

Egypt-Israel-Palestine: the geometry of a relationship after the Arab Spring

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Co- financed by Greece and the European Union

The beauty in the simplicity of the “no war without Egypt, no peace without Syria” dictum has lent it an axiomatic importance among the scholars of the Middle Eastern affairs. However, while Kissinger’s apothegm, for decades, was used to discuss Syria’s role as a spoiler in the Arab-Israeli or Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the newly created uncertainties regarding Cairo’s internal dynamics, formal and informal policies vis-à-vis Israel and the various Palestinian constituencies have brought Egypt back in the headlines. For 30 years the peace treaty signed by Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin has spared Israel from problems stemming from its south-western borders, providing Tel Aviv with a secure rear while facing challenges from Syria and Lebanon and the Palestinian groups from inside and outside Palestine. When Hamas took over Gaza, the importance of Egyptian non-hostility became increasingly important as Cairo in fact collaborated with Israel in the latter’s effort to put pressure on Hamas in military, economic and political terms.

Nevertheless, while changes in Egypt are taking shape, under the shadow of the institutional duel between Mursi and SCAF, their repercussions are felt along the sides of the Egypt-Israel-Palestine triangle. From the one side of the triangle, the long predictable relations on the bilateral level (Egypt-Israel) have attracted an often exaggerated interest. Heated arguments and incessant speculations occur around minor issues such as Mursi’s real or alleged letters to Shimon Peres.¹ The Muslim Brotherhood’s moves and statements are subjected to close scrutiny while the movement sails through newfound foreign policy challenges. The part of the Brotherhood that are not related to the FJP party, such as Brotherhood’s Supreme Guide Muhammad Badie², are allowed and entrusted with anti-Israel rhetoric to accommodate the public feeling. Even in this case the Brotherhood tries to discretely abstain from practical manifestation of this rhetoric.³ Mursi and his government, on

¹ The first instance of letter frenzy happened in late July 2012 when a letter attributed to Mursi was made public. In the letter Mursi allegedly said that he is “*looking forward to exerting our best efforts to get the Middle East Peace Process back to its right track in order to achieve security and stability for all peoples of the region, including that [of] Israeli people.*” In this case the government vehemently denied its authenticity. “Confusion over ‘fake’ Egyptian letter to Israel”, *Guardian*, (1/8/2012), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/01/israel-egypt-letter-mixup>. However, that was not exactly the case on the next letter on the occasion of the presentation of Egypt’s new ambassador to Tel Aviv credentials. In the letter Mursi is referring to Shimon Peres and Israel as a “great and good friend”. Mursi spokesman confirmed its authenticity but hastily added that he was simply following the protocol. “Mursi spokesman confirms “great friend” letter to Israel’s Peres”, *al-akhbar*, (19/10/2012), <https://english.al-akhbar.com/content/mursi-spokesman-confirms-great-friend-letter-israels-peres>

² “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood chief urges Jihad for Jerusalem”, *al-Arabiya*, (11/10/2012), <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/10/11/243221.html>

³ A highly indicative example is the anti-Israel protests and the Israeli embassy siege in August 2011 in response to the murder of Egyptian soldiers by Israeli forces after a hot-pursuit of militants. The movement tacitly supported but didn’t participate officially in the protests. Abou-El-Fadl, Reem, “The Road to Jerusalem through Tahrir Square: Anti-Zionism and Palestine in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Winter 2012), p. 19

the other hand, who are responsible for the day to day handling of the array of issues that affect the Egypt-Israel relations, refrain from overt anti-Israel rhetoric. Although often cited as a core issue, the abidance to the 1979 peace treaty is the least problematic issue in practical terms. Mursi has reiterated on several occasions his willingness to respect the treaty and in the foreseeable future he has no reason not to do so, especially since US help is dependent on a façade of friendly relations.

Israel is equally willing to maintain a cold peace status quo with Egypt. After the initial frenzy in the Israeli right wing press where Mubarak's eulogies were followed by alarmism regarding the Islamist threat⁴, Israel is settling on a dual track policy vis-à-vis Egypt. In this context Tel Aviv tries to keep an operational relation with Egypt by maintaining diplomatic calm and downplaying less serious issues. Two examples are of particular interest. First, Israel retained an unusual conciliatory stance after the death of Egyptian soldiers from Israeli fire in August 2011, especially if seen in comparison to the stance towards Turkey after the flotilla incident. The second example is Tel Aviv's reaction to the April 2012 revocation on Cairo's part of the natural gas agreement after the pipeline had been repeatedly sabotaged by militants. Benjamin Netanyahu preferred to strip this Egyptian move of any political meaning describing it as a simple "business dispute".

However, at the same time Israel regards Egypt under a fortress mentality prism that has taken over Israel's foreign policy since the early 2000s, when the "land for peace" principle was replaced by "Israel versus everybody" perception. In this sense Egypt is seen as a new front of crisis management, where Israel has to safeguard the best possible position. An Israeli defense official in the midst of the 2011 uprising said that *"If a hostile regime takes over in Egypt, the IDF will need to restructure itself and would be pushed to the limit in its ability to deploy adequate resources on the various fronts"*⁵. Since this hostile regime is in power now, Israel prefers to take its own measures to protect itself, while avoiding overextension, rather than wait progress from its neighbor. In this sense Israel has accelerated the construction of the barrier on the 240 km Egypt-Israel border. The plan for the barrier had been left on the shelf for many years and only after the cross-border attacks was it put to work. The barrier is now constructed at a tremendous pace (a little less than 1km per

⁴ Eitan Haber, for example, writes "It is very possible that Hosni Mubarak was not an ideal leader... [Yet] Mubarak and his regime were apparently the last obstacle in our conflicted world in the face of the Islamist tsunami, a predator that is already devouring some European states and turning the world into an increasingly less comfortable place to live." Haber, Eitan, "My tears for Mubarak", Ynet, (13/2/2011), <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4027802,00.html>

⁵ Katz, Yaakov, "Cairo regime change could make IDF boost forces", Jerusalem Post, (30/1/2011), <http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=205796>

day) and when it will be finished (projected for the end of 2012) it will be 5.5 meter high and 1.5 meter deep, equipped with trenches, radar surveillance and watch-towers. Moreover, Israel has deployed a whole brigade in the region and has extended its Iron Dome anti-missile system used in Gaza to southern Israel as well, in anticipation of a new missile attack in Eilat. UAV's are regularly scanning the border while allegedly Israel has been also trying to create a human intelligence network in the border area. Similar steps have been taken in the economic/energy field to safeguard Tel Aviv from Egypt's mood changes, especially in Suez. However, while economic disengagement may be possible, the security measures are nothing but a short-term solution. As an Israeli army officer admitted *"It's only an obstacle. They will find a way to infiltrate underneath with tunnels or by digging holes"*⁶. And they did indeed in May 2012.⁷ Since re-occupying Sinai is out of question for political and military reasons, in the long-term Israel is dependent on the stance and the actions taken by the rulers of its southern neighbor regarding the militancy in Sinai.

From MB's perspective, the ongoing mini-insurgency in Sinai is troubling along several dimensions and the relation with Israel is only one of these and perhaps the least important. First is MB's bid to govern effectively Egypt. Although territorial integrity is not in question as in the case of other uprising-hit countries, the mere existence of an area out of central authority's control makes the newly established government target to criticism of incompetence. The situation gets trickier with the involvement of radical Islamists. Those are mostly former members of the Islamic Jihad and Gama'a Islamiya who are disappointed by the decision of their comrades to enter politics. Having been released or having escaped from prison during the uprising, they are eager to revenge the ancient regime (as represented by SCAF) and embarrass the Muslim Brotherhood whom they traditionally treated with disdain and more so now that in their eyes it turns increasing un-Islamic. They are reinforced by foreign jihadis who see in the current situation in Sinai the occurrence of the greatest opportunity to finally attack the "number one target", Israel, in cross-border attacks. Along this line, Sinai's mini-insurgency presents an ideologico-political challenge to Mursi and the August 2012 massive military "Operation Sinai" proved that he is willing to stand to the challenge.

Nevertheless, despite the eye-catching attacks and declarations of the establishment of the "Islamic State of Sinai", it is clear to all interested parties that the true force behind the

⁶ Pelham, Nicolas, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes*, Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), September 2012, p. 26

⁷ Shmulovich, Michal, "Sinai smugglers cut through Egypt fence for first time", *Times of Israel*, (2/5/2012), <http://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-smugglers-cut-through-security-fence-tuesday/>

situation in Sinai are Bedouins. The latter are angry at the central state's decades of negligence and discrimination. Since the early days of the uprising, as the security forces were ordered to redeploy in Cairo or simply deserted their ranks, the Bedouin tribes demonstrated their readiness to redress their grievances in a violent manner if necessary. These grievances have been presented by tribal leaders to SCAF officials and Mursi himself who made the first presidential visit to the area in decades. In these meetings the tribes offered their cooperation in bringing calm to the area in exchange for a new social contract, demanding the release of prisoners, employment in government positions (including security forces), the legislation of land ownership, the election -instead of central appointment- of Community leaders (mukhtars) and actual implementation of development projects. Without a cooptation of the Bedouin tribes, no coercive operation, even if Israel agrees to a partial remilitarization of the area, can bring 60,000 km² under military control, especially the difficult terrain of the mountainous central Sinai.

However, although on first sight the solution seems simple (placate the Bedouins to clean the area), there is an additional dimension that complicates the problem: the civil-military relations. Sinai has turned into another battlefield for Mursi and SCAF. The most recent and indicative example of this *bras-de-fer* occurred in August 2012 when Mursi took advantage of the militant attack on Egyptian forces (killing 16 of them) in el-Arish which ended in a cross border attack in Israel. Mursi saw a golden opportunity and sacked the top leadership of the army.⁸ For as long this internal battle goes on, the one pole of power will sabotage the moves of the other.

Nevertheless, northern Sinai also affects and is affected by the situation in Gaza and thus is closely related to Muslim Brotherhood's stance towards the second side of the triangle, the Palestinian factions and particularly Hamas. Sinai's Bedouins traditionally had close relations with Gaza. As a Bedouin tribal leader observed they are "40 km from Rafah, and 200 km from Cairo"⁹. Separated by a highly guarded -first by Israel and later by Egypt- border, the relationship to a large extent took the shape of tunnel economy. Although the first recorded discovery of a tunnel dates back to 1983,¹⁰ the tunnel economy blossomed

⁸ Shahbaz, Adrian, "Egypt's Sinai: The Collapsing Buffer Zone between Egypt and Israel", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 10, no. 18, (27/9/2012), Jamestown Foundation, pp. 5-6

⁹ Pelham, Nicolas, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes*, Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), September 2012, p. 1

¹⁰ Pelham, Nicolas, "Gaza's Tunnel Phenomenon: The Unintended Dynamics of Israel's Siege", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 41, no.4, Summer 2012

as the Israeli siege on Gaza intensified after Hamas' take over. The tunnel economy benefited both sides. Largely excluded from formal economy, Sinai's Bedouins saw in smuggling a way to make a living. Hamas, on the other hand, saw an opportunity to alleviate the suffering of the population and smuggle weapons necessary for the fight against Israel. Straddled between two hostile regimes Hamas managed to sustain, regulate and tax a huge network of tunnels through which people and goods ranging from food, cement and medicine to cars, were smuggled on a daily basis.

When the 2011 uprising deposed Mubarak and brought the brotherly MB to power, it was assumed that the Egypt–Gaza relation would unfold on a totally new basis that would render the tunnels obsolete. However, the MB government despite close ideological links with Hamas in no case should be expected to grant it with a blank check. On the contrary, Mursi will try to keep Hamas on a short leash. The first reason for this *un-brotherly* stance is MB's desire to act as a responsible player in the eyes of the United States and the regional powers. Mursi's extensive touring in the region's capitals has demonstrated the new government's desire to restore Egypt to its former regional leadership and this requires a careful balancing between different interests. The MB has also a second aspiration, that of global ideological-organizational leadership. The Egyptian Brotherhood is the historical womb of all the other regional organizations to follow its strand of political Islam. For that reason the Egyptian Brotherhood considers itself as the legitimate leader that under the current conditions of regional islamisation can guide the rest. The Egyptian Brotherhood aims to regenerate the links between the local affiliate organizations, which were nulled by the former authoritarian regimes, and create a network/organization along the lines of Comintern. An "Islamist Comintern" will set from Cairo the ideological and political framework and if need occurs punish "revisionism".

The aforementioned interests of the MB on the ground translate into a carrot and stick approach. Hamas is allowed to open an office in Cairo and generally operate on a rather free basis in Egypt, but it should not expect more than symbolic gestures when Israel bombs Gaza and more importantly it should anticipate counter-measures when it fails to safeguard Egypt's interests. That was the case after the August 2012 attacks, where Palestinians' involvement was suspected, and Egypt reciprocated by closing the Rafah crossing for several days and taking action against the tunnels.¹¹ The message was conveyed: the tools to punish the lack of cooperation are still in place and can be used at the new government's will. A similar meaning was attached to Egypt's rejection of the Hamas proposal to create a

¹¹ Shuaib Abu Jahal, "Gaza: Mursi Disappoints", al- Akhbar, 26/8/2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/11454>

free trade zone on the border and allow commercial traffic through Rafah, although the official reasoning was that it would isolate Gaza from West Bank and allow Israel to disassociate itself from the occupation hazards, treating the area as Egypt's responsibility.¹² In this context, Hamas has rather limited options, especially since Hamas' decision not to back Assad has deprived the organization from Syrian and Iranian backing. Hamas has tried to diversify its supporters by splitting the Hamas operatives, leaving Syria, between Egypt and Qatar.¹³ Khaled Meshaal's decision to relocate to Qatar instead of Egypt and the Qatari emir's visit to Gaza in October should be seen in this light.

This delicate, still evolving, MB-Hamas relation was put under test during the November Gaza crisis. So was Egypt's new administration's relation with Israel. The rapid escalation of the conflict has once again demonstrated how explosive the last side of the triangle (Israel-Palestine) can be, but also how linked it is to the regional dynamics. Hamas' decision to reciprocate Israel's aggression was, inter alia, Hamas' declaration of freedom from MB-led Egypt's grip. For the Egyptian MB there was nothing but a spoiler motive in Hamas' stance. As a result of Hamas' self-determination bid, the MB was forced to deal with serious internal and wider repercussions. As the Palestinian casualties started to mount together with the internal pressure, Mursi felt compelled to recall the Egyptian ambassador to Israel, who was accredited barely a month ago. Inside Egypt, a wave of demonstrations, as an embarrassment to MB's conciliatory inactivity, forced the Israeli ambassador to flee the country, although he was not officially recalled.¹⁴

One of the factors that made the ceasefire possible was Israel's reluctance to prolong and escalate the conflict to a ground invasion. This reluctance was primarily dictated by the situation on the northern front that could not guarantee quiet and "neutrality" in case of an invasion. Netanyahu government could quite successfully sell IDF's self-restraint to the domestic audience, despite the fact that missiles from Gaza for the first time had reached Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. In order to show that a ground invasion was not necessary to eliminate the threat the Israeli government used Iron Dome's relative success¹⁵ as its main trump card.

¹² "Egypt rejects free trade zone along Gaza border", Al-Masry Al-Youm, 27/9/2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-rejects-free-trade-zone-along-gaza-border-uk-newspaper-reports>

¹³ "Hamas political leaders leave Syria for Egypt and Qatar ", BBC, 28/2/2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17192278>

¹⁴ "Ambassador left Cairo before assault started: Israel", Al-Ahram, 14/11/2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/58165/Egypt/Politics-/Ambassador-left-Cairo-before-assault-started-Israe.aspx>

¹⁵ According to an official statement from the IDF the Iron Dome had a success rate of 84%, while less than 7% of the fired missiles managed to hit a populated area. "Ceasefire Agreement Comes Into Effect", Israel Defense Forces, 21/11/2012, <http://www.idf.il/1153-17717-EN/Dover.aspx>

Israel's unwillingness would have been insufficient to materialize the ceasefire, had it not been for Egypt's anxious efforts to de-escalate the crisis. The MB government went through all available pressure channels to bring Hamas on the same wavelength regarding the crisis-management; Mursi's meeting with Khaled Meshaal in Cairo and Egypt PM's visit to Gaza, under a short lull in fighting, were just the most publicized. Although Turkey and Qatar were also involved in the negotiations¹⁶, Egypt was the one to pull the strings and take the credit¹⁷ (much to Ankara's chagrin¹⁸). The handling of the crisis was the first real test for the new MB-Hamas relation. The outcome signals that the new Islamist administration in Egypt bears significant influence on Hamas; a rather expected finding. At the same time, however, MB's crisis management capabilities proved highly efficient under times of pressure. The MB government managed to strike a delicate balance between highly emotionalized anti-Israel rhetoric, which was essential for placating the public opinion, and the need to present the face of moderation during the negotiations, dictated by the realpolitik of state interests.¹⁹

The November Gaza crisis demonstrated that the Palestinian-Israeli side of the triangle is capable to stir regional politics. However, no matter how explosive this stir can be, on a long term –strategic- level, it remains detached from the regional dynamic. The Fatah-ruled West Bank has been lately maneuvering to irrelevancy. Israel's fixation on "no partner for peace" dictum deprives Abbas from his legitimacy since it is primarily based on the negotiation-led peace process. The closure of the bilateral approach left Abbas with no choice but a leap to the international sphere. There is no doubt that the UN recognition of Palestine as "Observer State" provides Abbas and Fatah with a valuable breath of air on the legitimacy level. However, this success follows a series of unfortunate initiatives and embarrassing public relations failures such as the recent municipal elections in West Bank at which Fatah managed to lose without an opponent²⁰ and the handling of the renewed interest in Arafat's cause of

¹⁶ Spencer, Richard, "Gaza conflict: Egypt tries to reassert itself as diplomatic leader of Arab world", The Telegraph, 18/11/2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/9686616/Gaza-conflict-Egypt-tries-to-reassert-itself-as-diplomatic-leader-of-Arab-world.html>

¹⁷ Fadel, Leila, "Egypt's Morsi Praised For Cease-Fire As Talks Begin", NPR, 22/11/2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/22/165701509/egypts-president-plays-big-role-in-gaza-ceasefire>

¹⁸ See for example Cihan Çelik, "Frustrated Turkey sees diplomatic cold shoulder in Gaza crisis", Hürriyet, 24/11/2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/frustrated-turkey-sees-diplomatic-cold-shoulder-in-gaza-crisis.aspx?PageID=238&NID=35357&NewsCatID=470> and Murat Yetkin, "Israel-Gaza crisis and rise of Egypt", 20/11/2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/israel-gaza-crisis-and-rise-of-egypt.aspx?pageID=238&nID=35023&NewsCatID=409>

¹⁹ "Egypt proves reliable mediator in Gaza crisis", Deutsche Welle, 23/11/12, <http://www.dw.de/egypt-proves-reliable-mediator-in-gaza-crisis/a-16400060>

²⁰ "Analysts: Despite Hamas absence, elections still Fatah failure", Ma'an News Agency, 25/10/2012, <http://maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=530867> and "Blow to Fatah in West Bank local elections", BBC, 22/10/2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20025819>

death²¹. The negotiations-laden part of the Palestinian entity rests self-absorbed, weak to make a serious impact in an environment that, at least lately, scorns negotiations; or at least the kind Fatah and Abbas can offer. During the recent Gaza crisis, Abbas mediation efforts in the halls of the international organizations had barely any impact compared to Egypt's active, on-the-ground, diplomacy. Rightfully, Fatah can put the blame on its lack of access to the Gaza Strip from where its operatives were driven off during the 2007 stand-off with Hamas and are since barred from openly demonstrating Fatah-affiliation unless permitted by the Hamas-led government.

The de facto partition of the Palestinian side of the triangle, emboldened by the persisting disunity of its political leadership²², has been clearly demonstrated in the recent crisis. Their parallel but increasingly divergent paths minimize the impact that West Bank and Gaza combined might have. The Hamas' Gaza-restricted resistance paradigm, despite the operational space the opening of Sinai possibilities entail, fails to strike a long-term impact, as well. The ongoing intra-Palestinian rift acts as a median to the "Palestine-Israel-Egypt" triangle. It brings the Palestinian political establishments in Gaza and West to a "hypotenuse" position where they are not setting anymore the rhythm of the region; instead they receive the combined effect of the other two sides. The Middle East lately has been all about confronting the local oppressor. Since neither Hamas nor Fatah can provide a credible (among its people) answer to the external oppressor's aggression, the time may have come that the amnesty, in the form of self-restraint in open dissidence, approaches its end.

²¹ The Arafat death controversy was resumed after an Al-Jazeera documentary was aired in July claiming that "Arafat's final personal belongings – his clothes, his toothbrush, even his iconic kaffiyeh – contained abnormal levels of polonium, a rare, highly radioactive element". Caristrom, Gregg, "What Killed Arafat? Arafat's widow calls for body to be exhumed", Al-Jazeera, 4/7/2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/whatkilledarafat/2012/07/20127383653774794.html>

²² The Fatah Hamas rift has its roots in the way Fatah, Israel, and the international community dealt with the 2006 Hamas election victory. It reached its peak one year later in the battle of Gaza. Since then the relation between the two has devolved into something akin to a cold war, interrupted by ambitious initiatives (2011 Cairo Agreement and 2012 Doha Agreement) which, however, never cross the cold peace boundary.