

The Gaza Invasion: Will It Destroy Israel's Relationship with Egypt?

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In deciding what to do about Israel, the new Egyptian president is torn between the security establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The fact that Israel endured over 800 rocket attacks from Gaza in the past year before commencing yesterday's military operation against Hamas suggests that Jerusalem hoped to avoid the current flare-up. Among other concerns, the Israeli government knew that another Gaza war would ignite the neighboring Egyptian "street," and since Egypt's post-revolutionary government would have to be more responsive to popular sentiments, a downgrade in Israeli-Egyptian relations would be likely. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood -- Hamas' Egyptian cousin -- as Egypt's new ruling party exacerbated those qualms, given the Brotherhood's longtime opposition to the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and refusal to acknowledge Israel's rightful existence.

It was therefore unsurprising that Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, a former Brotherhood leader, conceded to popular outrage in the wake of "Operation Pillar of Cloud" this week by recalling Egypt's ambassador to Israel. Yet in the grand scheme of diplomatic gestures, this was, in fact, a relatively minor move. Indeed, former President Hosni Mubarak did exactly the same thing in November 2000 when Egyptian demonstrations against Israel mounted during the second intifada. The real question, therefore, is what Morsi does next: will he stop at simply recalling his ambassador, or will use the fighting in Gaza to justify a more severe approach towards Israel?

At the moment, Morsi is seemingly being pulled in two directions. On one hand, Egypt's diplomatic and security establishments are urging calm. In this vein, Foreign Minister Mohamed Amr issued a bland statement calling on Israel to stop the fighting, and has taken the matter to the Arab League, which, in addition to being feckless, won't discuss the fighting in Gaza until Saturday.

Meanwhile, during the three days leading up to Wednesday's conflagration, Egypt's intelligence services had been working to prevent Israel-Hamas escalation, and they are now hoping that the current episode will pass speedily

before Egyptian-Israeli relations are truly endangered. "Whatever happened happened," a high-ranking intelligence official told me yesterday when I asked whether a prolonged Gaza conflict would lead Morsi to intensify his response. "We must look to the future without any blood or escalation."

Yet the Muslim Brotherhood is pulling Morsi in a very different direction. In the wake of Wednesday's fighting, the Brotherhood called on Morsi to "sever diplomatic and trade relations with this usurper entity," so that the Egyptian government can "begin to be a role model for Arabs and Muslims who keep relations with this entity." The Brotherhood will also organize mass protests against Israel on Friday, and prominent Brotherhood leaders have insisted that post-revolutionary Egypt be more supportive of the Palestinians. "The Egyptian people revolted against injustice and will not accept the attack on Gaza," tweeted Brotherhood political party chairman Saad al-Katatny.

During the first four-plus months of his presidency, Morsi has mostly embraced the more pragmatic approach endorsed by Egypt's security and diplomatic professionals. This is partially due to Morsi's stubborn refusal to deal with Israelis (not to mention his refusal to even utter the word "Israel" in official statements), which has forced him to delegate responsibility for his Israel policy to these bureaucratic institutions that are disinclined from confrontation with Israel. But it is also due to the Muslim Brotherhood's belief that it must complete its project of Islamizing Egypt before it can pursue its regional ambitions. Indeed, as Mohamed Sudan, secretary for foreign relations of the Brotherhood's political party, said earlier this week, Morsi is pursuing the right path towards Israel because he is "cancelling normalization with the Zionist entity gradually."

Still, there are indications that Morsi may choose a more confrontational posture sooner rather than later. On Tuesday, the Brotherhood's political party announced that its legal committee was working on a new draft law to unilaterally amend Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. Meanwhile, prominent Muslim Brothers have made hostile gestures towards Israel in recent months, including the Supreme Guide's call for a "holy jihad" for Jerusalem, as well as Morsi's answering "amen" to an imam who prayed for the destruction of Jews.

Morsi has also demonstrated that he knows how to use a crisis to advance the Brotherhood's political agenda. He responded to August terrorist attacks in Sinai by quickly firing the military chiefs who posed the greatest threat to the Brotherhood's rule. Similarly, he may use the current flare-up to accelerate the Brotherhood's pursuit of its anti-Israel ambitions. Whether or not Morsi uses the current fighting in Gaza to break off Israeli-Egyptian relations entirely now, it is clear that this remains the Muslim Brotherhood's ultimate ambition.

This is where Washington comes in. While the Obama administration cannot change the long-held aims of an insular, extreme movement like the Muslim Brotherhood, it must work to prevent the Brotherhood from pursuing those aims anytime soon. The administration can begin by telling Morsi very clearly that while he is free to disagree with the United States on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he cannot disagree on the importance of maintaining Egypt-Israeli relations, which have served to prevent war between two of the region's strongest militaries for the past three-plus decades.

Moreover, the administration should use economic aid, as well as American support for the \$4.8 billion IMF loan that Egypt is pursuing, as leverage for ensuring that Morsi stays within well-defined red lines. After all, this aid is not charity -- it is an investment in a relationship with an Egypt that is at peace with its neighbors. And an Egypt that uses another round of Israeli-Palestinian fighting as an excuse for breaking its international commitments, as the Brotherhood would like Morsi to do, is a very bad investment.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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