

The Gaza War Is Eroding Egypt-Israel Relations

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

May 28, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Their longstanding peace treaty may be safe, but the growing tensions threaten to unwind years of progress and distract Egypt from its most important goal—securing a ceasefire with Hamas.

On May 27, Egyptian forces posted at the Gaza border opened fire on Israeli forces operating in Rafah, reportedly (<https://x.com/DailyNewsEgypt/status/1795059419773915399>) because they were “affected by the massacre” they believed was occurring there. In the resulting exchange of fire, an Egyptian soldier was killed. While such incidents are not unprecedented, Monday’s skirmish signals a significant bilateral shift—after years of warming relations, the Gaza war has sent Egypt-Israel ties hurtling back toward their nadir.

The Good Old Days

Improved ties between the two countries trace back to 2013, when a burgeoning jihadist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula led Cairo to request assistance from Israel. Specifically, the Egyptians asked for modifications to the security annex of the 1979 peace treaty that would allow them to deploy previously prohibited troops and military equipment throughout the peninsula. The request was conveyed via the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO), the international organization established to monitor compliance with the treaty’s military aspects. Israel agreed to that and more, also providing air support and intelligence that helped Egypt contain and ultimately roll back the threat.

By providing this strategic assistance and accepting approximately 66,000 Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai—three times the number allowed in the treaty—Israel changed the dynamic of the bilateral relationship. In 2019, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi [agreed \(https://www.cbsnews.com/news/egypt-president-el-sisi-denies-ordering-massacre-in-interview-his-government-later-tried-to-block-60-minutes-2019-01-06/\)](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/egypt-president-el-sisi-denies-ordering-massacre-in-interview-his-government-later-tried-to-block-60-minutes-2019-01-06/) with a reporter who noted that the counterterrorism campaign was the “deepest and closest cooperation” Egypt had ever pursued with Israel. Relations were also bolstered by Cairo’s ostensible assistance with blockading Gaza following Hamas’s violent 2007 takeover of the territory—an arrangement that led the group to [accuse \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-)

[middle-east-34288465](#)) Egypt of “collaborating” with Israel’s so-called “siege.”

A Growing List of Bilateral Irritants

Unfortunately, the current Gaza war has undone much of this progress. Shortly after Hamas’s October 7 assault on Israel, the Egyptian government [organized \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/protests-palestinian-gaza-middle-east-int/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/middleeast/protests-palestinian-gaza-middle-east-int/index.html) nationwide protests against Israel. Then, in early November, [Sisi stated \(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4687256-egypt-sisi-labels-palestinian-displacement-gaza-%E2%80%99red-line%E2%80%99\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4687256-egypt-sisi-labels-palestinian-displacement-gaza-%E2%80%99red-line%E2%80%99) that “the relocation of Palestinians to Egypt or Jordan” constituted a “red line” for Cairo, implying that Israel would jeopardize the peace treaty if it tried to evacuate Gaza civilians across the border during its military operations.

Cross-border tunnels have been another source of growing bilateral friction. In January, Israel hinted that it would eventually take over Philadelphia Corridor—a narrow strip of land running along Gaza’s border with Egypt—in order to prevent any postwar rearming of Hamas remnants via Sinai smuggling tunnels. In response, Cairo rejected any Israeli presence in the corridor, suggesting it would constitute a breach of the peace treaty’s security obligations. One official obliquely [warned \(https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/191152/Egypt-warns-Israeli-retaking-of-Philadelphi-Corridor-would-violate-peace-treaty?lang=en-us\)](https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/191152/Egypt-warns-Israeli-retaking-of-Philadelphi-Corridor-would-violate-peace-treaty?lang=en-us) that if Israel captured the corridor, “Egypt would defend its national security and the central cause of Palestine.”

In January, another official [noted \(https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-783285\)](https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-783285) that Egypt had “destroyed over 1,500 tunnels” along the Gaza frontier over the years, rendering any further smuggling operations “impossible.” Indeed, Egyptian forces famously flooded several tunnels in 2015 to stem the prodigious flow of weapons between Sinai insurgents and Hamas. After entering Rafah earlier this month, however, Israeli forces [announced \(https://www.dailywire.com/news/idf-discovers-700-tunnel-shafts-in-rafah-including-50-that-cross-into-egypt\)](https://www.dailywire.com/news/idf-discovers-700-tunnel-shafts-in-rafah-including-50-that-cross-into-egypt) the discovery of at least fifty tunnels crossing into Egypt. No doubt, this disclosure is a source of embarrassment to Cairo. For many observers, these tunnels confirm Egypt’s complicity—whether through bribery or negligence—in the smuggling of weapons that enabled Hamas to carry out the October 7 attack.

Humanitarian assistance has become another point of contention. For months, Israel and Egypt have been blaming each other for the extensive delays in delivering aid into Gaza, and these recriminations peaked when Israel captured the Rafah border crossing on May 7. Afterward, Cairo refused to dispatch aid trucks lined up at the frontier for nearly three weeks, with one official [declaring \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israels-rafah-offensive-strains-45-years-of-peace-with-egypt-f7810620\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israels-rafah-offensive-strains-45-years-of-peace-with-egypt-f7810620), “As long as Israeli forces remain at Rafah crossing, Egypt will not send a single truck to Rafah.” According to a [senior U.S. official \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-pans-egypt-for-withholding-un-aid-for-gaza/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-pans-egypt-for-withholding-un-aid-for-gaza/), Egypt was “withholding” UN humanitarian assistance because it did not want to “be seen as complicit with Israel’s occupation of the gate.”

Last week, Cairo relented somewhat by allowing aid trucks to cross into Israel and use the Kerem Shalom crossing further south, but it continues to bar movement through the Rafah crossing, previously the main conduit for foreign aid. In other words, Egypt has chosen to express its frustration with the Rafah offensive by weaponizing humanitarian assistance to the point where some of this aid [began to rot \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/aid-trucks-expected-start-entering-gaza-through-kerem-shalom-crossing-2024-05-26/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/aid-trucks-expected-start-entering-gaza-through-kerem-shalom-crossing-2024-05-26/), yet Israel still receives the lion’s share of international blame for the humanitarian crisis.

Meanwhile, some of Cairo’s diplomatic measures during the war have added to the bilateral friction. Most prominently, [it joined \(https://www.africanews.com/2024/05/13/egypt-joins-south-africa-in-icc-case-against-israel-over-gaza-conflict/\)](https://www.africanews.com/2024/05/13/egypt-joins-south-africa-in-icc-case-against-israel-over-gaza-conflict/) South Africa’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, accusing its

longtime peace partner of perpetrating “genocide” against the Palestinians.

Making matters worse was the [revelation \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/21/politics/sources-say-they-were-duped-by-egypt-changing-ceasefire-terms-for-hamas/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/21/politics/sources-say-they-were-duped-by-egypt-changing-ceasefire-terms-for-hamas/index.html) that an Egyptian intelligence official changed the Israeli-approved terms of a Gaza ceasefire proposal when presenting it to Hamas earlier this month. Whether intentional or due to incompetence, the change scuttled an opportunity to defer the Rafah offensive and at least temporarily halt the war, while also undermining Israeli confidence in Egypt’s mediation. Cairo denied the story, but the damage was done.

Policy Recommendations

As the Gaza war approaches its ninth month, the friction between Jerusalem and Cairo is seemingly coming to a head. In early May, as the Egyptian-mediated negotiations with Hamas were collapsing, CIA director William Burns [reportedly \(https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-1098090\)](https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-1098090) told Israel that if Rafah operations continued, Egypt “would annul the Camp David Accords.” Other reports [quoted \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israels-rafah-offensive-strains-45-years-of-peace-with-egypt-f7810620\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israels-rafah-offensive-strains-45-years-of-peace-with-egypt-f7810620) Egyptian officials stating that Cairo had considered withdrawing its ambassador.

Although talk of the demise of the forty-five-year-old peace agreement is premature, this week’s exchange of fire and the general deterioration in relations are cause for concern. Both countries continue to benefit greatly from the 1979 treaty—the Israeli military has not had to mass forces along the border with its former enemy in decades, while Egypt has enjoyed long-term engagement and funding from the United States in large part due to the treaty and resultant Israeli advocacy for its peace partner. Yet popular sentiment still matters in authoritarian Egypt, and the public is highly sympathetic toward Palestinians and widely negative toward Israel. Sisi is already under pressure at home for presiding over an anemic economy and selling [vast swaths \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/imf-and-uae-swoop-ease-egypts-economic-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/imf-and-uae-swoop-ease-egypts-economic-crisis) of public land to foreign countries, so he may see downgrading ties with Israel as a convenient safety valve to deflect domestic criticism.

In all likelihood, the 1979 treaty will survive the Gaza war regardless of these troubling developments. Yet Washington should still do what it can in the meantime to limit the damage to Egypt-Israel relations and prevent tensions from escalating any further. In the immediate term, this means urging Egypt to maintain better discipline among its security forces. Once the war is over and ties between Cairo and Jerusalem are on better footing, U.S. officials should encourage Israel to start working with the MFO and Egypt on reverting to the treaty’s original prescriptions for military deployments in the Sinai. During difficult times like these, a mandated separation of forces is wise to ensure the peace—and peace of mind.

Perhaps most important, the Biden administration should urge Cairo to channel its frustrations with Israel into more productive diplomacy instead of aid freezes, court cases, and public recriminations. With Qatar’s latest mediation stalled, Egypt has a unique opportunity among Arab states to play a constructive diplomatic role in reaching a long-delayed ceasefire, freeing the hostages, and helping to shape the “day after” in Gaza.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. Previously, he served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs from 2019 to 2021. ❖



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Here's the Real Problem with the U.N.'s Revised Gaza Death Toll](#)

May 24, 2024



Gabriel Epstein

[\(/policy-analysis/heres-real-problem-uns-revised-gaza-death-toll\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The PMF Represents Iraq at the Axis of Resistance Conference in Tehran](#)

May 24, 2024



Hamdi Malik,
Michael Knights

[\(/policy-analysis/pmf-represents-iraq-axis-resistance-conference-tehran\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[“Moderate” Hamas Statements Are an Old Ploy](#)

May 23, 2024



Neomi Neumann,
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/moderate-hamas-statements-are-old-ploy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-
analysis/egypt)

Israel (/policy-
analysis/israel)