

# There Is a Lot More Egypt Could Do for Gaza

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**Sisi's red line against absorbing displaced Palestinians won't budge, but Egypt can certainly host crucial initiatives that help them rebuild Gaza, train security personnel, desalinate water, and replace jobs Israel is no longer willing to provide.**

**T**hree months into its war against Hamas, the Israeli government has announced its intent to seize the Philadelphi Corridor, a narrow 8.7-mile strip of land that runs along the border of Gaza and Egypt. Controlling the territory would allow Israel to better prevent a postwar rearming of Hamas, which appears to have smuggled much of its arsenal via the Sinai Peninsula. But a long-term Israeli occupation of the corridor is also likely to irritate Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. While Sisi has maintained very good relations with Israel—including deep tactical counterterrorism cooperation in Sinai—lately the authoritarian leader has been unusually solicitous of Egyptian public opinion about Gaza.

To be sure, the Palestinian issue resonates greatly in Egypt. Sisi's rhetorical support for Palestinians has enabled him to get ahead of the street, channel popular anger, and likely bolster his waning popularity during a profound domestic economic crisis for which many Egyptians hold him responsible. Disruptions in Red Sea shipping related to the Israel-Hamas war are also having a significant **impact (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-04/spot-container-shipping-rates-soar-173-on-red-sea-diversions?embedded-checkout=true>)** on Suez Canal revenues, exacerbating Egypt's financial woes. For whatever reason, Sisi talks about Gaza a lot, and in recent months he has sponsored rallies and even a rare mass public demonstration in support of Palestinians.

Even so, Sisi has little affection for Hamas, the Palestinian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood that rules Gaza. Egypt largely eradicated its own Muslim Brotherhood branch in 2013, **reportedly (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity>)** killing more

than 1000 members of the Islamist group in a single bloody day. Since then, Sisi has built nearly [\(https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230627-egypts-prisons-are-an-economic-burden-in-a-debt-ridden-country/\)](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230627-egypts-prisons-are-an-economic-burden-in-a-debt-ridden-country/) three dozen new prisons to incarcerate remnant brothers and other regime opponents. Nevertheless, like many of his regional counterparts, Sisi continues to articulate staunch backing for Gaza.

During a government-sponsored rally for the Palestinian cause in Cairo in November, Sisi pledged  [\(https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/190174/President-El-Sisi%E2%80%99s-Speech-at-%E2%80%9CLong-Live-Egypt-A-People%E2%80%99s-Response-in-Solidarity-with-Palestine%E2%80%9D?lang=en-us\)](https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/190174/President-El-Sisi%E2%80%99s-Speech-at-%E2%80%9CLong-Live-Egypt-A-People%E2%80%99s-Response-in-Solidarity-with-Palestine%E2%80%9D?lang=en-us) Egypt's fealty. "My decision was resolute," he said, "namely to be at the forefront of the supporters of our brothers in Palestine and to spearhead action for their sake...By virtue of its history and geography, Egypt is destined to be the backbone in supporting the struggle" of the Palestinian people.

In providing this professed support, Cairo has been clear about what it will not do for Palestinians. First and foremost, Egypt will not serve as a Palestinian place of exile. Sisi has defined any Israeli expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt as a "red line  [\(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4687256-egypt-sisi-labels-palestinian-displacement-gaza-%E2%80%98red-line%E2%80%99\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4687256-egypt-sisi-labels-palestinian-displacement-gaza-%E2%80%98red-line%E2%80%99)." He also declared  [\(https://www.reuters.com/world/egypt-rejects-any-displacement-palestinians-into-sinai-says-sisi-2023-10-18/#:~:text=The%20border%20between%20Sinai%20and,be%20accepted%2C%22%20said%20Sisi.\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/egypt-rejects-any-displacement-palestinians-into-sinai-says-sisi-2023-10-18/#:~:text=The%20border%20between%20Sinai%20and,be%20accepted%2C%22%20said%20Sisi.) that Egypt's borders will not be opened to allow entry to Palestinians displaced by the violence. Egypt has been less clear, however, about what it will actually do proactively for Palestinians.

Importantly today, Egypt is serving as a staging ground for hundreds of trucks filled with humanitarian assistance crossing into Gaza. Cairo has also hinted that it could participate in an as-yet-undefined U.S. plan for an Arab stabilization force in postwar Gaza. An Egyptian contribution to a peacekeeping contingent would be an unusually helpful gesture during what is sure to be a difficult transition period. But this is only part of what Cairo should do to support Palestinians once the war is over.

The Oct. 7 Hamas massacre of mainly Israeli civilians was a milestone in the ongoing divorce proceedings between Israel and Gaza. Although Israel formally ended its occupation of Gaza in 2005, until recently it continued to provide the territory with water, electricity, and employment. Indeed, on Oct. 6, nearly 18,500 Palestinians  [\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/16/israel-gaza-workers-family-war-hamas/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/16/israel-gaza-workers-family-war-hamas/) from Gaza were working in Israel, the second largest source of Palestinian employment after the Hamas-led government.

Regardless of whether an Israeli-Palestinian political settlement is eventually achieved, Palestinians from Gaza are unlikely to ever receive permits to work in Israel again—especially after reports  [\(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-05/ty-article/hamas-may-have-used-spy-to-scout-idf-base-before-oct-7-attack-report-says/0000018c-3980-de12-a3af-3bcdbc260000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-05/ty-article/hamas-may-have-used-spy-to-scout-idf-base-before-oct-7-attack-report-says/0000018c-3980-de12-a3af-3bcdbc260000) emerged that laborers from Gaza may have provided intelligence on kibbutzim and military facilities to Hamas in advance of the attack. In early November, it was reported that Israel's construction sector petitioned  [\(https://www.voanews.com/a/israeli-construction-sector-moves-to-replace-palestinian-employees-with-indian-workers/7338259.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/israeli-construction-sector-moves-to-replace-palestinian-employees-with-indian-workers/7338259.html) the Israeli government to allow companies to hire up to 100,000 Indians to replace Palestinian laborers from both Gaza and the West Bank. In the aftermath of the Hamas attack, Israel also suspended the sale of electricity and water to Gaza. Water supplies have resumed, but it's unclear for how long.

After the war, Israel may be reticent to continue with business as usual, preferring instead to cut all ties with the troubled strip.

This is where Egypt comes in. Egypt's anemic economy precludes the possibility of financial contributions to Palestinians in Gaza, but if underwritten by the Gulf, there is much Sisi can do to support post-Hamas Gaza—

perhaps even profiting Egypt along the way.

There is ample space in the Sinai Peninsula, for example, to build a desalination facility and power plant to serve Gaza's needs. Like Israel, Egypt could sell this electricity and water to Palestinians.

Egypt could also help Palestinian laborers by providing daily work permits. Initially, these workers could participate in the building of these utilities; later, perhaps, they could find employment in new economic zones situated in Sinai near Rafah. Washington could incentivize this initiative by establishing qualified industrial zones—like the ones created after Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan—manufacturing products with Egyptian materials assembled with Palestinian labor and sold duty-free in the United States and Europe.

Beyond this assistance, Egypt could agree to train, if asked, the Palestinian Authority security forces that Washington hopes will fill the void after Hamas is eventually vanquished. Another useful and lucrative prospect for Cairo is the opportunity for Egyptian construction companies to be at the forefront of Gaza's rebuilding.

Since the end of Egypt's occupation of Gaza in 1967, Egyptian engagement with the territory has largely been confined to political mediation and intelligence operations. The Hamas crisis presents Egypt with the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Not only can Egypt take a leading role in helping Palestinians. By playing a productive part in postwar Gaza, Sisi can also blunt criticism of himself in the U.S. Congress, including of his December reelection, a contest widely considered neither free nor fair.

While Sisi understandably wants to avoid being perceived as complicit in Palestinian dispossession, Egypt is the only Arab state bordering Gaza and can no longer reasonably absolve itself of any responsibility for its professed brethren. Sisi talks a lot about supporting Palestinians. As the war in Gaza moves toward a less intensive phase, it's time for Egypt to act.

*David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. This article was originally published [on the Foreign Policy website](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/09/gaza-egypt-hamas-israel-war-sisi-border-refugees/)*

*[\(https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/09/gaza-egypt-hamas-israel-war-sisi-border-refugees/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/09/gaza-egypt-hamas-israel-war-sisi-border-refugees/). ❖*

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