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EGYPT'S POLICY TOWARD THE PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Introduction: This article provides a comprehensive examination of Egypt's policy toward the Palestinian conflict, from its historical role as a mediator and advocate for Palestinian rights to its contemporary approach in the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Through a nuanced analysis, this paper delves into the key factors shaping Egypt's policy and its impact on the broader dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. **Methods and materials.** We have employed qualitative methodology by drawing on primary and secondary sources to analyze Egypt's policy approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Primary sources include official statements, policy documents, and speeches. Secondary sources encompass scholarly articles, books, reports, and media analyses that offer insights into Egypt foreign policy towards the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. **Analysis:** Egypt's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a defining feature of its foreign policy in the Middle East for decades. As one of the Arab world's most influential and historically significant nations, Egypt's stance on the Palestinian issue has evolved significantly over time. This article aims to explore the historical context and contemporary dimensions of Egypt's policy, taking into consideration the changing regional dynamics, international relations, and domestic considerations that have shaped it. **Results.** The three factors elaborated on above will impact how the Egyptian regime will navigate the coming weeks and months and its role in the future governance of Gaza. The drive by Israel and its Western allies to “wipe out Hamas” in Gaza is bound to lead to a long and bloody ground incursion, although – judging from precedents – this will likely not succeed in crushing the resistance.

Key words: *Suez Canal, Hamas, Egypt's Contemporary Policy, Palestinian resistance, Sisi.*

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ПОЛИТИКА ЕГИПТА В ОТНОШЕНИИ ПАЛЕСТИНСКОГО КОНФЛИКТА: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ И СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ АНАЛИЗ

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Аннотация

Введение: Эта научная статья представляет собой всестороннее исследование политики Египта в отношении палестинского конфликта, от его исторической роли посредника и защитника прав палестинцев до его современного подхода в постоянно меняющемся геополитическом ландшафте Ближнего Востока. С помощью тонкого анализа эта статья углубляется в ключевые факторы, формирующие политику Египта, и ее влияние на более широкую динамику израильско-палестинского конфликта. **Методы и материалы:** В этой статье используется качественная методология, опирающаяся на первичные и вторичные источники для анализа политического подхода Египта к палестино-израильскому конфликту. Первичные источники включают официальные заявления, политические документы и речи. Вторичные источники включают научные статьи, книги, отчеты и анализ СМИ, которые предлагают понимание внешней политики Египта в отношении Ближнего Востока и палестино-израильского конфликта. **Анализ:** Позиция Египта в отношении израильско-палестинского конфликта была определяющей чертой его внешней политики на Ближнем Востоке на протяжении десятилетий. Как одна из самых влиятельных и исторически значимых стран арабского мира, позиция Египта по палестинскому вопросу со временем значительно изменилась. В этой статье предпринята попытка изучить исторический контекст и современные аспекты политики Египта с учетом меняющейся региональной динамики, международных отношений и внутренних соображений, которые ее сформировали. **Результаты:** Три фактора, подробно описанные выше, повлияют на то, как египетский режим будет ориентироваться в ближайшие недели и месяцы, и на его роль в будущем управлении Газой. Стремление Израиля и его западных союзников «уничтожить ХАМАС» в Газе обязательно приведет к длительному и кровавому наземному вторжению, хотя — судя по прецедентам — это, скорее всего, не приведет к сокрушению сопротивления.

Ключевые слова: Суэцкий канал, ХАМАС, современная политика Египта, палестинское сопротивление, Сиси.

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INTRODUCTION: Historical Background: Egypt's involvement in the Palestinian conflict can be traced back to the early 20th century when it was under British occupation. [7, p. 61] During this period, Egyptian nationalists, including Gamal Abdel Nasser, emerged as vocal proponents of Palestinian self-determination. Nasser's rise to power in Egypt further solidified the nation's support for Palestinian rights. [4, p. 56] The 1956 Suez Crisis and the 1967 Six-Day War had significant implications for Egypt's role in the region, as it marked the beginning of a complex relationship with Israel. Historically, Egypt played a central role in mediating between Palestinians and Israelis. [1, p. 29] The Camp David Accords in 1978, facilitated by Egypt, led to the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979. This treaty normalized relations between the two countries but raised concerns among Palestinians and other Arab states. [2, p. 212]

Egypt's contemporary policy toward the Palestinian conflict is multifaceted and influenced by several key factors.

1. Strategic Interests

Egypt's primary focus is on its national security and stability, which has led to cooperation with Israel on matters such as counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and border security in the Sinai Peninsula. Additionally, the importance of the Suez Canal for global trade plays a significant role in Egypt's regional strategy. Following the signing of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, Egypt has been the second largest recipient of US foreign aid after Israel. The money and close partnership are not only meant to keep Cairo out of any potential military conflict with Tel Aviv, but also to prop up a regime that can enforce regional stability in accordance with US interests, protect the security of the State of Israel, safeguard the Suez Canal, ensure no disruptions in the flow of oil, and last but not least act as a mediator to help broker a peace settlement that could end the Arab-Israeli conflict. [8, p. 34]

Egypt has approached its role as a mediator through an evolving lens. After Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Cairo's "mediation" took the form of pressuring the Palestinian resistance factions into de-escalation or accepting political compromises. [3, p. 65] Its leverage with these groups rested on security cooperation with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority against their Islamist rivals, and, more importantly, on managing the Rafah Crossing, Gaza's only border exit that is not under Israel's control.

In such a capacity, Cairo has been hardly a neutral mediator. The 2008 War on Gaza was declared by then-Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni while in Egypt after meeting with Hosni Mubarak. The latter participated in imposing the disastrous siege of the Strip, causing a severe humanitarian crisis. Egyptian state officials and media routinely attacked Hamas, while inviting its leaders to Cairo on occasions to negotiate or pass on proposals (from Israel, the US, as well as those formulated by Egypt) for de-escalations and ceasefires.

Immediately after the 2013 coup, Egypt tightened the siege on Gaza, closing the Rafah Crossing for extended periods. Highlighting the shared origin of Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian media whipped up security paranoia and a wide range of conspiracy theories about Hamas. These ranged from involvement in organizing prison breaks in Egypt, shooting protesters in Tahrir Square, working with the Muslim Brothers to create armed militias, and masterminding terror operations, to killing Egyptian soldiers in Sinai. [5, p. 21]

Cairo was fully complicit with Israel in its 2014 war, and the Egyptian media – whose organizations supported the coup, even before they were officially taken over by the General Intelligence Service (GIS) – sensationally incited violence against Palestinians and advocated the destruction of Hamas.

Such hostility could be attributed to two main factors. The first is the close alliance with Israel that emerged after the coup, which saw Egypt allowing Israel to conduct secret aerial strikes in Sinai against alleged terror targets and Israel intervening in the US on behalf of Egypt to unblock military aid. The second factor is Sisi's onslaught against any cause adopted by the 2011 revolutionaries who were staunchly pro-Palestinians. [9, p. 12]

From 2017 onward, Sisi's animosity towards Gaza's rulers started to change gradually into a relative rapprochement. On the one hand, Hamas proved resilient. On the other hand, the Egyptian military was facing painful casualties fighting an insurgency in Sinai and needed Hamas's help to control the flow of Salafi jihadis (who hate Hamas) and arms from Gaza and to cut the escape routes that local Sinai militants took to seek refuge in southern Rafah. [10, p.127]

The rapprochement included relatively easing the siege, opening the Rafah Crossing, and shuttle visits and meetings with Hamas leaders to broker some long truce with Israel. The humanitarian situation, however, did not substantially improve in the Strip. Ultimately, Egypt's foreign policy remained dependent on US guidelines, which were reaching new extremes with Donald Trump in the White House. The Abraham Accords, which opened the door for Israel to have a "warm peace" with influential Arab players in the absence of Egyptian input, reflected a further decline in Cairo's regional influence.

Before assuming office in 2020, Joe Biden had promised to hold "Trump's favorite dictator" (with reference to Sisi) accountable. Yet, the outbreak of the 2021 Gaza war, provided Sisi with an opportunity to present himself as a "mediator" who could influence Hamas while ensuring Israel's security. Through the Egyptian GIS, Cairo managed to broker a ceasefire, earning praise from the Biden administration.

Since 2021, Cairo returned to the usual role it had assumed since Mubarak's reign. The GIS works to ensure de-escalation and ceasefires whenever tensions erupt between Israel and the Palestinian resistance groups. In exchange, it gains some political clout with Washington and Western capitals.

Ensuring the quiet has also meant using the Rafah Crossing as a bargaining chip with Hamas and passing on intelligence to the Israelis regarding imminent dangers. Israeli media reports spoke of the GIS warning Benjamin Netanyahu of the 7 October attack days before it took place. The reports were denied by both Cairo and Netanyahu's office but confirmed by Republican Michael McCaul, Chairman of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

As the current war raged, Sisi has been trying to offer himself to world leaders – some of whom have been critical of his human rights record recently – as a mediator who is trying to de-escalate. Yet, the continuation of the war keeps exposing how Cairo has lost much of its regional clout and ability to influence its surroundings. The mediation efforts for de-escalation have not gone anywhere so far. On the contrary, Israeli aggression has been escalating, resulting in the death of more than 6,000 Palestinians by 25 October.

An international summit to tackle the crisis in Gaza convened in Cairo on 21 October but was ignored by most influential Western leaders, who sent officials but declined to attend in person. [6, p. 201] Other than angry statements, the summit did not come up with anything that concretely changed the situation.

All that Cairo has been "fighting" for (and with little success so far) is to just get some medical and food aid caravans into Gaza. Cairo was repeatedly snubbed by Israel, which bombed the Rafah Crossing four times, injuring four Egyptians.

Sisi will not give up on his role as a "mediator" anytime soon, and he will remain a party to any settlement, not least because of Egypt's geographical proximity to the conflict zone. However, Cairo's influence is increasingly being dwarfed by other regional players like Qatar, which is arguably closer to Hamas's leadership than Egypt. Eventually, the only "mediation" of any kind that produced results up till now is the Qatari success in securing the release of two US hostages.

2. Regional Dynamics

Egypt has maintained its role as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, participating in ceasefire negotiations during times of crisis. Its historical ties to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and involvement in reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas reflect Egypt's commitment to regional stability.

For decades, the Palestinian cause has been a major radicalizing and politicizing factor for generations of Egyptian youth, and solidarity actions with the Palestinians quickly developed

into anti-regime dissent. After all, the 2011 revolution was the culmination of a long process of dissent accumulation that started a decade earlier thanks to the second Palestinian intifada. The successive regimes that ruled the country have always eyed the Palestinians with suspicion, even when they publicly declared support for the Palestinian struggle. Dissent in Egypt has been crushed over the past decade, but it is slowly reviving. Once again, the Palestinian cause is throwing a rock in still waters.

During the first week of the war, protests broke out spontaneously. On 8 October, thousands of al-Ahly football fans rocked a stadium in Alexandria with pro-Palestine chants. This is significant since this particular youth group has been subject to security crackdowns, and previous attempts to raise the flag of Palestine during football matches were met with repression.

Street protests also erupted in several towns, such as in 6th of October City. This was attacked by the police, who rounded up a number of protesters. Journalists assembled at the Press Syndicate in the heart of Cairo to burn the Israeli flags. Protests were organized at the Lawyers Syndicate and the Actors Guild. The biggest mobilization, during the same week, was when hundreds protested at al-Azhar Mosque following the Friday prayer, before they were dispersed by the police.

As the war entered its second week, solidarity protests escalated. The Journalists Syndicate called for a second protest which was joined by the Lawyers Syndicate and others. An alliance of professional syndicates was declared to coordinate solidarity actions.

Student protests also broke out in Cairo, New Cairo, Alexandria, 6th of October City, Fayoum, Minya, Mansoura, Kafr el-Sheikh Monofiya, and elsewhere. In several cases, the protesters went out onto the streets in almost all the provinces. Campus protests are of immense significance in Egypt. The universities have been a prime target for the post-2013 coup crackdowns when security forces and the military raided campuses, shot and killed students in broad daylight, conducted mass arrests, tried students in military courts, and ordered the extrajudicial executions of some of them.

Under severe repression, the student mobilization started losing steam by mid-2015 and was completely over by the beginning of 2018. Throughout Egypt's history, university campuses have always served as an initiation ground where future dissident leaders and organizers received their political education and honed their organizing skills. The end of student activism has had drastic implications on the overall political scene. Generations of students have graduated without ever taking part in a protest, march, or electoral campaign. They have neither engaged in debates, written a statement nor distributed a leaflet. This has deprived the opposition of experienced cadres and ensured the "desertification" of the political scene. The current protests, however, are a turning point that will produce a new generation of activists. This will be a shot in the arm for the opposition movements.

The security response to the protests, during the first week, was "moderate" by the regime's standards. There were some arrests in some street demonstrations, and it is unclear if the protesters were later released or are still in custody. In other cases, the Central Security Forces (CSF) cordoned off the protesters to prevent them from marching but did not attack them.

This so far "soft repression", which may change anytime in the future, is due to a couple of reasons.

First, the regime's coercive capacity is not as strong as it was before the economic crisis that began around two years ago and is now starting to wreck the country. Sisi is not as confident as he used to be about his support base. His regional sponsors are no longer writing blank cheques. He

has no visible exit out of this crisis. The economic uncertainty and the fear of a public spontaneous explosion are making him relatively more careful with the extent and scope of crackdowns.

Second, Sisi knows that he is not in a position to round up all those protesting for Palestine nor is he keen to expend political capital doing so. He may also find it useful to show Western leaders that there is popular pressure against the Sinai resettlement plan. Those protests could help him abort the transfer scheme, or to raise the bargaining cost in case of acceptance. And it is in that context, that we should understand the state-sponsored call for protests, following Sisi's meeting with Scholz on 18 October, whereby the people were asked to give Sisi the "mandate to protect Egypt's national security," invoking a precedent in 2013, when Sisi asked the public for a "mandate to fight the possible terror threat."

Yet, in 2013, Sisi's popularity was at its peak, amid mass fear psychosis in Egyptian society, which made him confident that he could mobilize millions to support his planned crackdowns on the Muslim Brothers.

Ten years later, things are different. Sisi's popularity has hit rock bottom for several reasons, the most important of which are the economic crisis and the deteriorating living conditions of Egyptians.

Moreover, there are structural problems in his regime, which would make such state-sponsored mobilizations very risky. Sisi's regime is crowd-phobic and evolved from a counterrevolution whose central goal was ending all forms of collective action. Its essence rests on surveillance, social control, and the eradication (not management) of dissent. This is built into its daily politics, which left the regime's repressive apparatus micromanaging society. This system of governance lacks the basic tools of managing large crowds, which Hosni Mubarak possessed.

First, Mubarak had the National Democratic Party (NDP) which had roots in every neighborhood in Egypt and strong patronage networks. The NDP could mobilize nationally and remain in control of the crowds it put out on the streets, but the NDP was dissolved in 2011. The current security services-run Nation's Future Party, which inherited some of the NDP networks, is hardly on the same level of organization or influence. This is clear in how they mismanaged the attack by its thugs on the Engineers Syndicate or the Matrouh fiasco that saw them gathering crowds to declare support for Sisi's presidential nomination, only to watch it turn into an anti-regime protest.

Second, Mubarak had the Muslim Brothers (MB), an opposition group that had a presence on every university campus, in every syndicate, as well as chapters in almost all provinces. In tense times when atrocities took place in Palestine that were bound to trigger protests in Egypt, the regime could count on the MB to diffuse the anger through limited mobilizations that would never leave the mosques, university campuses, or the entrances of the syndicates, and, more importantly, would never chant against Mubarak. Today, there is no MB and no other opposition group capable of playing this role. Sisi destroyed them all.

And, indeed, Sisi's risky gamble backfired last Friday. While the state and Nation's Future Party embarked on their national mobilizations, the dissidents announced alternative protest gathering points. Thousands in Cairo and Alexandria joined the opposition protests. Protesters in Cairo marched into Tahrir Square breaking the security cordon and thundered the 25 January 2011 chants "Bread! Freedom! Social Justice!" Others denounced the government, before the police cracked down on them, arresting more than 100 in Cairo and Alexandria. Running battles with the CSF ensued in Bab el-Louq and Abdeen in the heart of Cairo, where protesters tore down Sisi's banners.

On social media, a flood of videos emerged spontaneous protests happening alongside the state-sponsored ones. Some of them included children marching and cussing Israel, while others denounced the Egyptian regime.

These visuals of dissent are once again circulating on Egyptian social media. At the time of writing, downtown Cairo and most public squares in the country's major urban centers are witnessing stepped-up security presence. CSF armored vehicles and trucks are visibly noticed. Citizens are stopped randomly and searched. Yet, street action is slowly getting normalized once again. And this is something that the Egyptian regime will be keen to ensure does not happen.

3. Domestic Considerations

The Egyptian government has domestic considerations that shape its policy. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime, while seeking to maintain strategic relations with Israel and the United States, must also consider the sentiments of the Egyptian population, which remains sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

4. Broader Arab Relations

Egypt's relationships with other Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have influenced its approach to the Palestinian conflict. These states have sought to balance their own interests and alliances with their commitment to the Palestinian cause. The other factor at play in Egypt's response to the war in Gaza is its territorial security. On the second day of the war, an Israeli army spokesperson called on Gazans to leave for Egypt for safety. This triggered wide denunciations in the Egyptian mainstream and social media. The following day, the Israeli army retracted its call, while the Israeli ambassador to Cairo quickly denied her state had any intentions of resettling the Palestinians to the Sinai Peninsula.

Such assurances do not seem to have quelled Cairo's fears. The mainstream media, which is mostly run by the GIS, kept whipping up the subject, and the state trolls on X – formerly Twitter – initiated trending hashtags denouncing the “Sinai plot”. A lengthy investigative report was published by Mada Masr, an independent media website, that alleged – based on extensive interviews with local officials and foreign diplomats – that Egypt was near accepting a deal whereby massive financial incentives were to be offered in exchange for taking in Palestinian refugees from Gaza. The report was later taken down by the site management, citing “national security” concerns.

In a joint press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, on 18 October, Sisi reiterated his rejection of the transfer of Palestinians to Sinai, saying this would create a security problem in the peninsula, which would turn it into a launch site for “terror attacks” against Israel. He also added, to the shock of many in Egypt, that:

If there is an intention for forceful relocation, there is the Negev Desert in Israel. It is very possible to transfer the Palestinians there, until Israel accomplishes its stated mission to liquidate the resistance, or the armed groups, Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and others in the Gaza Strip. After that, it can return them if it wants.

Sisi's concerns about the resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt are genuine, even when the regime uses the subject for propaganda purposes, and will be a primary factor in influencing his decisions regarding the Rafah Crossing and the humanitarian situation in the strip.

CONCLUSION: Egypt's policy toward the Palestinian conflict is a complex blend of historical ties, strategic interests, regional dynamics, domestic considerations, and broader Arab relations. As a result, Egypt often finds itself walking a delicate tightrope in the tumultuous Middle East. Its historical role as a mediator and advocate for Palestinian rights remains an essential aspect of its identity, but contemporary geopolitical realities have necessitated pragmatic policy shifts. Egypt's policy toward the Palestinian conflict is emblematic of the broader complexities facing the Arab world in its engagement with Israel and the evolving dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As regional dynamics continue to change, Egypt's role will remain a critical factor in shaping the path to a sustainable resolution of this enduring conflict.

The three factors elaborated on above will impact how the Egyptian regime will navigate the coming weeks and months and its role in the future governance of Gaza. The drive by Israel and its Western allies to “wipe out Hamas” in Gaza is bound to lead to a long and bloody ground incursion, although – judging from precedents – this will likely not succeed in crushing the resistance.

Each day of continued fighting in Gaza and the West Bank will leave Cairo’s autocrat with the burden of managing increased pressure by a more mobilized Egyptian public and pressure to open the border for Palestinians to escape Gaza. The current revival of street action in Egypt is reminiscent of the early 2000s, but this time the protests are happening in a more volatile situation due to the economic crisis. In such a context, the war can be a catalyst for further social dissent.

Cairo’s regional and diplomatic clout, which has steadily eroded since 2013, is facing another challenge with this war, amid Sisi’s inability to pressure, let alone mediate between, the active players in comparison to other states like Qatar, for example. How this will play out in terms of his support in Washington is an issue that needs close following, especially when his reputation is already tarnished by the Bob Menendez scandal.

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Արտակ Համլետի ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԻՍՅԱՆ՝ պատմ. գիտ. թեկնածու,
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