

Hamas Should Not Romanticize Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Rule

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Jul 24, 2013

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Articles & Testimony

From media conspiracy theories to flooded smuggling tunnels, the Brotherhood's failed tenure in Egypt held nothing but bad news for Hamas.

Imagine being in the Gaza office of Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, as he gathers advisors to discuss the new situation in Egypt.

Haniyeh could ask a theological question about how the Muslim Brotherhood could fall from office. However, after this, it might be worth asking other questions. What went wrong and how did this happen? More importantly, what are the lessons that should be drawn from this saga?

Morsi's failure in Egypt is extremely significant for Hamas, a movement which sees itself as the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. After all, there was jubilation in Gaza when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. A senior Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzouk relocated to Cairo early last year amid expectations of the Muslim Brotherhood surge. While fellow Islamists are bound to romanticize the period that their sister party headed the biggest Arab state, and this period will inevitably be stamped into historic lore, in fact, any assessment must begin with the fact that for Hamas there is little to romanticize.

Of course, Hamas likes to blame foreign conspiracies for all of its problems. Yet, Egyptians blame the US for being too supportive of the Brotherhood over this last year, rather than too antagonistic. The US provided Egypt with military aid and avoided criticizing the Brotherhood government, even as it became increasingly authoritarian. Moreover, the US enacted no foreign sanctions on the Brotherhood, like it has on the Iranian nuclear program. So this, too, cannot be considered seriously.

However, by any yardstick, the Brotherhood presided over a rapid economic decline. Before Hosni Mubarak fell, Egypt held \$36 billion in foreign currency reserves. Now, the figure is more like \$16 billion. Tourism came to a sudden halt, as did foreign investment. Gas lines and electricity shortages became legendary. Having waited for this

moment in Egypt for eighty years, the Muslim Brotherhood government's catastrophic economic mismanagement raises questions about whether Islamists will now be viewed as incompetent to govern.

Second, while the Muslim Brotherhood often allowed ideological or partisan concerns to take precedence over the national interests, when it came to Israel, the Brotherhood's record was mixed. On one hand, while Egyptian President Morsi refused to talk to Israelis or authorize his own policy advisors to do so, his approach was less than full-throated. Yet, Morsi did not terminate the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, nor did he submit it to the Egyptian public for a public referendum for revisions. While the Brotherhood may have dreamed of a future realignment, in practice, this was not the case.

The Brotherhood did not become the political home that Hamas might have hoped for. Abu Marzouk would publicly admit that Egypt has not given permission for Hamas to open an office in Cairo. Moreover, when fighting flared up between Hamas and Israel in November, Egypt did not enlist on the side of Hamas. Instead, Egypt used existing intelligence channels to work together with Israel and find a way to a cease-fire. Just a few months earlier, Haniyeh himself had said Israel would not dare strike Gaza with the Muslim Brotherhood in power. Haniyeh declared at a Gaza mosque in July 2012, "We are confident that Egypt, the revolution led by Morsi, will never provide cover for any new aggression or war on Gaza," he said. "We are confident that Egypt, the revolution led by Morsi, will not take any part in blocking Gaza," Haniyeh added.

Yet in fact, in the wake of November's hostilities, Egypt intercepted more weapons destined for Hamas in Gaza and closed up tunnels between the northern Sinai and Gaza. (Now, there are reports that the Egyptian military's motivation to close tunnels has increased amid fear that Hamas may use tunnels to funnel weapons to the Brotherhood. There are no one-way tunnels.)

Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood was unsuccessful in brokering a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah, despite Egyptian officials prioritizing this issue. In fact, when a senior Hamas delegation visited Cairo just last month, it was met with hundreds demonstrating with placards calling them "terrorists" and calling for their expulsion. Yet, with all the bloodshed of Sunnis in Syria, Hamas cannot return to its office in Damascus anymore.

If this is not enough, the early indications of the first few weeks since the Egyptian military intervention suggest Hamas is becoming more isolated in terms of Egyptian public opinion. There are even untrue stories in the Egyptian press insinuating that Hamas and Morsi conspired to kill Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai. The fact that these untrue stories were published at all is a barometer of Hamas's deep unpopularity in Egypt today. Furthermore, there are accounts that the Egyptian military is not just flooding Gaza tunnels for temporary impact, but exploding them as well.

Finally, the timing of Secretary John Kerry saying there is a "basis" for resumption of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority led by President Mahmoud Abbas cannot be coincidental, even if expectations for the talks remain very modest. This occurred despite Haniyeh's public objection this week.

Of course, Hamas may attempt to re-engage in terror to sabotage the talks. Yet, is this really in its interest or will this just deepen its isolation at this time? Moreover, does Hamas really want to depend solely on its financial supporter Qatar that is undergoing its own leadership transition? Apart from accepting international requirements which are known to Hamas and everyone else, if Hamas would even accept the Arab Peace Initiative at a time that Israelis and Palestinians are planning to return to the negotiating table, this would move Hamas closer to Saudi Arabia.

When all this is taken together -- no broken peace treaty, Egypt's interception of weapons, no Palestinian reconciliation, deepening isolation in Egypt and Abbas's return to the peace table over Hamas's objections -- Hamas and Haniyeh should reassess its ideology, its strategy, its approach towards peace and its relationship with Egypt.

Hamas needs to look forward and back at the same time. It should not romanticize this past year. There was never a

"dream-team" combination of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas capable of delivering a serious -- let alone mortal -- blow to Israel. Hamas should learn the lesson that its own rejectionist ideology is a liability to the organization itself, even in ideal times when it had a friend in power in Cairo. It needs to rethink its policies and not just realign tactics. One should certainly not bet on Hamas making any such reassessment of its ideology based on the failed experiments of the last year. Such soul-searching is probably too painful for Hamas, but it does not make reassessment any less necessary.

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