

# How To Defuse the Israel-Gaza Conflict: Cairo's Crucial Role

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Nov 20, 2012

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**The New York Times convened an online panel of five Middle East experts to discuss diplomatic efforts to end the deadly confrontation between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza. The following contribution was made by Washington Institute Ziegler distinguished fellow David Makovsky, director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process.**

**A**s Secretary of State *Hillary Clinton* begins her Middle East visit today, she will undoubtedly discover that cease-fires do not come in only one shape or size.

It seems likely that the parties now will favor a "less for less" approach. As it is just two months before his own re-election, Benjamin Netanyahu could herald Israel's successful elimination of Hamas operations chief Ahmed Jabari as well as Israeli success in targeting all known long-range Fajr-5 rockets.

For its part, Hamas will herald the fact that its rockets achieved farther range than ever before, reaching into both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Finally, as the broker of any deal, Egyptian leader Mohammad Morsi will enjoy some short-term plaudits before his upcoming maiden voyage to Washington. With everyone wondering about the direction of the new Egyptian government, Morsi can promote his part in the cease-fire negotiations to show Americans that he is part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Notwithstanding the short-term gains a limited cease-fire brings to the parties, a "more for more" cease-fire would be intriguing. Since those negotiations are invariably protracted, it is probably only attainable as a "stage two."

However, being on the ground with Israelis and Palestinians during this crisis has reinforced my belief that a broader cease-fire may have better chance not to be violated. But this requires each side to do more.

For Egypt, "more" means undercutting the prospect of Gaza violence reoccurring in the future. The main step would

involve the shutting down of a network of tunnels from Sinai into Gaza, where rockets are smuggled. Their sustained actions is the one thing that could enforce the deal. So long as Egypt does not act, Israel is likely to believe the cease-fire is temporary as the stockpiles will be replenished.

Egypt has leverage with Hamas. The Egyptian president was successful this past summer when 16 Egyptian soldiers were killed by jihadi forces in the northern Sinai, and Morsi demanded that Hamas shut down its smuggling network of tunnels. The Gaza group sees its future linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

Furthermore, Cairo itself could enable regular political contacts with Israel apart from the existing intelligence channel. This is the first time since their bilateral peace treaty of 1979 that there have been absolutely no high-level political contacts between Egypt and Israel.

For its part in the cease-fire, Hamas will undoubtedly ask Cairo to open up the Rafah crossing point between Egypt and Gaza. Egypt has been wary of this -- not wanting more Palestinians or Palestinian goods in Egypt, and worrying that it will lead to a certain blurring of functions whereby Egypt will somehow be sucked into the Gaza vortex. Yet, the opening would also allow Egypt more leverage over Hamas, giving Hamas something to lose.

As part of a wider deal, Israel will want to know if Hamas has been successful in acting against jihadi groups that can inflame the region at will by firing rockets at Israeli cities. However, in return, Hamas may be well positioned to extract economic and other concessions from Israel to ease various restrictions on Gaza.

Of course, even a broader cease-fire is not an enduring solution since there is no three state solution. Without a wider peace effort involving Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, a cease-fire has its limitations.

Taken together, a less for less approach might be more politically feasible. However, either now or later, the U.S. will find a broader cease-fire has at least the potential of avoiding further rounds of violence. ❖

*New York Times*

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