

# Egypt's New Role

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**W**hile the world remains riveted on Iraq, Egypt has signaled a new -- even unprecedented -- readiness to play an intensive leading role in ending the Israeli-Palestinian war. In Egyptian eyes, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's intention to withdraw from the Gaza Strip has created an opening, and Egypt is determined to act on it. Having just returned from the Middle East, I am convinced that the Egyptian decision is sincere and quite firm. But can the Egyptians do everything on their own, and do they fully appreciate what they are getting into?

No doubt their motivation to act is not just a sense of opportunity but also a perception of possible dangers. The last thing Egypt wants is to have Gaza, sitting as it does on Egypt's border, devolve into chaos or become dominated by Hamas. Stability in Egypt, always the preoccupation of President Hosni Mubarak, will not be served by either possibility. Hence, Egypt seems very aware of the consequences of inaction as Israel withdraws from Gaza.

Ironically, Sharon's decision to leave Gaza has led Egypt to assume the role previously played by the United States. It is now Egypt that seeks to coordinate Israel's withdrawal and the parallel assumption of responsibilities by the Palestinian Authority. It is Egypt that seeks to address Israeli security concerns to ensure that the withdrawal will be complete. And it is Egypt that is trying to reorganize, restructure and train Palestinian security forces, and empower the Palestinian prime minister.

Can Egypt succeed? It won't be easy. It will have to overcome difficulties with both Israelis and Palestinians. In Israel, Ariel Sharon may have made his decision, but he cannot ignore the concerns of his military, particularly when his own party is resisting the withdrawal. Even before the first-ever killing of Israelis by a Qassam rocket in the Negev city of Sderot on Monday, the Israeli military worried about the smuggling of qualitatively more destructive weapons (Katyusha rockets, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles) into Gaza once Israel withdraws. For that reason, the Israeli Defense Forces have favored holding on to the Philadelphi route, a thin strip of land between Gaza and Egypt, notwithstanding the prime minister's desire to withdraw completely. If Egypt wants the Israeli withdrawal to be complete, it will have to demonstrate to the Israeli military that it is acting to shut down the smuggling tunnels that run from its side of the border into Gaza. So far, the Israeli military leaders I spoke with remain unconvinced.

But the challenge with the Palestinians may be even more daunting. Today the Palestinian Authority in Gaza does not function on security matters. There are different security organizations, tied to different factions of Fatah, and with different strongmen. Moreover, these competing forces must also contend with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Egypt

wants to create coherence by having Yasser Arafat permit consolidation of the security organizations into three services that have a professional chain of command and are separated from Fatah. Egypt wants the leaders of the new consolidated security services to come to Egypt to reach understandings on their responsibilities, how they will be fulfilled and how Egypt will monitor their performance while also providing them support. Only after reaching such understandings would the Egyptians send about 150 advisers to work with and monitor the new security services in Gaza.

It is a logical plan. While it has the backing of the Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qureia, Arafat has given only grudging support -- and even this under pressure from Mubarak and his intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman. Arafat's yes to Suleiman almost certainly means "no" at this point, particularly because the chairman will never willingly surrender control over the security forces and is also loath to let anyone else appear to be the liberator of Gaza.

Does this mean all is lost? Not necessarily, but it will require constant pressure on Arafat from Mubarak, including the threat of going public about Arafat's obstructionism. Arafat may have little to fear from our criticism, but should the traditional friends of the Palestinian people declare that he is blocking efforts to advance the Palestinian cause, it could have a decidedly different impact on the chairman.

In private, Mubarak and other Arab leaders have often been very critical of Arafat. But they have never been willing to make the same statements in public, perhaps fearing Arafat's ability to manipulate their publics over a betrayal of the Palestinians. Egypt's stake in what happens in Gaza may change that traditional calculus. It could make it possible for Egypt to broker understandings between the Israelis and Palestinians on the timing of the steps the Israelis will take as they prepare for withdrawal, the steps the Palestinians must take in response, the ways the handover of territory will be coordinated, and the specific areas where the Israeli Defense Forces and Palestinian security services will work together.

It's hard to believe that such coordination can work out if there is not a cease-fire -- a real cease-fire. Unquestionably, the Egyptians will also try to produce that. But all this is a tall order, and the Egyptians are unlikely to succeed without active U.S. support. Already the Egyptian timetable of two months for Arafat to concede on the consolidation of Palestinian security forces suggests to some Palestinians and Israelis that the Egyptians are reluctant to push too hard when they believe the U.S. administration is otherwise occupied.

Middle East moments have a way of appearing and disappearing quickly. The time to prepare for the Gaza withdrawal is now. We had better reinforce the Egyptian effort soon lest it too slip away.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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