived differently by some in the opposition, who believed that Hamas had no choice but to comply with the Egyptian ceasefire proposal. According to Moataz Matar (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h30UpPuc++>), Egypt's control of its border crossings with Gaza—the only outlet for Gaza's residents given Israel's tight control of Gaza's other borders—allowed the Egyptian government to control the prices and the entry of basic trade goods into Gaza. Hence, Hamas feared that noncooperation with Egypt's ceasefire proposals could fire back and push the latter to tighten its grip on the crossings. In addition, some Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcXjISWgMes&ab_channel=TeNTV) have employed the conspiracy theory that the Egyptian companies expected to participate in the reconstruction of Gaza plan to spy on the "resistance" on behalf of Israel and the UAE.

Nonetheless, while interpretations of the past few weeks' events vary, what is evident is that Sisi has come out ahead. Sisi's legitimacy, originally based on grandiose promises of providing full security and economic growth to Egyptians, has narrowed to fear-mongering against members of the Muslim Brotherhood, combating terrorism, and safeguarding stability. These policies led to the collapse of Egypt's tourism industry which contributes 11.3% of the total national income, and security solutions that have further damaged the human rights situation in Egypt. Therefore, considering the importance of the Palestinian cause to the majority of Egyptians and the emergence of Sisi as the purported savior of the Palestinian people, Sisi's legitimacy—at least among his current supporters—will likely experience a big boost.

While the United States has the right to pursue its own interests and the interests of its allies, the Biden administration should carefully work to balance its regional interests with its commitment to democracy and human rights in Egypt. In contrast, inconsistent U.S. commitment to these values in Egypt could further exacerbate the country's human rights situation and give the regime the green light to continue its crackdown on human rights activists and journalists. ❖

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