

# Sisi's Egypt and the Gaza Conflict

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

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## Washington should not be nostalgic for the days when a Muslim Brotherhood government had greater sway in Gaza City.

**T**he ongoing Hamas-Israel conflagration reveals an important paradox in the new Egyptian regime's foreign policy outlook and capabilities. Recently inaugurated president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi shares Washington and Israel's view of Hamas as both a terrorist organization and a strategic threat, and he is consequently both less able and less willing to fulfill Egypt's traditional role of mediating between Hamas and Israel. While Washington is rightly eager to negotiate a swift end to the current round of fighting in Gaza, it should avoid the temptation to press Egypt to make any concessions that would enhance Hamas's rearming capabilities, such as reopening the Rafah crossing without a reliable system for preventing the flow of weapons and terrorists.

Sisi's negative view of Hamas represents a dramatic -- and welcome -- shift from his immediate predecessor, Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader. Prior to his June 2012 election, Morsi served as Hamas's point of contact within the Brotherhood's Guidance Office, and Morsi later hosted top-ranking Hamas leaders in the presidential palace and permitted Hamas deputy Mousa Abu Marzouk, a longtime personal friend, to reside in a Cairo suburb. By contrast, Sisi's regime has ordered Marzouk to leave Egypt and undertaken an aggressive military campaign to shut down the vast majority of the underground tunnels from Sinai to Gaza through which Hamas and other groups frequently smuggle weapons. During periods of calm, Sisi has thus contributed to Western efforts to confine Hamas.

Yet Sisi's sour relations with Hamas complicate Washington's efforts to end the latest round of Hamas-Israel fighting. Unlike his predecessors, Sisi has been unable to influence Hamas toward negotiations, as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces did during the 2011 deal that released Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and as the Morsi government did during the 2012 Gaza ceasefire. Indeed, at U.S. officials' request, the Sisi regime has engaged Hamas with a proposal under which Israel would release recently captured prisoners and expand the fishing area off the coast of Gaza, while Egypt would permit building materials to enter Gaza. Hamas has rejected this overture, and

Cairo appears unwilling to make any concession -- such as the permanent opening of the Rafah crossing -- that might enhance its leverage with Hamas. An Israeli ground invasion might force Sisi to change his approach, however, because high Palestinian casualties would make Sisi's continued isolation of Hamas politically costly, given the Egyptian public's pro-Palestinian sympathies.

This tension between Sisi's disdain for Hamas, on one hand, and his need to cater to Egyptian public opinion, on the other, has been evident in the wide gap between Egypt's policy and its pronouncements. While the Rafah crossing remains mostly closed, with only temporary openings in recent days to permit the entry of aid and outflow of wounded Gazans, Egyptian officials have publicly lambasted Israel's airstrikes. On Friday, Egypt's Foreign Ministry spokesman declared that Cairo stood "with the Palestinian people, who pay the price for the hazards and brutal attacks," and accused Israel of "flouting the rules of international law." Meanwhile, the Sisi government attempted to calm rising anger regarding the president's stance on Gaza by sending five hundred tons of food and medical supplies to Gaza in military vehicles.

This two-faced policy toward Gaza thus resembles that of the Mubarak era, but with a significantly diminished diplomatic role for Egypt during moments of crisis. While this leaves Washington without a reliable diplomatic mechanism for resolving the current Hamas-Israel fighting, in the longer term -- and during periods of lighter media attention -- Washington can count on Sisi as a partner in isolating Hamas.

Indeed, Washington shouldn't be nostalgic for the days when a Muslim Brotherhood government had greater sway in Gaza City. Despite his cooperation in negotiating the 2012 ceasefire, Morsi's strong pro-Hamas sympathies meant that every episode of Hamas-Israel fighting carried the risk of a regional crisis. That is not the case during the current conflagration.

*Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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