

Egypt, Hamas, and Opportunities for Reconciliation

by [Ramy Aziz \(/experts/ramy-aziz\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ramy Aziz \(/experts/ramy-aziz\)](#)

Dr. Ramy Aziz is a researcher and analyst for the Middle East and international affairs. He is a research fellow at The Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy (ISGAP).



Brief Analysis

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In a statement issued in early March in by the headquarters of State Security in the Cairo suburb of Nasr City, Egyptian Ministry of Interior General Magdy Abdel Ghaffar announced that Hamas was responsible for the June 2015 assassination of Egyptian Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat. Abdel Ghaffar stated that, “The assassination of Barakat was part of a major conspiracy implemented under orders from the Muslim Brotherhood leadership residing in Turkey and in coordination with the other armed branch of the group, Gaza’s Hamas. Hamas played a major role in the conspiracy, extending from the very start through final execution.”

Yet Egyptian media reported that a Hamas delegation—led by Mahmoud Al-Zahar, Mousa Abu Marzook, and Khalil Al-Hayya—visited Cairo at the invitation of the General Intelligence Directorate to discuss a number of matters under dispute.. Hamas spokesperson Salah Al-Bardawil stated that the organization of this meeting was coordinated with Khaled Meshaal, head of Hamas’ Political Bureau, and Khaled Fawzi, head of Egypt’s General Intelligence Directorate. The meeting is the latest in Hamas’ recent efforts to visit regional state capitals—Riyadh, Doha, Tehran, and Ankara-- in a bid to fix its poor image in the region,. Hamas new interest in Egypt makes sense; it shares a direct border with Gaza and could directly impact the Gaza Strip. Hamas also recently engaged in activities that had a significant negative impact on Egyptian national security.

Before the meeting, both parties attempted to pressue the other to gain leverage during the negotiations. Hamas flirted with Tehran, permitting Iran to begin operating within the Gaza Strip, a move that proved worrisome for Egypt. Hamas had previously attempted to exploit the rapprochement between Turkey and Israel by pushing the former to convince Israel to build a port in the Gaza Strip and allow Turks to reside and work in the area. These negotiations drew concern from both Egypt and the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. Egypt rushed to capitalize on its past cooperation with Israel to express its concern over Turkish involvement in Gaza and its strong opposition to a port, which it presented as a direct threat to Egyptian national security, suggesting that the port would be used to smuggle weapons to support jihadist groups leading the insurgency in the Sinai.

Under the leadership of King Salman, Saudi Arabia recently removed the Muslim Brotherhood from the country’s list of terrorist organizations, and Hamas has also attempted to exploit Saudi Arabia’s recent shift in foreign policy—typified by its declassification of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization—by presenting itself as a part of

the Sunni alliance led by Saudi Arabia designed to confront rising Iranian interests in the region. Egypt quickly responded; its army launched a major crackdown on tunnels connecting the Sinai and the Gaza Strip that destroyed a large portion of the passageways. In September 2015, the Egyptian Army's Engineering Corps pumped water from the Mediterranean into channels on the Sinai-Gaza border, causing several more tunnels to collapse.

Furthermore, an Egyptian court announced in February 2015 that Hamas was a terrorist organization, forming yet another source of pressure on the group. Although the court removed Hamas from the list after a few months, the courts are currently examining a case to reverse that decision. A January 2015 condemning Hamas' armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, as a terrorist organization remains in effect.

During the meeting, the Hamas delegation and Egypt's intelligence services both presented a diverse list of demands. The Egyptians demanded that Hamas cut its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, a terrorist group under Egyptian law, and remove all pictures bearing images of either Mohamed Morsi or the Brotherhood's slogan. Egypt also asked that Hamas attempt to control the border between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula and sever ties with terrorist groups leading the insurgency against the state in the Peninsula. Moreover, they requested that fugitives who have fled from Egypt to the Gaza Strip and Hamas members with proven involvement in damaging Egyptian national security be extradited to Egypt.

On the other side, Hamas demanded that the Rafah crossing—closed since 2007—be opened and goods and materials that help sustain normalcy within the Strip be permitted to pass, especially after Hamas recently lost a considerable number of its tunnels. Hamas questioned the fate of four Hamas members who disappeared after crossing into Egypt last September and accused Egyptian authorities of being behind their disappearance. and requested that Egypt supply the Gaza strip with diesel fuel and petroleum products required to generate electricity.

Although announcements of the meeting did not present a timeline or details of any agreement, media discourse associated with both parties has shifted, suggesting a type of truce. For example, during his popular program *Al-Ashara Masa'an* ("Ten PM"), TV presenter and journalist Wael Al-Ibrashi has argued that Egypt should stop attacking Hamas as long as they refrain from intervening in Egyptian internal affairs and respect the country's national security. Hamas representatives have issued a deluge of statements positive toward Egypt in marked contrast to Hamas' previously expressed views. Hossam Badran, a Hamas spokesperson currently residing in Qatar, said that "We are proud that we belong to the same ideological school of this group [The Brotherhood] but we are a Palestinian liberation movement and our decisions are exclusively made within our Shura and leadership institutions. This is understood by all parties, including Egypt." On March 20, the Izz el-Deen al-Qassam Brigades placed a large sign at the Al Saraya intersection in the densely populated downtown Gaza City where Qassam Brigades used to hang Muslim Brotherhood slogans, that stated "Resistance does not point its weapons abroad."

In further confirmation of Hamas' separation from the Brotherhood, Palestine's *Al-Quds* newspaper reported on March 20 that Hamas had recently ordered its members and leaders not to repeat Muslim Brotherhood slogans at rallies or print the Brotherhood's logo – a Quran and two swords – on any materials pertaining to Hamas activity, a move that was welcomed in the Egyptian media.

While public rhetoric between the two parties has softened, a long and bumpy road still lies ahead. Reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas and the formation of a unity government will be an extremely difficult process, despite the recently signed Doha Declaration. The Declaration stipulated the formation of a national unity government and legislative elections within six months, but failed to outline mechanisms to ensure the implementation and maintenance of the agreement's stipulations.

Nevertheless, this may encourage broader regional reconciliation. The statement made by Abu Obeida—Spokesman for the Qassam Brigades—regarding the fate of Israeli soldiers and civilians kidnapped in the Gaza Strip in 2014

granted credibility to the idea that Hamas would seek out reconciliation and open a new page in relations with Egypt, especially since most media sources confirm that Egypt has played a pioneering role in encouraging reconciliation in the region as the principle mediator between Israel and Hamas throughout various peace negotiations.

This is, of course, reliant on Egypt reconciling its own internal contradictions. It is important to note that it is not certain that all of Sisi's agencies hope to reconcile with Hamas. Even as the General Intelligence Directorate hosted Hamas in Egypt, the Interior Minister announced that Hamas was responsible for the assassination of Egypt's Prosecutor General.

Ramy Aziz is an Egyptian journalist based in Europe. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=9251&lang=en#.VxusJvkrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9251&lang=en#.VxusJvkrLIU). ❖

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