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# *The Proximity Paradox: Egypt's shifting role in Gaza*

Supervised by A. SHAKER and G. TZOGOPOULOS

Jasmin SABRI

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## Table of Contents

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## Introduction

This work aims to detangle the complex history tying together the Gaza Strip and the Arab Republic of Egypt. Through the means of a thorough historical and political analysis, which takes shifts in government and leadership in both Egypt and Gaza into consideration, this study seeks to unravel the multifaceted narratives that have defined their relationship over the past eight decades. Ever since Gaza was defined as a distinct territorial unit in 1948, Egypt has played a decisive role in its governance. Initially through direct administration and later through more nuanced forms of influence. Although the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian control for nearly two decades, the relationship between the two has never been straightforward. It has consistently been entangled with broader regional politics, evolving national interests, and the ideological weight of the Palestinian cause within the Arab world.
Indeed, Egypt's involvement in Gaza cannot be understood in isolation from its own internal political transformations or the regional and international pressures surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Within the Arab world, Palestine has long symbolized both a shared regional identity and a wider anti-colonial struggle. This historical backdrop is essential for understanding Egypt's shifting strategies toward Gaza, strategies that have oscillated between solidarity, paternalism, pragmatism, and, at times, marginalization. While Egyptians and Palestinians share linguistic, cultural, and historical ties, the political dimension of their relationship is riddled with contradictions. These similarities, paradoxically, have made their bond all the more complex, particularly as the Palestinian situation diverged dramatically from that of its neighbours following the large-scale Jewish immigration to Palestine and the emergence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The core research question guiding this study is: how have successive Egyptian regimes adapted their political, diplomatic, and economic approaches toward Gaza over time, and what are the implications of these shifts for Palestinian governance and regional geopolitics? This inquiry is framed by an examination of pivotal historical junctures,

such as Egypt's military administration of Gaza, the Camp David Accords, the rise of Hamas, and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, all of which have reshaped Egypt's stance toward Gaza. In addressing this question, the study will interrogate whether major policy shifts represent sincere efforts to defend Palestinian rights or whether they have served as rhetorical postures masking more pragmatic state interests. Over the following pages, this study will attempt to bring to the foreground the often-overlooked dynamics of Egyptian-Palestinian relations, placing them at the centre of the Palestinian question. By tracing Egypt's evolving policies toward Gaza, the work seeks to close what I perceive as a gap in the existing literature, namely, the lack of sustained attention to Egypt's dual role as both a stakeholder in and a shaper of Palestinian political realities.

# Chapter I: Egypt's Governance of Gaza (1948–1967)

## I.1 Gaza before the Strip

Before Gaza became known as a mere strip of land, it was part of the larger region of Palestine, which had been under the control of the Ottoman Empire since the 16th century. Its southern limitation was defined in October of 1906, when the Ottoman and British authorities agreed on a boundary separating British mandate Egypt and Ottoman-ruled Palestine. Even though this imaginary line spans only over a range of twelve kilometres, from Tabaa to Rafah on Egypt's northeastern border, it has become the stage of enormous geopolitical tensions and disputes over the past century.
Amid the first World War, Arab uprisings against Ottoman rule led to a clash between ruling and British imperial forces in the Levant. The British army successfully drove Ottomans out of the region in 1916. Just a year later, the seeds of what we know today as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, were sown. With the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the British government publicly declared its support for the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people[1]". This led to a paradox at the heart of the Mandate government. On one hand, the British pledged support for Jewish national aspirations; on the other, they were committed, at least nominally, to administering Palestine in the interests of its existing population. Although the 1922 Mandate Charter states that Britain should provide "administrative advice [to the Palestinian population] until they can exist unaided[2]", this never fully materialized.
Simultaneously, British policy was favourable towards the Zionist movement, facilitating immigration and land acquisition. This apparent bias contributed to fostering resentment and ultimately led to increased friction between the autochthone and the immigrated population.

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[1] Balfour, Arthur James. *The Balfour Declaration.* Letter to Lord Rothschild. 2 Nov. 1917. United Kingdom National Archives, FO 371/3083.
[2] Feldman, Ilana. *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967*. Duke University Press, 2008. p. 6.

These tensions culminated in the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. The uprising was motivated largely by Palestinian nationalist sentiment and was met with an overwhelming response from both the British government, sending in 20.000 troops, as well as the Zionist movement, who had armed more than 15.000 people by 1939[3]. The British military response was, however, accompanied by strategic concessions, including a temporary halt to Jewish immigration. This was most famously done through the "White Paper", a policy document that aimed at clearing up confusion regarding the Balfour declaration: "His Majesty's Government believe that the framers of the Mandate in which the Balfour Declaration was embodied could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish State against the will of the Arab population of the country. [...] His Majesty's Government therefore now declare unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State. They would indeed regard it as contrary to their obligations to the Arabs under the Mandate, as well as to the assurances which have been given to the Arab people in the past, that the Arab population of Palestine should be made the subjects of a Jewish State against their will.[4]" Although the increased presence of the army somewhat helped to stabilize the situation, the Palestinian armed rebellion, Zionist attacks on property and civilians, arson, bombings and assassinations continued. The response of the British monarch was to send in a committee of inquiry under the leadership of Lord Robert Peel. The Peel committee concluded that the mandate was not functional and failed to reconcile England's obligations towards both the Arab and Jewish population and ultimately recommended that the land should be divided. This suggestion had two major impacts; on one hand, it was the first time a Jewish national State had been explicitly mentioned and was therefore met with a cautious yet mostly positive response from that side. On the other hand, the committee suggested a forced displacement of the Palestinian population to Transjordan, which sparked outrage and resistance on the Arab side.

[3] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 55.
[4] "Palestine." *Hansard*, vol. 347, House of Commons Debates, 23 May 1939, cols. 2129–97, UK Parliament, api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1939/may/23/palestine.

During this same period, Egypt, though nominally independent since 1922, remained under strong British influence. The monarchy and *Wafd* party-led government were initially very cautious in their response towards the unrest in Palestine and tempered vocal support for the revolts in favour of Anglo-Egyptian ties. British diplomatic records show that then Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahhas even tried to restrain Egyptian newspaper coverage of Palestine at London's request. Despite that, nationalist pressure continued to grow and by late 1937, the narrative of Cairo's cabinet shifted. Egypt began to view the Palestinian civil unrest as a fellow Arab and anti-imperialist struggle. Furthermore, Egypt condemned Zionist immigration and land policies, and Cairo joined other Arab capitals in pressuring Britain at the League of Nations to address Arab grievances. For example, Egypt voted against the 1937 Peel Commission partition plan. The revolt's intensity arguably catalysed Egypt's shift from a narrowly Egyptian nationalism toward an active regional policy[5]. As observed by the authors of this book: "the Palestine issue became the mobilizing force impelling both Egyptian public opinion and Egyptian governments into involvement in regional politics.[6]"

Although the dominant nationalist *Wafd* party ended up publicly declaring solidarity and organizing fundraising events for relief committees supporting Palestinian victims, other political entities went even further. The Ismailia-founded Muslim Brotherhood under the leadership of Hassan al-Banna, made Palestine the centrepiece of its activism and explicitly called on Egyptians to view Gaza and the rest of Palestine as part of their homeland, insisting that defending it was crucial to Egypt's integrity[7]. Due to their geographical proximity, members of the Brotherhood "frequently visited Gaza, where the Muslim Brotherhood structure was even more under Egyptian influence than in the rest of Palestine.[8]" Secular nationalists, such as the popular Young Egypt, *Masr al-Fatat*, shared this sentiment. Throughout the political spectrum, pan-Arab

[5] Gershoni, Israel, and James Jankowski. *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930–1945*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. pp. 167-191.
[6] Idem.
[7] Idem.
[8] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 28. Translated from French by myself.

intellectuals denounced Zionism and repeatedly invoked Palestinian independence as central to the larger cause of Arab liberty. In 1937, for example, the Egyptian Women's Union appealed for a special Arab conference to demand Palestinian rights. From 1937 to 1939, Egyptian newspapers reported on the revolt's battles, protests in Jerusalem and Jaffa, and calls by leaders like Hajj Amin al-Husseini for regional support. One observer later noted that the Egyptian public treated the revolt as a cause of their own: the growth of a literate, Arabized middle class gave rise to a pan-Arab consciousness that tied the Egyptian future to Palestine.[9]

In 1947, the British government, unable to contain the growing unrest and violence in Palestine, officially relinquished its "dual obligation[10]" to both the Jewish and Arab populations and turned the matter over to the United Nations. This act marked a decisive abandonment of Britain's role as intermediary and signalled the collapse of its colonial strategy in Palestine. The UN responded with Resolution 181, a partition plan that proposed the division of the territory into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem under international administration. The plan was received with celebration by the Zionist movement, which interpreted it as international legitimization of Jewish statehood. Arab leaders, including those in Egypt and Gaza, firmly rejected the proposal. They argued that it violated the rights of Palestine's Arab majority, who made up two-thirds of the population and owned the majority of the land yet were allocated only 43% of the territory[11]. The Higher Arab Committee and the Arab League both sharply criticised the resolution as there were concerns about it violating the principle of national self-determination enshrined in the UN charter.

In the wake of this vote, intercommunal violence escalated into a full-scale civil war within Mandatory Palestine. Zionist paramilitary groups such as the Haganah, Irgun, and Palmach launched a series of coordinated operations targeting Palestinian towns

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[9] Gershoni, Israel, and James Jankowski. *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930–1945*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. pp. 167-191.

[10] Feldman, Ilana. *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967*. Duke University Press, 2008. p. 7.

[11] *"The 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine."* CJPME—Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee, n.d., www.cjpme.org/fs_173.

and villages, most notably Plan Dalet in April 1948. These offensives led to the systematic depopulation of large parts of Palestine, forcing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to flee. The refugee crisis did not unfold overnight, but rather through a series of violent expulsions, massacres, and sieges stretching over the span of several months. By May 14th, 1948, when the State of Israel was unilaterally declared, over 300.000 Palestinians had already been displaced[12]. The ensuing invasion by neighbouring Arab states, including Egypt, was as much a response to the declaration of statehood as it was a bid to halt further Zionist expansion and contain the deepening humanitarian catastrophe. While the question of why Palestinians did not declare a state of their own arises naturally in this context, it lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Though the most commonplace explanation to this is the rejection of the Partition Plan by Arab Nations, this answer strips Palestinians of agency and risks oversimplifying the issue. A nuanced treatment of this topic has, however, been explored in detail in Rashed Khalidi's work "The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood[13]".

Egypt's military campaign in Palestine initially aimed to secure the southern front and protect Gaza and its hinterlands. Through the Sinai, Egypt deployed nine battalions comprising roughly 10.000 soldiers, who advanced along the Gaza coast toward Ashdod and al-Majdal[14]. While early gains were made, Egypt's strategy quickly faltered. Ill-prepared for extended warfare, the Egyptian army suffered logistical shortcomings and poor coordination with other Arab forces. One of the most emblematic moments of this first war was the siege of Faluja, where a large contingent of Egyptian troops, among them a young officer named Gamal Abdel Nasser, was surrounded by Israeli forces for several months[15].Though the Egyptians refused to surrender and ultimately evacuated under the 1949 Armistice Agreements, the

[12] Citino, Nathan, et al. "Generations of Palestinian Refugees Face Protracted Displacement and Dispossession." *Migrationpolicy.org*, 2 May 2023, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/palestinian-refugees-dispossession.
[13] Khalidi, Rashid. *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*. Beacon Press, 2006.
[14] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 69.
[15] Feldman, Ilana. *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967*. Duke University Press, 2008. p. 5.

episode deeply shaped both Egyptian military doctrine and Nasser's personal views on Palestine.

As Israeli operations continued into the latter half of 1948, the scale of displacement intensified. By the time of the first armistice agreements in early 1949, more than 750.000 Palestinians had been expelled or had fled from their homes — a traumatic and unforgotten event that would later be termed the Nakba, Arabic for catastrophe. Gaza, under Egyptian military presence since May 1948, became the primary refuge for displaced Palestinians from southern villages such as al-Faluja, Iraq al-Manshiyya, and Beersheba. The territory's population of approximately 80.000 people was nearly overwhelmed by the arrival of about 250.000[16] refugees, placing immense pressure on already scarce resources. Makeshift camps and shelters provided by the United Nations Agency for Palestinian Refugees soon dotted the coastal strip, foreshadowing the protracted refugee crisis that would dominate Gaza's postwar identity. The UN agency placed the newly arrived into eight "temporary" camps, some of which exist up until today[17].

In response to the crisis, the United Nations adopted Resolution 194 on December 11, 1948. Article 11 of the resolution notably affirmed that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date[18]," and stipulated that compensation be provided for property lost or damaged. Despite the resolution's apparent commitment to the rights of return and restitution, its implementation was obstructed by Israel's refusal to allow large-scale repatriation and the lack of enforcement mechanisms within the international community. Egypt, along with other Arab states, endorsed the resolution, viewing it as a vital, although limited, diplomatic instrument to redress the injustices of partition and war. Over the decades, however, the right of return has grown more

[16] Feldman, Ilana. *Police Encounters: Security and Surveillance in Gaza under Egyptian Rule*. Stanford University Press, 2015. p. 28.
[17] "Palestinian Refugees in the Gaza Strip (1948–1967)." *PalQuest*, Institute for Palestine Studies, https://palquest.palestine-studies.org/en/highlight/22188/palestinian-refugees-gaza-strip-1948-1967.
[18] United Nations General Assembly. *Resolution 194 (III): Palestine – Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator*. 11 Dec. 1948. *A/RES/194*, UN General Assembly, (Art. 11). *Refworld*, UNHCR, https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unga/1948/en/86836.

complex. Passed down through generations, the claim now applies to a vast and scattered Palestinian diaspora. While the principle remains enshrined in international discourse, its realization has become one of the most contested and diplomatically fraught issues in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The war's aftermath transformed Gaza permanently. As Israeli forces advanced, thousands of Palestinian refugees poured into the coastal area. What emerged from the rubble of 1948 was a fundamentally new political and demographic space: the Gaza Strip. Codified in the Egyptian-Israeli armistice agreement of February 1949, the Strip was a narrow, overcrowded enclave carved from the remnants of the former Gaza subdistrict. It encompassed just 1.3% of Mandatory Palestine, yet it absorbed such a large number of refugees, that it tripled the native population of the area[19]. The sudden demographic shift placed immense strain on Gaza's economy, infrastructure, and social fabric. As sociologist Ilana Feldman notes, "The Gaza Strip was a brand-new space, in a difficult condition and with an unknown future.[20]"

What had once been a town among many in southern Palestine now became a heavily restricted zone under Egyptian military rule, politically and geographically severed from the West Bank and other Palestinian regions. It was in this period, defined by war, displacement, and administrative rupture, that Gaza came to be known as "the Strip," a term that reflected not only its physical dimensions but also its geopolitical isolation. The legacy of these events would shape Egypt-Gaza relations for the next two decades, setting the stage for a complex and often fraught administration that will be explored in the following chapters.

[19] "Palestinian Refugees in the Gaza Strip (1948–1967)." *PalQuest*, Institute for Palestine Studies, https://palquest.palestine-studies.org/en/highlight/22188/palestinian-refugees-gaza-strip-1948-1967.
[20] Feldman, Ilana. *Police Encounters: Security and Surveillance in Gaza under Egyptian Rule*. Stanford University Press, 2015. p.27.

## I.2 Conjoined Twin Politics: Egyptian Administration, the All-Palestine Government and the *fedayeen*

Gaza being under Egyptian control from 1948 onwards was the product of a failed attempt to defend the territorial integrity of a Palestinian state, rather than a premeditated national strategy. Much like the British before them, the Egyptians found themselves assuming responsibility over a strip of land that had come to symbolize both the failure of Arab unity and the enduring resilience of the Palestinian cause. As Feldman aptly puts it, "the Egyptian government, which had entered the war to prevent the partition of Palestine, found itself instead the custodian of this small sliver of Palestinian territory.[21]" Egypt's administration of Gaza, then, was less the result of political ambition than the consequence of an unintended military and diplomatic outcome. Far from being annexed, the Strip became a space of suspended sovereignty: a space of undefinable status, neither fully Palestinian nor truly Egyptian, caught in a liminal state that reflected the broader uncertainties of the post-1948 Middle East.

This *res nullius* status of Gaza posed immediate and lasting dilemmas. While the Egyptian government insisted on the Strip's Palestinian identity, it avoided annexation to remain faithful to the principle of Palestinian self-determination and because hope for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state still persisted. This refusal to make Gaza Egyptian sparked an inter-Arab conflict between Egypt and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which had annexed the West Bank around the same point in time. Jordan accused Egypt of instrumentalizing Gaza, while pursuing their own political goals[22]. Jordan's suspicion of Egypt's intentions was heightened by Cairo's support of the All-Palestine Government (APG), established in September 1948 in Gaza as the first sovereign Palestinian authority under Arab League endorsement. Headed by its President Hajj Amin al-Husseini and Prime Minister Ahmed Hilmi Basha, the APG was

[21] Feldman, Ilana. *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967*. Duke University Press, 2008. p. 7.
[22] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 41.

meant to project the legitimacy of a Palestinian national government, but it remained largely symbolic. Egypt maintained real control over the Strip's borders, security, and governance. In essence, Gaza functioned as a protectorate under Egyptian administration, while the APG served as little more than a political façade. Although the body was established in Gaza, it did not include any representative from the area.

In contrast to Egypt's endorsement of the Husseini-led government in Gaza, Jordan moved to consolidate its control over the West Bank by convening the Jericho Congress in December 1948, which pledged allegiance to King Abdullah and formally called for unification with the Hashemite Kingdom. This bid to annex Palestinian territory directly challenged the legitimacy of the APG and further fragmented Palestinian political representation. Egypt's refusal to recognize Jordan's annexation, and Jordan's reciprocal rejection of the APG, exemplified the deepening rifts within the Arab world, with Gaza becoming the geopolitical stage on which these tensions were most visible.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza intensified. The Nakba had turned the Strip into a place of exodus and exile. The sudden demographic explosion overwhelmed the local population and placed enormous pressure on limited infrastructure. Matters worsened in March 1949, when Israeli forces violated the terms of the Egypt-Israel armistice and expelled the remaining inhabitants of Faluja and Iraq al-Manshiyya, forcing many to flee once again to Gaza and the Khalil/Hebron hills. This influx clearly underlines that the number of Palestinians seeking refuge in Gaza only continued growing in the first year following the Nakba. Egyptian authorities struggled to maintain order and basic services, as their military administration, led by Governor General Muhammad Haidar Basha, was ill-equipped for such an immense social and logistical burden.

In this context, Egypt entered into an agreement with the newly established United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in September 1950. UNRWA, founded through the UN General Assembly Resolution 302, was tasked with providing emergency aid and employment to Palestinian refugees,

making it the first UN body ever catering to refugees from a specific region. In Gaza, the agency quickly became the largest civilian employer after the Egyptian administration. Schools, clinics, food distribution centres, and improvised housing were established under its auspices. The collaboration between Egypt and UNRWA shaped the Strip's socio-political structure for decades to come, institutionalizing its dependency while also anchoring its identity as a refugee space. Still, this arrangement did little to solve Gaza's core political problem: it remained stateless, occupied, and strategically ambiguous.

Egypt refusing to formally integrate Gaza into its own territory did not only lead to the dispute with Jordan, but also to Israeli ambitions to gain more land. The founder as well as first president of the Israeli state, David Ben-Gurion, proposed to annex the territory, since Egypt had made no claim to sovereignty over it. Israel's president informs the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine of these plans during the Lausanne Conference. This proposal, which became known under the name of the "Gaza Plan", envisioned the acceptance of all Gazan refugees and inhabitants as Israeli citizens, provided that the international community would finance refugee resettlement. The proposal was rejected by Egyptian authorities, since the plan did not stipulate clearly under which conditions refugees would be allowed to return. The Egyptian government feared that Gaza's population would be relocated to the desert. In later talks, the Israeli government declared that it would only be able to take in about a hundred thousand refugees, so less than half of the number present in the Strip alone. Even though the Gaza annexation proposal was widely discussed during the conference, no agreement was reached, and the members of the conference separated without results on September 15th[23]. A problem of Lausanne was also the lack of independent Palestinian representation. Israel had already been accepted as a state y the United Nations and this status was a prerequisite for the conference to even take place. Palestine had no such recognition, suggesting that its status was

[23] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 83-84.

consistently measured by a different standard, one that denied it the legitimacy of statehood and excluded it from autonomous diplomatic engagement.

Another pressing issue emerged along the armistice line, sensitive in regard to what had been defined in the Egyptian-Israeli armistice agreement. The Rhodes Agreement states that: "No element of the land, sea or air military or para-military forces of either Part, including non-regular forces, shall commit any warlike or hostile act against the military or para-military forces of the other Party, or against civilians in territory under the control of that Party; or shall advance beyond or pass over for any purpose whatsoever the Armistice Demarcation Line set forth in Article VI of this Agreement except as provided in Article III of this Agreement; and elsewhere shall not violate the international frontier; or enter into or pass through the air space of the other Party or through the waters within three miles of the coastline of the other Party.[24]". The exception this text refers to concerns the withdrawal of military forces, essential to guarantee peace.

In the early years of Egyptian rule, thousands of Palestinians attempted to cross into Israeli territory, often to retrieve lost property or to harvest abandoned crops. The extreme difficulty of overcoming the trauma of dispossession becomes even more pronounced through the artificial character of the demarcation lines; especially when former homes and land were sometimes visible by the naked eye. Though these people could not be defined under the umbrella of armed forces and most of them were driven by devastation more than by the intention to commit warlike or hostile acts, Egyptians were alarmed by any movement near the armistice line.

Initially, Egyptian forces treated these crossings as breaches of security, arresting or detaining returnees. The priority was then to adhere to the agreement and not provoke the newly established Israeli state. Yet, over time, a shift occurred. This change had a few backgrounds; on one hand King Farouk's Egypt started to lose focus

[24] United Nations. "S/1264/Corr.1 of 23 February 1949." Article II. *Archive.org*, web.archive.org/web/20140525024736/unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/9EC4A332E2FF9A128525643D007702E6.

on Gaza, as the administration was preoccupied with removing the remaining British forces from their Suez base. This issue was inherited by the following Egyptian administration, who was not yet acquainted with the formulation of foreign policy. In early 1954, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles got involved in the matter with the intent to counter Soviet influence in the region through the facilitation of an agreement between Egypt and Britain. Then, Eisenhower's state department officials began to draft a proposal for a peace plan between Egypt and Israel, referred to under the code name "Operation Alpha". The Israelis were, however, not willing to engage in a peace agreement with Egypt, as the US acted against their interests. Defence minister Pinhas Lavon had built an espionage network inside Egypt, ordering several operations against select Egyptian, British, and US targets, with the goal to create enough chaos to have the British keep their troops in the Suez Canal zone. When Ben Gurion was sworn in as minister of defence, he ordered the most violent raid on Gaza since the signature of the armistice in February 1955. Not only was this a clear and blatant violation of the previously cited agreement, but a week into the raid, an Egyptian military camp near the railway station in Gaza City was targeted.

These events led to drastic change in Egypt's approach to Gaza. Firstly, within the Cold War dynamic, Egypt signed an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, breaking the West's monopoly on weapon imports in the region. A delicate balance was kept, as the deal was not signed with the Soviet Union, but rather a satellite state. This collaboration also paved the way for building up military strength against Israel, who did not cease to aggress. Estimates by United Nations reports indicate that between 1949 and 1956, Israel had launched more than 17 raids on Egyptian territory[25].

The increase in arms access led Egyptian commanders to openly collaborate with and invest in organized infiltration units, the so-called *fedayeen*. As for the people constituting these armed groups, many of them were refugees or members of armed cells with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, who began launching small-scale attacks

[25] Thomas G. Mitchell (2000). *Native Vs. Settler: Ethnic Conflict in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, and South Africa*. Bloomsbury Academic. p. 133.

against Israeli outposts from within Gaza. Egyptian intelligence supported their operations, supplying them with both weapons and information. A key figure in Egyptian support of *fedayeen* units was General Mustafa Hafez, then director of Egyptian military intelligence. Hafez ultimately headed the units that grouped under the name "Battalion 141", which led to considerable Israeli losses. Egyptian Mustafa Hafez became well-respected among Gazans and was viewed as a martyr of the resistance, especially after his death. He was assassinated by Israeli intelligence, who had infiltrated his inner circle and given someone he thought close to him a book bomb[26]. This transformation, from first viewing the *fedayeen* as security risks to recognizing them as instruments of resistance and actively engaging in their missions, reflected Egypt's broader pivot towards anti-colonial activism. Furthermore, Egypt was partaking in Gazan conflicts as if they were its own. The line between Egyptian and Palestinian fighters grew increasingly blurred; lives were lost without clear distinction between nationalities or sides.

Gaza was no longer merely a burden or a humanitarian crisis, it was becoming a space that demanded support, strategy, and care. For Egypt, Gaza offered a platform to contest Israeli expansion, assert pan-Arab leadership, and test the boundaries of regional influence. Yet beyond geopolitical calculation, Egypt also assumed responsibility, being the only Arab country to actively confront Israeli military power and defend a Palestinian national presence. Yet, the contradictions at the heart of Egypt's policy remained unresolved. Cairo spoke of Palestinian sovereignty and acted as the voice of Palestine at international negotiating tables, but Gazans could only speak through Egypt. The All-Palestine Government existed largely on paper, with real authority resting in Egyptian hands. Refugees called for return but were instead integrated into a camp-based economy, struggling to exist unaided. As the 1950s unfolded, these internal tensions deepened. They would ultimately culminate under the ideologically charged and ambitious leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, a

[26] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 100.

charismatic figure whose rise would redefine Egypt's role in Gaza and the broader Arab world.

## I.3 Nasser's Gaza: Revolutionary Egypt and Regional Ambitions

The 1952 Free Officers coup in Egypt brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power and reshaped Cairo's approach to Gaza and the larger Palestinian cause. Prior to 1952, Gaza had been ruled by an Egyptian-appointed military governor under the All-Palestine Government. After the monarchy fell, Nasser retained strict control: he kept Gaza under military administration, with a high commissioner from Cairo, and continued to resist any move to formally annex the territory. Thus, Egypt continued to treat Gaza as a protectorate, as it had been under the British. What changed legally though, was the 1955 promulgation by Nasser's regime of a "fundamental law" defining the "region under the control of Egyptian forces in Palestine[27]" thereby officially establishing the modern Gaza Strip under Egyptian rule[28].

Throughout the 1950s, Egypt also managed Gaza's infrastructure and public services, while most social aid came from UNRWA. Cairo did not grant Gazans Egyptian citizenship, reflecting the desire of the administration to preserve Palestinian identity, although Egypt was tightly supervising affairs in Gaza. Nasser's early policy toward the territory also involved strengthening cooperation between Egyptian and Gazan Brotherhood parties. In the immediate post-revolution years, he made concessions to Gaza's Muslim Brotherhood which had supported the coup: for instance, Sheikh Hajj Sawan of the Brotherhood was appointed Gaza's mayor in 1952 as a reward for backing the Free Officers. The Brotherhood distributed aid and ran welfare programs in

[27]Cherif, Nour, and Axel Martin. "The Egyptian Policy Towards Palestine from 1949 to 1956." *CJFP* (Cambridge Journal of Foreign Policy), 25 Nov. 2021. www.cjfp.org/the-egyptian-policy-towards-palestine-from-1949-to-1956/.
[28] Idem.

the refugee camps, extending the new leader's influence. This was done through so called "mercy trains", that transported important humanitarian aid to Gaza and left Brotherhood members to distribute it. However, by 1954, Nasser had broken with the Brotherhood. A failed assassination attempt in 1954 led him to crack down on the Brotherhood's Gaza network and by early 1955 Sheikh Sawan was ousted from his position as mayor of Gaza[29].

On March 29th, 1955, Nasser personally returned to Gaza for the first time since 1948, signalling his commitment to the territory. However, some communist and socialist groups heavily criticized Nasser's presence in and power over Gaza, even going as far as labelling him as a dictator[30]. These tensions were eased through making it clear that Egypt truly did not have any territorial claim over Gaza, as well as through substantial support of *fedayeen* units. Nasser's stance towards Mustafa Hafez and his men translated into the organization of two *fedayeen* campaigns, one in August 1955 and the second in April 1956.

As he sought to solidify his role as the upcoming leader of the Arab world, part of that enterprise meant the promotion of Palestinian armed struggle. By May 1954, Nasser's government was supporting and training Palestinian *fedayeen* to raid Israeli border settlements. These raids were carried out from both Gaza and the Sinai, targeting Israeli military outposts and villages. The Palestinian fighters were largely seen as anti-colonial freedom fighters in line with Nasser's pan-Arab vision. As one Egyptian officer later recalled, Nasser urged Gazans not to abandon hope, voicing the optimistic goal that, in the future united Palestine, would be achieved once colonial rule ended. This policy had concrete effects on Gaza and, clearly, their relationship to Egypt. Under Nasser, the fate of Gazans specifically and Palestinians in general was to a large degree inseparable from the leader's overall project. Internationally, Nasser sought to cast the Palestinian struggle as part of the anti-colonial movement that had gathered momentum at Bandung in 1955 and in the Non-Aligned Movement. Although Gaza

[29] Idem.
[30] Idem.

itself was not on the Bandung agenda, Nasser used the conference's spirit to present Israel as a Western outpost in the Middle East. In speeches he frequently denounced Zionism as a form of imperialism. For example, by 1964 he was citing Bandung's anti-colonial rhetoric and applied it to Israel, calling it a "part of a Western imperialist conspiracy to divide the Middle East[31]". He argued that only by liberating Palestinian lands could the dignity of the Arab nation be fully restored, uniting once again the Arab nation's emancipation and anti-colonial struggle.

Meanwhile, Nasser's decision-making would soon bring upon a regional crisis, that would have an irreversible effect on the Gaza Strip. In July 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, provoking an Anglo-French-Israeli invasion also known under the retrospectively attributed term of tripartite aggression. Israeli forces quickly overran the Sinai Desert and entered Gaza in October. During that military campaign Israel implemented the Kadesh Plan, which aimed first to seize Sinai and then to capture Gaza itself.

This led to a four-month-long Israeli occupation, which deeply changed the political sentiments of Gazans. Israeli forces perpetrated civilian massacres, notably in Khan Yunis, under the pretext of rooting out fedayeen fighters[32]. Global pressure ultimately forced a ceasefire and UN peacekeeping forces were deployed. Through US influence by President Eisenhower on Ben-Gurion, Israel was eventually compelled to withdraw from both Sharm el-Sheikh and Gaza in early 1957. The return of the Egyptian administration was widely welcomed by political factions and civilians alike, some of whom switched out the UN flag to raise the Egyptian one and declared "Egypt is our mother[33]." Even the formerly critical voices in Gaza showed enthusiasm at the return of the Egyptians. Shortly after, the UN decided to give back administrative control to Nasser, though under the condition that *fedayeen* activity be curtailed. By 1959, fedayeen operations had become nearly non-existent. Though the movement got

[31] Nasser, Gamal Abdel. *Speech to the National Assembly*, 24 Mar. 1964. In *The Philosophy of the Revolution and Other Speeches by Gamal Abdel Nasser*, edited by Mahmoud Hussein, Translated by Frances C. Gillespie, Monthly Review Press, 1969.
[32] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 106.
[33] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 116.

gradually weakened, Nasser's support for the *fedayeen* had greatly elevated his status as Palestine's champion. Meanwhile, in October 1959, a pivotal shift occurred outside Gaza: Yasser Arafat founded Fatah in Kuwait, laying the groundwork for an autonomous Palestinian movement that would eventually compete with Egyptian influence.

From 1957 until the Six-Day War, Egypt maintained their government in Gaza but made cautious gestures toward Palestinian self-rule. A basic law in 1957, updating the 1955 fundamental law, created a Palestinian Legislative Council, and 22 Palestinian councillors were later elected under Egyptian supervision. The broader political context included proposals for Gazan integration into Nasser's United Arab Republic (UAR), an attempt at realizing the dream of pan-Arabism through an attempt at integration with Syria[34]. Hajj Amin al-Husseini called for the formation of a Gazan Palestinian government, which could then join the UAR. Nasser rejected this idea but instead strengthened local governance through the updated Legislative Council, granting Gazans a limited, but symbolically important degree of autonomy. In practice, however, all key decisions remained with the Egyptian High Commander, and Israeli complaints about *fedayeen* often curtailed even that limited self-rule. Gaza's economy and services stayed underfunded: most funding came from UNRWA or international aid, while Egypt's own budget to Gaza was modest. Egypt continued to issue Gaza's residents "All-Palestine" passports rather than citizenship, which unfortunately did not alleviate the bureaucratic complications Palestinians were facing. That being said, the Gazan economy did enjoy some growth under Nasser. A free-trade zone was established from 1957 onwards, which entailed tourism infrastructure, including hotels along the coastline, which allowed for Egyptian and international visitors to travel to the Strip. Trade with Egypt also intensified, with goods passing through Sinai and the Gaza port[35]. Within this framework, Nasser aimed to reignite the influence of Palestinian leadership and civilians on the land.

[34] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 120.
[35] Roy, Sara. *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development*. Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995, p. 25.

Most importantly, Nasser was instrumental in founding the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964. At Nasser's request, the Arab League convened a Palestinian National Council in East Jerusalem in May 1964 to form the PLO. Nasser personally picked the PLO's first chairman, Ahmad Shukeiri, an Egyptian-appointed official. The founding PLO charter called for the liberation of Palestine from Israeli colonialism, and an Arab League summit held in Cairo immediately declared this a national objective. In September 1964, at the following Arab League summit in Alexandria, the decision was made to accompany the creation of the PLO by the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA). Nasser declared that Sinai and the Gaza Strip would be at the PLO's disposal for military training. This was more a symbolic gesture of support, but also a strategic move to keep PLO activities under Egyptian supervision. This announcement deepened already existing tensions between Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yasser Arafat: Arafat and Fatah viewed the PLO as little more than an Egyptian tool, lacking real Palestinian independence. This rivalry would become increasingly pronounced as Fatah rose in stature and will be explored further in the following chapters.

In the 1960s, Egyptian troops prepared themselves for a renewed fight to liberate their neighbours. In May 1967 Egyptian troops were deployed in Sinai and tensions mounted around Gaza, a situation that ultimately contributed to the crisis leading up to the Six-Day War. Overall, Nasser's emergence on the Palestinian scene reconfigured the way Egypt administered Gaza. His administration formalized the territory's status legally, by adapting the aforementioned laws. Additionally, under Nasser Egypt engaged in the bloodshed and political activism by and of its own people for Palestinian nationalism. From putting the Palestinian struggle on the national agenda over to providing arms, training, and manpower to the resistance, to finally engaging in open hostilities against the occupying power, Nasser's Egypt was an undeniable ally to the Palestinian people at large and to Gazans specifically. Though this figure is not without controversy, Egyptian-Gazan ties were at their strongest under the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

# Chapter II: From 1967 to the early 2000s

## II. 1 After the Fall: 1967 War and the End of Egyptian Control

The War in June 1967 represented a stark turning point for Palestinians, Egyptians and Israelis alike. Some experts trace the origins of this largely unexpected war to the 1966 regime change in Syria. The radical left-wing leadership expressed the want to launch a people's war of liberation in order to resolve the Palestinian question and began to follow a rather forward policy on their borders, encouraging infiltrations into Israeli territory. This was particularly relevant to Egypt, who had signed a mutual defence agreement with Syria in November of that same year. However, Nasser had assured US government officials that he would not be dragged into a war by the former United Arab Republic member. Both the President himself as well as his military commander Abdel Hakim Amr, had expressed publicly that Arab nations were not looking to get involved in a military conflict[36]. The Israeli government under then Prime Minister Levy Eshkol, did not seem like an administration on the verge of launching a full-scale war. The Soviet ambassador in Cairo, Dimitri Pojidaev delivered a warning on May 13th to the Egyptian foreign office, stating that Israel was massing 10 to 12 brigades on the Syrian border and there was serious reason to believe that they were about to attack[37]. Though this intel turned out to be a drastic overestimation of Israel's military strength at the Syrian border, Egyptians, who had close ties to the Soviet Union, decided to react to this inflated information immediately. They responded by mobilizing their troops and requesting the partial withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) stationed on their side of the armistice line. Though this move was of concern to Israeli leadership, they took on the position that there would be no conflict unless the Egyptians would start interfering with their shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba. While the third United Nations General Secretary, U Thant, was already en route to Cairo, hoping to reduce tensions, Egypt announced the closure of the Gulf

[36] Parker, Richard B. "The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 46, no. 2, Spring 1992, pp. 177–197. *Middle East Institute*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328429.
[37] Idem.

of Aqaba to Israeli shipping and cargo. Although aware of the Israeli positions, Egyptians expected more of a punitive strike rather than the launch of a full-scale military conflict. Even if that were the case, Egypt thought of itself as more than a match for Israel. This turned out to be a tragic miscalculation on their part.

The June 1967 war, whose aftermath became known in the Arabic-speaking world also as the *Naksa*[38], did more than redraw the map of the Arab-Israeli conflict; it marked a psychological rupture, both nationally and regionally. Egypt's defeat, the occupation of Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula, and the collapse of Arab forces in a mere six days ended nearly two decades of Egyptian administration in Gaza and abruptly altered the nature of Egypt's involvement in Palestinian affairs. The suddenness of Israel's aerial pre-emption and its rapid ground gains shattered the image of Egyptian military might carefully cultivated under Nasser's rule. The effects of this loss reverberated not only in Cairo's halls of power but also in the daily realities of Palestinians in Gaza, who now found themselves under direct Israeli occupation for the second time since 1956, many of them still deeply affected by the gruesome memory of that first occupation.

As becomes evident through Soviet involvement in the events preceding the outbreak of the June War, this date was not only of regional but also of geopolitical relevance. In the hours following the destruction of Egypt's air force on June 5th, 1967, Gaza quickly became one of the first territories to fall. The Israeli army entered the Strip on June 6, facing little resistance, as Egyptian forces, already overwhelmed in the Sinai, were ordered to retreat across the Suez Canal. Just a few days later, Gaza was fully under Israeli control. The scale of the collapse was shocking, especially to a leadership that had framed Arab unity and Palestinian liberation as moral imperatives. The symbolic loss of Gaza as well as of the Sinai Peninsula was compounded by the material and emotional disintegration of Nasser's regional project.

[38] Al-Charif, Maher. "Saadallah Wannous. Itinéraire d'Un Intellectuel Arabe Libre - Du Théâtre, de La Modernité et de La Tradition." *Orient XXI*, 18 Aug. 2017, orientxxi.info/magazine/the-second-nakba-displacement-of-palestinians-in-and-after-the-1967-occupation.

Though several Arab countries were militarily defeated in 1967, the war also marked a crucial inflection point in the international community's stance vis-à-vis the Israeli state. For the first time, Israel had launched a pre-emptive war against the totality of its neighbouring Arab states, without direct provocation. Despite this, the war significantly enhanced Israel's image in the West, particularly in the United States and parts of Western Europe. As author Rashid Khalidi notes, the Six-Day War shifted global perceptions of Israel from a beleaguered, post-Holocaust sanctuary into a formidable regional power with sophisticated military capabilities[39]. In the eyes of many Western states, Israel's swift and decisive victory reinforced the narrative of a small democratic state defending itself against the existential Arab threats encompassing it. Meanwhile, in much of the Global South and among non-aligned nations, Israel's occupation of Arab territories, including both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was viewed as a blatant violation of international law, a position codified in United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from territories occupied in the conflict. 1967 also represented a much greater difficulty to achieve a truly sovereign Palestinian state. No longer affiliated with Egypt, Jordan or Syria, Palestinians' ties to any Arab states holding the potential to fight for their cause were severed. For Gazans, the Strip's declaration as a closed military zone meant severe restrictions on freedom of movement[40], with permits for exit tightly controlled by Israeli authorities, which can be inscribed into an enduring system of containment that laid the groundwork for future humanitarian crises.

The sift in Gaza's governance was immediate and traumatic for its residents. As laid out by historian Jean-Pierre Filiu, Israel imposed a curfew on the Strip, conducted mass arrests, and targeted prominent figures of the former Egyptian administration and Palestinian resistance groups[41]. Thousands were displaced, and numerous refugees fled across the newly drawn lines, only to find the Rafah border closed. This closure

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[39] Khalidi, Rashid. *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*. Beacon Press, 2006.
[40] "Egyptian Role in the Siege of Gaza." *Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East*, Factsheet Series No. 062, April 2009, www.cjpme.org/fs_062.
[41] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 199.

stemmed primarily from Egypt's loss of territorial control over Gaza and the redefinition of Rafah as a frontline boundary with Israeli-occupied territory, making any reopening a direct security risk for Sinai.

The Egyptian Red Crescent estimated that nearly 100.000 people were displaced in the aftermath, many attempting to cross into Egypt to escape Israeli control[42]. The Israeli authorities quickly moved to assert control over key administrative, security, and educational functions, replacing Egyptian-led structures with military rule.

Yet the war's consequences were not limited to the fate of Gaza's population. The defeat also shattered the myth of Nasserist invincibility. In Cairo, the initial government announcement framed the war as a Western conspiracy, but the magnitude of the loss quickly became apparent. On June 9th, Nasser gave an emotional televised speech announcing his resignation: a move that sent shockwaves across the Arab world[43]. Crowds took to the streets in mass demonstrations, pleading for him to remain in office. Yielding to popular pressure, Nasser reversed his decision within 24 hours, but the aura of his leadership had been irrevocably damaged. A writer for the Fathom Journal notes that "The Arab defeat in 1967 shattered the image of pan-Arabism as a vehicle of Arab modernisation […] Almost overnight, [Nasser's image] all came to naught.[44]"

Despite the military disaster, Egypt refused to formally relinquish its claim to Gaza. In the months following the war, Egyptian radio broadcasts continued to refer to the Strip as under Egyptian sovereignty, though practically it had no presence there. This rhetorical defiance underscored a deeper dilemma: Egypt had lost control but could not afford, politically or ideologically, to appear as if it had abandoned the Palestinians. As Ilana Feldman depicts in her work, Egypt's prior governance of Gaza had created a

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[42] Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *Badil Bulletin: Palestinian Refugee Return, Displacement and Refugee Rights*, no. 18, Badil Resource Center, May 2004. https://badil.org/phocadownloadpap/Badil_docs/bulletins-and-briefs/Bulletin-18.pdf.

[43] Nasser, Gamal Abdel. "Radio Broadcast to the Nation Announcing Presidential Resignation." *American Rhetoric*, 9 June 1967, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gamelabdelnasser1967resignationaddress.htm.

[44] Susser, Asher. "'1967 Was a Watershed in Middle Eastern History.'" *Fathom Journal*, February 6, 2017, fathomjournal.org/the-six-day-war-was-a-watershed-in-middle-eastern-history/.

complex and often contradictory dynamic; at once protector and administrator, yet also a state with limited accountability toward the stateless population under its charge.[45] In the aftermath of 1967, this ambiguity deepened. Egypt neither governed Gaza nor entirely let go of its symbolic responsibility for it. Militarily expelled but morally entangled, Egypt began to reposition itself. The regime's post-war strategy was twofold: to restore Egyptian territorial sovereignty through diplomacy or force, and to maintain its legitimacy as a central actor in the Palestinian cause. The Khartoum Conference in August 1967, where Arab leaders adopted the famous "Three No's" — no peace with Israel, no recognition, and no negotiations — marked a shared rhetorical front[46]. But beneath this unity lay diverging national priorities. Egypt's main interest, increasingly, became the return of the Sinai.

In Gaza, Israeli rule was swiftly consolidated, but Egypt's influence lingered in subtler forms. Many Palestinians in the Strip continued to see Cairo as the only Arab capital with a legitimate historical claim to Gaza, having administered the territory for nearly two decades. Resistance groups, some of them formed under Egyptian patronage, began to reorganize underground. Israeli authorities treated these groups as a significant threat; arrests and torture became common tactics of repression. As Filiu notes, "the memory of Egyptian rule, for all its ambivalences, soon paled in comparison to the brutalities of Israeli occupation[47]".

Thus, while Egypt had physically withdrawn, its legacy endured in the minds of Palestinians, in the language of Arab solidarity, and in the unresolved questions of sovereignty and justice. The 1967 defeat did not sever Egypt's relationship with Gaza, rather, it transformed it. What had once been a direct form of administration became a diasporic commitment, increasingly filtered through rhetoric, regional diplomacy, and the shifting sands of Cold War politics. In this post-Naksa moment, Egypt began navigating a new role. No longer as Gaza's administrator, but as one of many Arab

[45] Feldman, Ilana. *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967*. Duke University Press, 2008.
[46] "Arab League Summit - Khartoum 1967 - English Text." *Ecf.org.il*, Economic Cooperation Foundation, 17 Jan. 1970, ecf.org.il/media_items/513.
[47] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 201.

states caught between solidarity and realpolitik. The next phase of this relationship would be defined not by direct rule, but by contested memory, diplomatic manoeuvring, and, eventually, ideological transformation.

## II.2 From Rhetoric to Realignment: Egypt's Shifting Policy under Sadat (1973–1979)

The death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in September 1970 was a profound loss to the Arab world, especially after his last triumph of brokering a Palestinian-Jordanian ceasefire agreement, which aided in ending the Black September. The loss of Nasser was symbolically poignant, as it marked not only the end of an era in Arab politics, but also a profound shift in Egypt's orientation toward Gaza and the Palestinian question more broadly. Nasser's image as the champion of pan-Arabism and the Palestinian cause, though certainly not without contradictions, had resonated deeply with many in Gaza who had experienced nearly two decades of Egyptian administration, mostly under Nasser's rule.

The ascension of Anwar Sadat, a close confidant of Nasser who had participated in the 1952 toppling of the monarchy, gradually proved transformative. While initially committed to the legacy of his predecessor, Sadat would go on to dismantle the very foundations of Nasserist policy, ushering in an era of pragmatic nationalism, economic liberalization, and ultimately, rapprochement with Israel. The transition from Nasser to Sadat was met with scepticism across the Arab world. Within Egypt, Sadat was widely perceived as lacking political depth and charisma. Foreign observers and local elites alike considered him a placeholder, a man unlikely to command the ideological machinery of Nasserism, despite having been so close to him. Yet by 1971, through a series of calculated purges and the neutralization of rival factions, including the powerful Vice President Ali Sabri and pro-Soviet officers, Sadat consolidated power

and launched what was called the Corrective Revolution[48]. This process of "de-Nasserization" aimed to dismantle the ideological and institutional foundations of his predecessor's regime. Although this granted Sadat full control over the political system, it also deepened the preexisting domestic mistrust towards him.

Gaza, still under Israeli occupation, retained symbolic importance in Sadat's public discourse. Though less central than the Sinai, it was frequently referenced alongside the West Bank in speeches concerning Egypt's military and diplomatic efforts in Palestine. In private, however, Sadat's regime made no effort to revive armed resistance to the occupation from Egyptian soil. This reflected a broader retreat from Egypt's earlier posture of direct support for Palestinian armed resistance, in favour of a more state-centred, diplomatic approach.

His relegating of the Palestinian cause to a secondary role became more evident in the lead-up to the 1973 October War, referred to in the Arab world as the Ramadan War and in the West as the Yom Kippur War. The offensive was strategically conceived as a limited operation, aimed primarily at reclaiming the Sinai Peninsula. Nonetheless, the act of military engagement was politically transformative. In the eyes of many Egyptians and Palestinians, it restored a sense of agency and honour lost in the 1967 defeat. Sadat, once a disputed figure, was soon celebrated as the "Hero of the Crossing, who had healed Egypt's deep nationalist wounds that the Israelis inflicted in June 1967[49]". Though Gaza was not a direct battlefield in the 1973 war, the conflict nonetheless had indirect effects on the Strip: it reinvigorated Palestinian nationalist sentiment and intensified political organizing.

The war further opened the door to a radically new phase in Egyptian foreign policy. The 1974 disengagement agreements and Egypt's reinvigorated relationship with Washington, that led to the implementation of neoliberal reforms. Sadat, together with Chile's Pinochet, were the first leaders to bring neoliberalism into the Global

[48] Tanner, Henry. "Sadat Launches 'Corrective Revolution' to Consolidate Power." *The New York Times*, 25 May 1971, p. A12.
[49] Cook, Steven A. "Hero of the Crossing? Anwar Sadat Reconsidered." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7 Oct. 2013, www.cfr.org/blog/hero-crossing-anwar-sadat-reconsidered.

South[50]. This relationship with the United States was not only translated into internal policy but also led to Sadat's unprecedented visit to Jerusalem in 1977. Some attribute noble motives to this historic opening. Anwar Sadat, who had been influenced in his youth by the actions of Mahatma Ghandi and his non-violent ethos, sought to disrupt the cycle of violence and mistrust between the Arab States and Israel. This motive was verbalized in the speech pronounced on the 20th of November: "Why don't we move forward, with this courage and this daring, to build a noble edifice to peace that protects and does not threaten, that lights up for the coming generations the human mission of construction, development and the dignity of man? Why should we bequeath to these generations the outcome of bloodshed, the destruction of families and the groans of casualties?[51]".

For many Egyptians, but even more so for Palestinians, this diplomatic overture came as a shock. The symbolic weight of Egypt's leadership had never been greater than during the years of confrontation with Israel. Now, the very state that once hosted the PLO and had administered Gaza was extending a hand to its former enemy. Jean-Pierre Filiu points out that Sadat, before the Israeli government, "advocates for the Palestinian people's right to a state, but without mentioning the PLO or Gaza (though referring to the West Bank)".[52] This omission did not go unnoticed. Syria, Iraq and Libya immediately condemn this action as "treason[53]", while Arafat took a few weeks before responding. He finally leads the PLO into open opposition to Egypt, which, in retaliation, suspends all facilities granted to Palestinian nationals. Such a diktat particularly affected Gaza's students, as they were deprived of access to Egyptian universities. Despite the accusations of betraying the Palestinian cause, Sadat did touch upon sensitive issues in a clear manner while addressing the Knesset: "To tell

[50] Butland, Phil. "The Rise and Fall (and Rise and Fall) of the Egyptian Left: Part 2." *The Left Berlin*, 3 June 2023, www.theleftberlin.com/the-rise-and-fall-and-rise-and-fall-of-the-egyptian-left-part-2/.
[51] Sadat, Anwar. *President Sadat's Speech to the Israeli Knesset, November 20, 1977*. Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, p. 174. https://sadat.umd.edu/sites/sadat.umd.edu/files/President%20Sadat%E2%80%99s%20Speech%20to%20the%20Knesset.compressed.pdf.
[52] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012. p. 175. Translated from French by myself.
[53] Idem.

you the truth, peace cannot be real unless it rests on justice and not on the occupation of the land of others. It is not right that you should demand for yourselves what you deny to others. In all frankness, and in the spirit that impelled me to come to you today, I say to you: You should give up once and for all the dreams of conquest, and the belief that force is the best way to deal with the Arabs.[54]"

The 1978 Camp David Accords, negotiated with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and brokered by U.S. President Jimmy Carter, formalized the beginning of the "battle for a just and lasting peace.[55]" The accords' vague provisions for Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza, though proof of Sadat's integrity, were criticised due to their largely symbolic nature. A far more pressing point, was the bilaterality of the accord, which fully excluded the PLO from the negotiation process. More importantly for Gaza, the implementation of the deal had direct and detrimental consequences. The newly demarcated Philadelphi Corridor, a militarized buffer-zone under shared Israeli and Egyptian control on its respective sides, physically split the city of Rafah in two. This severed family ties, creating loss of social cohesion as well as the destruction of homes located on the corridor's route. Furthermore, Gazan fishermen lost access to previously Egyptian-controlled waters, a critical source of livelihood, and were restricted to operating only during daylight hours under Israeli surveillance.

The subsequent 1979 Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty fundamentally altered Cairo's posture toward both Israel and Gaza. Signed on March 26th, 1979, the treaty — rooted in the Camp David framework — offered Egypt the return of the Sinai Peninsula but required formal recognition of Israel and the cessation of Egyptian support for armed struggle. This was certainly an abrupt shift, as it marked the first time up until then that an Arab country was willing to negotiate with Israel on eye-to-eye level. This move was followed by consequences: immediately upon signing the treaty, Egypt was ostracized by most Arab states. The Arab League expelled Egypt and moved its headquarters from

[54] Sadat, Anwar. *President Sadat's Speech to the Israeli Knesset, November 20, 1977*. Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, p. 175.
[55] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012., p. 181.

Cairo to Tunis[56]. Countries like Syria, Iraq, and Algeria severed diplomatic ties. Gaza's leaders and media outlets reacted with fury. The main sentiment in the Strip was that Camp David had turned their closest neighbour into an adversary overnight. This sense of betrayal was tangible: Gazan communities that had long relied on Egypt for medical treatment, goods, and political advocacy suddenly faced border closures and abandonment. Egyptian universities shut their doors to Gazan students, and Egyptian officials ceased their intermediary role in Palestinian matters. Despite these consequences, Sadat remained steadfast. He argued that regaining Sinai and stabilizing Egypt were prerequisites for becoming a credible voice for Palestinian rights. A strong, internationally backed Egypt, he stipulated, could ultimately serve the Palestinian cause more effectively.

By the mid-1970s, Egypt was reeling from economic hardship, burdened by war debt, stagnant growth, and growing domestic discontent. Meanwhile, U.S. engagement in the region had surged, and Sadat saw American aid as critical for economic recovery and political consolidation, an approach that stood in contrast to the will of many Egyptians. Sadat's decision to remove subsidies from bread and other basic necessities resulted in a two-day national strike, known under the term "Bread Revolution[57]". In Egyptian Arabic, the word for bread is a synonym for "living", reflecting its symbolic and material importance. Though the revolt was initially violently repressed, the regime eventually paused the reforms and ceased efforts of implementation temporarily.

Another shift under Sadat which affected Gaza just as much, if not more, than Egypt was his stance towards Islamists. In contrast to Nasser's harsh repression, Sadat adopted a policy of engagement. As early as the early 1970s, he released leading Brotherhood figures from prison and allowed the group to resume limited social, educational, and religious activities. The regime's security services, with Sadat's

[56] League of Arab States. *League of Arab States: Membership Suspensions and Headquarters Relocation*. UN Term, United Nations Terminology Repository, 2025.
[57]Butland, Phil. "The Rise and Fall (and Rise and Fall) of the Egyptian Left: Part 2." *The Left Berlin*, 3 June 2023, https://www.theleftberlin.com/the-rise-and-fall-and-rise-and-fall-of-the-egyptian-left-part-2/

blessing, tolerated the Brotherhood's growing influence as a counterbalance to leftist and Nasserist forces, effectively creating an unofficial alliance. As Carrie Wickham notes, Sadat's approach aimed at "co-opting Islamists without empowering them politically,[58]" but it ultimately created an uncontrollable dynamic. This willingness to cooperate with the Brotherhood extended across borders and had profound implications for Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, already heavily influenced by its Egyptian counterpart, was emboldened by Cairo's rehabilitation of Islamist actors. As a scholar observes, the Brotherhood's re-legitimization in Egypt "paved the way for the Islamization of Palestinian political discourse, particularly in Gaza, [59]" where charitable and religious networks affiliated with the Brotherhood expanded significantly. Sadat's Islamist strategy eventually backfired. The movement he helped empower bifurcated: one stream pursued gradual reform under the Brotherhood's banner, while another adopted more radical methods, embodied by groups such as *al-Jihad al-Islami* and *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*. Some compare Sadat's support of Islamists as him having created a Frankenstein's monster[60]. What began as a tactic to balance the political scales at home ultimately reshaped Gaza's internal dynamics and seeded the ideological terrain that later led to the president's own demise as well as the formation of radical groups.

By the decade's end, Egypt's relationship with Gaza had changed fundamentally. No longer a direct administrator or vocal advocate, Cairo had turned inward, prioritizing peace with Israel and domestic stability over regional confrontation. The symbolic weight of shared history remained, but the political bond weakened. Gaza, once tied to Egypt through governance, now stood increasingly alone, caught between occupation and the growing influence of new actors Egypt had helped to empower. This withdrawal did not mark the end of Egypt's involvement, but rather the beginning of a

[58] Wickham, Carrie *Mobilizing Islam*, 2002, p. 45
[59] Abu-Amr, Ziad. "Hamas: A Historical and Political Background." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, Summer 1993, pp. 5–19.
[60] Butland, Phil. "The Rise and Fall (and Rise and Fall) of the Egyptian Left: Part 2." *The Left Berlin*, 3 June 2023, www.theleftberlin.com/the-rise-and-fall-and-rise-and-fall-of-the-egyptian-left-part-2/.

new phase: one defined less by presence and more by diplomacy, mediation, and strategic distance; an evolution that would take shape under Mubarak's long rule.

## II.3. From Cold Peace to Regional Mediator (1980s–2005)

Following Sadat's assassination in October 1981 by Egyptian Islamic Jihadists, Hosni Mubarak inherited a country under heavy diplomatic fire. Full adherence to the peace treaty was a prerequisite for continued U.S. military aid, which then amounted to about $1.3 billion annually[61]. Economically, Egypt prioritized reconstruction: U.S. assistance funded infrastructure repairs in Sinai and subsidized armaments essential to deter potential threats. As Mubarak consolidated power, he also recognized that domestic legitimacy hinged on reviving Egypt's Arab credentials.

Egypt's regional rehabilitation gained traction during the First Intifada, which erupted in late 1987 in the Jabalya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Mubarak's government initially condemned the violence but soon realized that it had to regain the trust of fellow Arab leaders, who showed support for the uprising. In early 1988, Egypt dispatched humanitarian convoys to Gaza while carefully avoiding any involvement in arms transfers or militant backing. As Israel escalated its response with curfews, mass arrests, and home demolitions, Cairo publicly denounced these collective punishments but privately discouraged radical Palestinian factions from intensifying the confrontation[62]. Mubarak's strategy also reflected his worry of domestic incitement of political unrest. He feared that radicalism in Gaza could inspire similar mobilizations within Egypt. In opposition to Sadat, Mubarak had reinstituted Nasser's ban on the Muslim Brotherhood and viewed Islamist movements with deep suspicion. This sentiment did not change anything about the emergence of Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, in December 1987. It did not affect the reality

[61] Sharp, Jeremy M. *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*. Congressional Research Service, 5 Feb. 2021, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33003.
[62] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. *Histoire de Gaza*. Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2012., p. 208-221.

either, that Egyptian intelligence maintained informal channels with certain Hamas leaders.

Among them was Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who came to Gaza as a refugee after the 1948 Nakba and moved on to become one of Hamas' founders and the group's spiritual leader. He had been educated in Cairo for a year and maintained contact with Egyptian Brotherhood members. At this time already, first inter-Palestinian issues could be sensed. For example, Yassin had a strenuous relationship to Yasser Arafat, as both leaders diverged on fundamental issues. Yassin emphasized resistance and Islamic governance, while Arafat pursued political negotiation through the PLO. These emerging ideological rifts complicated Egypt's stance, there was no unified Palestinian movement to engage with, but rather multiple fractions. Palestine had now not only been geographically severed, but also politically.

Another source of tension emerged on the Egypt-Gaza border: the 100-meter-wide buffer zone, or Philadelphi Corridor created under Camp David, did not seem to prevent the movement of illegal goods and people between Egypt and Gaza. Though tunnels had been built as early as 1982, mostly for communication purposes between the families divided by the split of Rafah city, they now came to Israel's attention as security concerns in the context of the First Intifada[63]. In coordination with Israel, Egypt's security apparatus conducted intermittent crackdowns on tunnel activity in that area throughout the 1980s. As Gaza's population grew and closures by Israel became more frequent, the number of tunnels being dug beneath the buffer increased as well[64]. The tunnels were first used by Rafah residents for economic reasons. For instance, Egyptian gasoline could be sold at a high price in Gaza. Smugglers reportedly also dealt in US dollars, cigarettes, gold and spare car parts. Over time, however, the network evolved, with some tunnels facilitating the movement of weapons and militants, particularly during periods of heightened conflict. While sources differ on the

[63] Sharp, Jeremy M. *The Egypt–Gaza Border and Its Effect on Israeli–Egyptian Relations*. Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1 Feb. 2008. *UNT Digital Library*, https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc820611/.
[64] United States Congress, Congressional Research Service. *The Smuggling Tunnels: 1982–Present*. CRS Report RL34346, 1 Feb. 2008. CRSLibrary Bus. RL34346, Congressional Research Service.

extent of arms and personnel smuggling during the First Intifada, by the Second Intifada such activity had become well-documented and largely undisputed. While the tunnel system played a secondary role in actual combat, even critical observers acknowledge that it became a vital lifeline for an increasingly blockaded Gaza. Simultaneously, the tunnels became a persistent strategic concern for both Cairo and Tel Aviv.

By 1989, the intifada's political momentum contributed to Egypt's readmission into the Arab League, albeit under conditions requiring visible support for Palestinian self-determination. Egypt's re-inclusion did not mean that it had been forgiven by the Arab League members. Its role remained secondary in the Arab world, but Mubarak made tangible effort to change this. Though the first Palestinian popular uprising eventually subsided by 1993, its impact on Gaza was enduring: the rise of grassroots organizing, popular committees, and new Islamist currents, had been proof to Gazans that they did not need to rely on Egyptians or Israelis to defend the dignity of their people.

Notably, Egypt's marginal role in the Madrid Conference of 1991 revealed the extent of its waning influence in Palestinian affairs. Although the conference was co-sponsored by the United States and a crumbling Soviet Union — whose participation was largely ceremonial given its imminent dissolution — it marked the first multilateral attempt to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Madrid process included not just Israel and the Palestinians, within a joint Jordanian delegation, but also Syria and Lebanon. Its lack of presence was indicative of a broader loss of regional authority. As a Professor of International Relations has noted, "Egypt's symbolic participation could not mask its political marginality; its role was now more that of a gatekeeper to Western-backed diplomacy than a genuine advocate for Palestinian agency[65]."

The ensuing negotiations of Madrid, the Oslo Accords, marked the first concrete steps toward bilateral dialogue between Israel and the PLO under Yasser Arafat. Although Egypt was not a principal party, it reasserted a considerable degree of influence. In the

[65] Brand, Laurie A. *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations: The Political Economy of Alliance Making*. Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 142.

lead-up to Oslo I, Egyptian intelligence facilitated safe passage for Palestinian negotiators traveling through Cairo. Egypt's diplomatic involvement became increasingly visible in the years that followed. In 1993, President Mubarak hosted the Cairo Summit with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat, and in 1994, Egypt also hosted the signing of the Gaza–Jericho Agreement, which launched the initial implementation of Palestinian self-rule[66]. Oslo II, also known as the Taba Agreement, was concluded on Egyptian soil in 1995, further underscoring Cairo's sustained role in the peace process. As for the outcome of Oslo, Mubarak's administration formally recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as the legitimate authority in the occupied Palestinian territories. Egypt had long maintained ties with the PLO, but the Oslo framework provided an official diplomatic basis to engage with the organization as the representative of the Palestinian people. Mubarak's government quickly moved to support the nascent Palestinian Authority (PA), which was established as part of the Accord's implementation. Cairo aided in training sessions for PA security personnel, provided institutional support for the civil administration in Gaza, and facilitated Yasser Arafat's return to the Gaza Strip in 1994. These diplomatic moves demonstrated that while Egypt lacked direct involvement, it continuously expressed a sense of moral responsibility towards Gaza.

As established earlier, Egypt openly cultivated relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its dominant faction, Fatah. At the same time, it viewed Hamas's rise with deep suspicion. These concerns were particularly heightened during the Second Intifada, which lasted from 2000 to 2005. During those five years, the group increased its influence in the occupied territories. Fearing Islamist spillover into Sinai and being warned about increased activity around the tunnels by Israel, Egypt reinforced the Philadelphi Corridor, replacing earthen berms with concrete barriers to curtail smuggling and cross-border infiltration.

[66] "Israel and PLO Sign Accord Granting Palestinian Autonomy." *The New York Times*, 5 May 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/05/world/israel-and-plo-sign-accord-granting-palestinian-autonomy.html.

During this period, Egypt despite the clear bias, increased its mediation efforts. While maintaining its alignment with the Palestinian Authority, it hosted several rounds of intra-Palestinian talks in Cairo, including high-profile Fatah-Hamas meetings. These efforts, such as the 2002 Cairo summit, were meant to present Egypt as a neutral broker, but they largely failed to produce lasting reconciliation. Nonetheless, they demonstrated Cairo's strategic interest in preserving regional stability and preventing further fragmentation of the Palestinian movement.

The ultimate fragmentation of inter-Palestinian politics was sealed by Hamas's electoral victory in 2006. Egypt, along with much of the international community, refused to recognize the group's win in the parliamentary elections. While Palestinian leadership fractured, Mubarak's regime decisively sided with Fatah. Reports later revealed that Egypt allowed U.S.-backed arms shipments destined for Fatah strongman Mohammed Dahlan to pass through its territory[67]. This partiality further destabilized Gaza, contributing to the eventual outbreak of violence. When Hamas took control of Gaza in June 2007, following a series of confrontations with Fatah, Egypt's response was swift and unambiguous. The Rafah crossing was sealed, only opening when Israeli-approved arms shipments were to be delivered to Fatah, or under particular international pressure. When convoys arrived to deliver international aid, Mubarak's administration led them pass.

Egypt's subsequent policy treated Gaza as a hostile entity. The government, citing security concerns, maintained tight restrictions at the border. While limited humanitarian exceptions were allowed into Gaza, Egypt largely coordinated with Israel and the U.S. in efforts to isolate Hamas. The siege on Gaza tightened, and Rafah became a symbol of blockade and neglect. Public criticism intensified as Egypt was seen to be complicit in the humanitarian crisis. Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit's

[67] Rizk, Philip. "Egypt's Two-Faced Gaza Policy." *Egypt Independent*, 31 Jan. 2010, egyptindependent.com/egypts-two-faced-gaza-policy/.

2008 defence of the border closure, placing blame squarely on Hamas for rejecting PA oversight, only amplified regional frustration.

These tensions came to a rise during Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), when Egypt's refusal to fully open Rafah during Israel's assault on Gaza sparked outrage across the Arab world. Images of injured Palestinians turned away at the border fuelled mass protests inside Egypt, where opposition parties and civil society groups accused the Mubarak regime of betraying its historic support for Palestine. This public discontent was further amplified d by revelations of deepened trilateral security cooperation between Egypt, Israel, and the United States. Along the Philadelphi Corridor, Egypt increased tunnel demolition operations with U.S. logistical support and began construction of a steel underground barrier to sever smuggling routes[68].

While Cairo continued to host periodic reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, these efforts yielded little substantive progress. The discourse within Egypt grew polarized: state media emphasized the need for national security and containment of extremism, while independent outlets criticized the regime's complicity in Gaza's suffering. By 2010, Egypt's role in Gaza had become emblematic of its broader crisis of legitimacy.

When the Egyptian revolution erupted in January 2011, these tensions had already crystallized. Gaza had become a symbol of the Mubarak regime's moral failure, its foreign policy perceived as subservient to Israeli and American interests at the expense of Arab solidarity. Public anger over the Rafah blockade, combined with years of repression and inequality, contributed to the broader calls for change. Just days after Mubarak's resignation, thousands of Palestinians demonstrated in Ramallah and Gaza, calling for an end to the internal Palestinian division. Like their counterparts across the

[68] Sharp, Jeremy M. *The Egypt–Gaza Border and Its Effect on Israeli–Egyptian Relations*. Congressional Research Service, 1 Feb. 2008, https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc820611/.

Arab world, young Palestinians took to social media to organize their own movement, called "March 15" not for regime change, but to restore national unity[69].

This moment marked the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. Egypt's dual posture, as a peace treaty partner with Israel and an erstwhile advocate for Palestine, had become unsustainable in the face of popular mobilization and regional upheaval. The rise of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood would soon reconfigure Egypt's approach to Gaza, initiating a short-lived era of ideological alignment and diplomatic engagement that stood in sharp contrast to Mubarak's policies.

[69] Odeh, Nour. "Palestine's Youth Revolt." *Foreign Policy*, 23 Mar. 2011, foreignpolicy.com/2011/03/23/palestines-youth-revolt-2/.

# Chapter III: Egypt's Gaza Policy, 2011–2025

## III.1. Revolution and Realignment: The Arab Spring and Morsi's Presidency (2011–2013)

Mohamed Morsi's election to the presidency in June 2012 marked a moment of extraordinary political promise. As the first democratically elected head of state in Egypt's modern history, Morsi's administration was expected to break from decades of military-backed diplomacy and reassert Egypt's regional autonomy. His party's electoral platform emphasized the need to restore Egypt's role as a leader of the Arab and Islamic world, with special focus on the Palestinian cause[70]. Amr Darrag, head of the Freedom and Justice Party's foreign relations committee, stated unequivocally that "Egypt completely lost its cultural, religious, and political leadership positions during [the Mubarak] period[71]" and vowed to transform Egyptian foreign policy accordingly.

Morsi's early foreign policy moves reflected these ambitions. His first international visits included stops in Tehran and Addis Ababa, signalling a potential reorientation away from traditional Western alliances. His participation in the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Iran, the first such visit by an Egyptian leader since 1979, further underscored the symbolic distance from the Mubarak era[72]. Yet, despite this rhetorical pivot, Morsi's administration quickly affirmed Egypt's continued adherence to its international treaties, including the peace agreement with Israel.

This duality of bold symbolism paired with cautious continuity, was most evident in Egypt's Gaza policy. During the electoral campaign, Morsi had strongly championed Palestinian liberation, declaring in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly that "the first issue which the world must exert all its efforts in resolving,

[70] Foreign Policy in Morsi's Presidential Election Platform, *Ikhwan Web*, 2012.
[71] Darrag, Amr. *"A Revolutionary Foreign Policy: The Muslim Brotherhood's Political Party Promises to Transform Egypt's Place in the World,"* Foreign Policy, October 16, 2012.
[72] Roll, Stephan; Grimm, Jannis (2012) : Egyptian foreign policy under Mohamed Morsi: Domestic considerations and economic constraints, SWP Comments, No. 35/2012, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin.

based on justice and dignity, is the Palestinian cause[73]". However, when confronted with the realities of governance, including economic instability, institutional resistance, and strategic dependencies, his administration chose to maintain most of Mubarak's security arrangements.

The November 2012 Israeli assault on Gaza, the IDF's Operation Pillar of Defence, tested Morsi's foreign policy credibility. His government responded with a plethora of symbolic actions: recalling the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv, dispatching Prime Minister Hisham Qandil to Gaza, and allowing mass protests in Egyptian streets[74]. Morsi also engaged in direct talks with Hamas leadership, which garnered praise in Palestinian circles. Some praised him for "not selling out the resistance[75]". These efforts culminated in Egypt brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, earning international recognition, including from then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton[76].

However, behind these diplomatic victories lay structural limitations. Morsi never moved to renegotiate the Camp David security annexes, nor did he permanently open the Rafah border crossing. Despite early gestures suggesting a freer trade relationship with Gaza, as it had existed under Nasser, such a zone was never implemented. Indeed, by mid-2013, Egypt had reimposed stringent controls on border traffic and intensified efforts to destroy tunnels, actions that mirrored Mubarak-era policy. As *The Economist* observed, "Egypt's new Islamist leaders have so far failed to embrace their Gazan brothers[77]". These inconsistencies exposed the contradiction between electoral promises and pragmatic constraints.

Domestic factors played a central role in shaping this paradox. Egypt's post-revolution economy was fragile: inflation was rampant, tourism had collapsed, and international

[73] "Statement of H.E. Dr. Mohamed Morsy President of the Arab Republic of Egypt," The Permanent Mission
of Egypt to the United Nations in New York, September 26, 2012.
[74] H.A. Hellyer, "From Tahrir to Tel Aviv," Brookings Institution, November 19, 2012.
[75] David D. Kirkpatrick and Jodi Rudoren, "Israel and Hamas Agree to a Cease-Fire, After a U.S.-Egypt Push," The New York Times, November 21, 2012.
[76] Edmund Blair, "Analysis: Egypt Proves Peace Role Can Survive Arab Spring," *Reuters*, November 22, 2012.
[77] "A honeymoon that wasn't: Egypt's new Islamist leaders have so far failed to embrace their Gazan brothers", The Economist, September 29, 2012, http://www.economist.com/node/21563776.

investment rapidly fell. In this context, the regime's dependency on U.S. economic and military assistance, constrained foreign policy flexibility[78], a recurring issue Egyptian leadership confronted. Furthermore, the Egyptian military, though nominally subordinate to the civilian presidency, remained a powerful actor and likely opposed any radical shift in Gaza policy that might jeopardize strategic security arrangements with Israel.

By the time of Morsi's ousting in July 2013, his Gaza policy had come full circle. Despite rhetorical declarations of solidarity and some symbolic diplomatic realignment, the policy toward Gaza under Morsi largely resembled that of his predecessors: constrained, risk-averse, and ultimately subordinated to national and regional imperatives. However, his presidency reinforced Egypt's role as an essential mediator, able to facilitate temporary de-escalations. Less averse to talking to all parties involved, meaning both the PLO and Hamas, gave Morsi's administration credibility as a broker.

Though the Arab Spring did represent a fleeting moment of possibility for an improved Egyptian–Gazan relationship, several factors stood in the way of tangible change. Morsi's short tenure demonstrated both the potential and the limits of ideologically driven foreign policy in a context of probing transition toward a fragile democracy. As in previous eras, Egypt's relationship with Gaza remained deeply intertwined with domestic legitimacy, geopolitical alignments, and the ever-present calculus of national interest.

[78] Selim, Gamal M. "Egyptian Foreign Policy after the 2011 Revolution: The Dynamics of Continuity and Change." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 49, no. 1, 13 Apr. 2020, pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1747983.

## III.2 Security-First Egypt: Post-revolutionary Shifts under Sisi (2013–2020)

The overthrow of Egypt's first democratically elected president, in July 2013 marked a clear turning point in Cairo's policy toward Gaza. Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Egyptian state took an explicitly security-first stance, turning Islamist movements, domestically and elsewhere in the region, into a prime target. Egypt launched a campaign to cripple Gaza's tunnel economy and tighten control of the Rafah crossing. Simultaneously, Cairo reverted to framing itself as a guardian of Gaza's welfare and a mediator in Palestinian affairs. For example, during the 50-day assault on Gaza in Summer 2014, Egypt proposed a cease-fire plan, in which it explicitly called Israel an occupying power[79]. Although initial Hamas demands, such as an end to the blockade and prisoner releases were unmet, Egypt ultimately helped lay out the August 2014 truce. In doing so Cairo balanced pressure on Hamas with pressure on Israel: the Egyptian proposal insisted Hamas be sidelined in border enforcement, yet Sisi also reminded the world of Gaza's plight and urged aid. After the 2014 war, Sisi declared at Arab summits that Arab leaders should focus on Gaza's reconstruction, echoing Nasser's legacy of Palestinian support[80].

Sisi's government did initially deviate from Morsi's Hamas-friendly approach: unlike his predecessor, who eased the blockade and engaged in talks with Hamas, Sisi soon demonized the group as a Sinai-security threat. In 2014, Egyptian courts formally designated Hamas as a terrorist organization[81]. This new legal framework, accompanied by a sweeping new anti-terror law, seemed to have codified the regime's new stance. Paradoxically, it took only two years for this stance to hold up. In the beginning of 2016, Sisi sought to cooperate with Hamas, to counter surges by IS in Sinai[82]. Egypt oscillated between hard-line blockade and selective cooperation: initially

[79] "An Egyptian Reset on Gaza." *Middle East Institute*, 2018, mei.edu/publications/egyptian-reset-gaza.
[80] Idem.
[81] "Egyptian Court Declares Hamas a "Terrorist" Group." *Al Jazeera*, 28 Feb. 2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/2/28/egyptian-court-declares-hamas-a-terrorist-group.
[82] Mandour, Maged. "Egypt's Shifting Hamas Policies." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 July 2021, carnegieendowment.org/sada/2021/07/egypts-shifting-hamas-policies?lang=en.

crushing Gaza's smuggling lifelines, then shifting again. In the spirit of their rapprochement, Hamas leaders began visiting Cairo for talks: a March 2016 delegation held security discussions, and Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's Gaza chief, made public visits in January and September 2017. In return, Hamas formally renounced its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in mid-2017 and emphasized it would not threaten Egypt. Afterwards a pro-Sisi TV host praised Gaza's rulers for helping destroy tunnels, reflecting the new détente.

Though there was a short collaboration serving domestic interests, this did in no way mean that Sisi was now friendly toward Hamas or other groups driven by religious ideology. Sisi repeatedly asserted that securing the Sinai border justified closing Gaza's only non-Israeli gateway. For example, in late 2015 Sisi told Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas that the Rafah crossing "could operate normally" only if the Palestinian Authority took control[83]. Citing Sinai militancy, he framed tunnel-smashing and border buffer zones as defensive steps. In public appearances, Sisi spoke of Gaza's suffering with concern, invoking Egypt's historic role as Palestine's leader, like Nasser, but always insisted Egyptian security comes first.

Domestic politics also reflected this shift. The state-controlled media and loyalist commentators openly blamed Gaza's Hamas for Egypt's troubles. On pro-government TV, hosts called for militarily ousting Gaza's leaders. This process of vilifying Hamas was done before the background of Sisi's broader crackdown on the Brotherhood. Opposition parties, meaning secular, liberal, and Nasserist groups, eventually broke ranks. In summer 2014, at the height of the assault on Gaza, they issued a joint statement condemning Israel and demanding that Rafah be opened permanently "above political considerations[84]". This rare show of Egyptian civil unity highlighted popular sympathy for Gazans. But the Sisi government mostly resisted, insisting on strict controls. As one Gaza analyst put it, "Egypt tried to demonise and outlaw the MB,

[83] Strickland, Patrick. "Egypt Army Destroys Dozens of Gaza Tunnels." *Al Jazeera*, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/9/egypt-army-destroys-dozens-of-gaza-tunnels.
[84] "An Egyptian Reset on Gaza." *Middle East Institute*, 2018, mei.edu/publications/egyptian-reset-gaza.

and weaken Hamas… this policy won't succeed. It only hurts the 1.8 million civilians in Gaza[85]".

Under Sisi, the Egypt–Gaza border was transformed into a fortress. Security forces razed entire neighbourhoods on Egypt's side of Rafah to create a deep buffer zone. Thousands of homes and farmlands were demolished in the span of 2014 to 2015. Human Rights Watch reports at least 3,200 families evicted, with Egyptian troops not even shying away from firing on farmers and fishermen near the border[86]. By late 2015 the army boasted it had destroyed over 1300 Gaza tunnels, that are also key for smuggling food and medicine and was flooding others[87]. These actions fit Sisi's narrative of protecting Sinai from Gaza-origin militants, but for Gazans they meant a near-total blockade. The Rafah crossing itself remained largely closed throughout Sisi's presidency. Except for brief humanitarian or pilgrimage windows, Gazans could not easily travel to Egypt. A news outlet noted in 2018 that Rafah had only opened sporadically since 2013, mainly during Muslim holidays and occasionally to ferry aid during protests. Egypt strictly limited the crossing to those holding foreign residencies or special permits, essentially barring most Gazans. Only under heavy pressure did Cairo relent briefly: for example, in Ramadan 2018 Sisi authorized opening Rafah for the first time in years to "alleviate the burdens" after clashes on Gaza's border[88]. Yet even then only a few hundred people and limited trucks were allowed into the besieged enclave.

By 2020 Egypt had sealed off the border more tightly than ever. Earlier that year, Egyptian forces began erecting a massive steel wall along much of the 14km frontier. This new barrier, about 7 to 8 meters high and equipped with underground sensors, parallels a concrete wall whose construction had started in February. The government gave no public explanation beyond repeating that the goal was to "control the border

[85] Strickland, Patrick. "Egypt Army Destroys Dozens of Gaza Tunnels." *Al Jazeera*, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/9/egypt-army-destroys-dozens-of-gaza-tunnels.
[86] Idem.
[87] Mandour, Maged. "Egypt's Shifting Hamas Policies." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 July 2021, carnegieendowment.org/sada/2021/07/egypts-shifting-hamas-policies?lang=en.
[88] "Egypt Opens Gaza's Rafah Crossing for Ramadan." *Voice of America*, Voice of America (VOA News), 18 May 2018, www.voanews.com/a/egypt-opens-gaza-rafah-crossing-ramadan/4399514.html.

and prevent any illegal activity". In practice, the physical barrier underscores a decades-long policy: in the words of Egypt's president, Gaza has "two occupations – Israeli occupation and Hamas occupation[89]," and Egypt will not loosen the grip on its Sinai border, even if that has detrimental effects on Gazans.

Journalists and aid workers warned that the destruction of tunnels would deepen the humanitarian crisis. UN reports found vast food insecurity and 44% unemployment in Gaza after 2015[90], attributing much hardship to the tightened siege. In sum, under Sisi the border turned into a symbol of Egypt's hard stance: heavily militarized and largely shut.

The isolation and repeated conflicts under Sisi's border policies had a profound effect on Gaza's politics. Since 2013, Hamas consolidated its rule even as it lost external patrons. The fall of Egypt's Brotherhood and Syria's civil war had already weakened Hamas's regional position. Under Sisi, Hamas responded by reshaping its strategy. In 2014-15, a unity government with Fatah was briefly formed in Gaza, but it collapsed amid mutual distrust. Nonetheless, Hamas realized it needed to reduce tensions with Egypt. Therefore, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, elected in 2017, actively sought to improve ties with Cairo and curb engaged with Sisi when approached for help with Islamist surges.

At the same time, Gaza's society became more agitated. Years of siege, unemployment and economic hardship had bred frustration. By 2018, the Great March of Return protests erupted along Gaza's Israeli border, driven by ordinary Gazans demanding an end to the blockade and right of return. These demonstrations, though primarily aimed at Israel, also reflected Gazans' desperation under the siege. Egypt watched uneasily: Cairo warned that Hamas must ensure such protests did not spill into Sinai. Within Gaza, smaller protests also targeted their own leadership. In March 2019, hundreds of Gazans demonstrated against tax hikes and political repression. These dynamics

[89] Strickland, Patrick. "Egypt Army Destroys Dozens of Gaza Tunnels." *Al Jazeera*, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/9/egypt-army-destroys-dozens-of-gaza-tunnels.
[90] Idem.

showed a political evolution: Gaza's population grew less patient with Hamas's governance, even as opportunities for democratic choice, such as elections or broad reconciliation, remained blocked by both Israeli and Egyptian pressure.

Reconciliation efforts continued intermittently. Egypt regularly shuttled between Hamas and Fatah to broker new unity deals, though none took lasting effect. Meanwhile, Hamas gradually softened its ideology to appeal for broader legitimacy. Officially ending its Brotherhood affiliation in 2017 marked a shift: Hamas increasingly presented itself as simply Palestine's resistance rather than an Egyptian-born Islamist movement. After years of sequestration, Gaza's politics thus grew inward-facing: Hamas's rule was characterized by strict oversight, and local civil-society groups, thinkers, aid workers and journalists, operated under severe restrictions. In this environment, Egypt was seen ambivalently by Gazans: some credit Cairo for mediating ceasefires, but many blame it for enforcing the blockade that undercuts Gaza's economy and mobility.

The draconian measures on Gaza did not go unchallenged by civil society on both sides of the border. In Egypt, independent parties and activists, many of whom had experienced the 2011 and 2013 uprisings, openly criticized Sisi's Gaza policy. They repeatedly reminded the regime that public sentiment in Egypt remained sympathetic to Palestinians. In August 2014, a coalition of secular and liberal parties issued a joint demand that Egypt "open the Rafah crossing… permanently,[91]" reflecting popular outrage at Gaza's suffering. Yet, the Sisi government largely quelled dissent at home: speaking out against the blockade could itself be branded as support for "terrorists." Press freedom and protest rights were shrinking, so open challenges to Gaza policy were rare after 2015.

By 2020 the picture was mixed. The Sisi regime continued to speak supportively of Palestine on diplomatic stages, hoping to showcase its Pan-Arab credentials. It led the Arab League in calling for Gaza relief and served as chief interlocutor with Israel on

[91] Mandour, Maged. "Egypt's Shifting Hamas Policies." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 July 2021, carnegieendowment.org/sada/2021/07/egypts-shifting-hamas-policies?lang=en.

Gaza ceasefires. Yet at the grassroots level both in Egypt and Gaza, many people saw little improvement. Gazans were angry at being stuck under blockade, Egyptians were divided between pro-regime media celebrated security measures, while family ties and media across the border meant ordinary Egyptians were still aware of Gaza's plight. In broad terms, civil society on both sides was silenced: Egyptian NGOs and media were discouraged from criticizing Cairo's Gaza policy, and Gazan NGOs were barely able to operate under the siege. Nevertheless, the underlying sentiment persisted: many Egyptians professed solidarity with Gaza's people, and a substantial number of Gazans blamed leaders on both sides for their misery. These grassroots pressures were sometimes able to slightly nudge policy: for instance, Egypt's occasional border openings for medical cases were framed as humanitarian gestures. However, by 2020 the dominant dynamic remained security control.

## III.3 Escalation and Diplomacy: Cairo's Response to the Gaza Crisis

The early 2020s witnessed the Gaza Strip oscillating between relative diplomatic quiet and recurring episodes of deadly escalation. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gaza's already fragile healthcare system, underfunded, overstretched, and heavily reliant on external aid, collapsed further under pressure. As a result of both Israeli restrictions and Egyptian border limitations, medical equipment, vaccines, and fuel entered the enclave only sporadically. According to reports by humanitarian organizations operating in the region, by mid-2021 Gaza had one of the lowest vaccination rates in the Eastern Mediterranean[92]. The pandemic exacerbated economic hardship and further entrenched public discontent but also brought a fleeting reprieve in terms of cross-border violence.

[92] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs—Occupied Palestinian Territory (*OCHA oPt*). *COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report No. 30, 30 April 2021*. OCHA oPt, 6 May 2021, www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-30-april-2021.

This period of relative quiet was shattered in May 2021 during what became known as the "Sword of Jerusalem" conflict. Triggered by Israeli actions in East Jerusalem and the storming of al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan, Hamas launched rockets into Israeli territory. The Israeli Air Force responded with strikes on densely populated areas of Gaza. Egypt, consistent with its post-2007 mediation role, played a central part in brokering the ceasefire that ended the eleven-day conflict[93]. Cairo's diplomatic corps positioned itself once again as a key regional intermediary, hosting multiple rounds of indirect negotiations between Hamas and Israeli officials, and facilitating the entry of humanitarian assistance into Gaza, albeit limited.

Over the next two years, Egyptian foreign policy toward Gaza remained grounded in cautious pragmatism. Border controls through Rafah were periodically relaxed or tightened depending on the security climate, with Cairo simultaneously overseeing prisoner exchanges and supporting limited reconstruction efforts, particularly after the May 2021 conflict. Egyptian intelligence officials continued to hold confidential meetings with Hamas and Fatah representatives alike, reiterating Egypt's longstanding demand for Palestinian national reconciliation.

Two years later, everything changed. The Hamas-led attacks on October the 7th, 2023 and the following ground invasion of Gaza, marked a drastic turn. Suddenly, the small Strip re-entered global consciousness with unprecedented intensity. The West, which had been relatively quiet on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the early 2000s, started to collectively turn their attention toward the enclave. The ensuing debate was shockingly polarized. News outlets spoke of "condemnation" of Hamas' actions and often repeated Israeli propaganda without checking the information prior to its release. CNN insiders revealed that editorial practices led to "regurgitation of Israeli propaganda" and a consistent lack of fact-checking of claims made by Netanyahu's

[93] El Dahan, Mai, and Nidal al-Mughrabi. "Egypt Sends Delegation to Israel and Gaza to Reinforce Ceasefire." *Reuters*, 22 May 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-sends-delegation-israel-gaza-reinforce-ceasefire-2021-05-22/.

government. One insider described it as “journalistic malpractice” due to the network's tendency to parrot Israeli narratives without scrutiny[94].

October the 7th also dramatically strained Egypt’s regional posture and spurred new policies. While Egypt did not openly support Hamas’s operation, its leaders emphasized the illegality of collective punishment and repeatedly urged a ceasefire. Within days of the attack, international agencies operating in or through Cairo, including United Nations bodies and humanitarian organizations, warned of an impending humanitarian disaster. President Sisi publicly framed Israel’s sweeping strikes as a grave injustice: as he told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, forcing Gazans out of their land would “liquidate the Palestinian cause[95]”. Egypt’s foreign ministry also criticized Israel’s announced evacuation of Rafah as unjustified “collective punishment” and called for immediate aid corridors[96].

Crucially, Cairo drew a firm red line[97] on the proposal – floated by some Israeli and U.S. figures – to move Gaza’s population into Sinai or elsewhere. Egyptian officials, reflecting widespread domestic sentiment, branded this idea as unacceptable. President Sisi declared he would “never” let Gaza’s people be treated as disposables and warned that any such transfer would make Sinai a launchpad for future conflict[98]. Foreign Minister Shoukry echoed that forcible displacement is “no solution” and would violate Egypt’s sovereignty. In early 2025 Cairo made it even clearer that President Sisi

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[94] Syal, Rajeev. “CNN Faces Backlash over Coverage of Gaza War as Staff Hit Out at ‘Pro-Israel Line’.” *The Guardian*, 11 Nov. 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/nov/11/cnn-gaza-war-coverage-pro-israel-backlash.

[95] DFRLab. “Egyptian Social Media Reacts to Calls for Evacuating Gaza Residents into Sinai.” *DFRLab*, 4 Dec. 2023, dfrlab.org/2023/12/04/egyptian-social-media-reacts-to-calls-for-evacuating-gaza-residents-into-sinai/.

[96] Mohamed Kandil, Amr. “Egypt’s Journalists Syndicate Urges Suspending Camp David Accords after Israeli Statements on Sinai.” *EgyptToday*, 3 Apr. 2025, www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/139359/Egypt%E2%80%99s-Journalists-Syndicate-urges-suspending-Camp-David-Accords-after-Israeli.

[97] International Crisis Group. *Egypt’s Gaza Dilemmas*. Middle East/North Africa Report No. 91, 13 June 2019, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt-israelpalestine/b91-egypts-gaza-dilemmas.

[98] Aboulfotouh, Jaida, and Yara Ahmed. “Egypt’s Balancing Act: Borders and Stability in the Gaza War.” *Prisme Initiative*, 25 May 2024, prismeinitiative.org/blog/egypts-balancing-borders-stability-gaza-war-jaida-aboulfotouh-yara-ahmed/.

would decline a Washington visit if forced migration of Gazans were on the agenda[99]. Egyptian lawmakers and syndicates likewise mobilized: the Journalists Syndicate condemned Israeli statements as violations of Egyptian sovereignty and urged a review of the Camp David Accords and threatening their possible suspension. These reactions underscored how seriously Egypt takes the Palestinian right to self-determination. In effect, Cairo's Foreign Ministry had released a document stating that Israel was taking steps that it considers as "part of a long series of [Israeli] violations of international law and international humanitarian law and reflects an unacceptable disregard for the international community and the United Nations." The Ministry further wrote that "Egypt reiterates its absolute rejection of all Israeli practices aimed at displacing Palestinians from their lands and eliminating the right of return and compensation for Palestinian refugees.[100]"

At the same time, Egypt immediately re-entered the mediation process. Alongside Qatar and the U.S., Egypt pushed urgent ceasefire negotiations and hostage swaps. In late 2024 and early 2025 Cairo hosted several rounds of talks: for example, President Sisi joined with Algeria's leader in October 2024 to announce an Egyptian plan for a two-day truce, exchanging a few prisoners, as a stepping-stone to a permanent ceasefire[101]. Egyptian diplomats delivered ceasefire proposals between parties and according to media reports, Cairo carried an Israeli proposal to Hamas in April 2025[102]. By March 2025, Egypt had formulated a postwar reconstruction plan – endorsed by an Arab summit – worth an estimated $53 billion and explicitly premised on Gaza's

[99] Grist, Karolin. "Egypt's President Sisi 'Not Attend Any White House Talks If Gaza Displacement'." *Reuters*, 12 Feb. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypts-president-sisi-not-attend-any-white-house-talks-if-gaza-displacement-2025-02-12/.
[100] Press Release. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Immigration and Egyptian Expatriate Affairs.* October 29, 2024.
[101] "Israeli Strikes Kill Dozens in North Gaza, Raid Deepens, Medics Say." *Reuters*, 27 Oct. 2024, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-strikes-kill-dozens-north-gaza-raid-deepens-medics-say-2024-10-27/.
[102] Khazen, Ibrahim, and Mohammad Sio. "Egypt Delivers Israeli Proposal to Hamas for Temporary Ceasefire in Gaza." *Anadolu Agency*, 15 Apr. 2025, www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/egypt-delivers-israeli-proposal-to-hamas-for-temporary-ceasefire-in-gaza/3538326#:~:text=Egypt%20sent%20an%20Israeli%20proposal,did%20not%20reveal%20its%20sources.

residents not being forcibly displaced, but getting their homes rebuild[103]. This plan, widely publicized in regional media, was designed in part as an alternative to ideas of depopulation: the draft called for rebuilding Gaza by 2030 without removing its population, underscoring the continuing commitment by Egypt to a two-state solution framework.

Throughout 2024 to 2025 Egypt also managed the Rafah border with extreme care. When Israel briefly seized the Gaza side of the crossing in May 2024, Egypt immediately closed its gate in protest; humanitarian agencies noted that Gaza then lost its only un-Israeli-controlled lifeline. Under the January 2025 ceasefire, however, Egypt reopened Rafah for the first time in nine months to let out patients and wounded for treatment. These evacuations – strictly limited and coordinated with international monitors – were hailed in Egypt as a humanitarian necessity, even as Cairo still required PA-coordinated management and European oversight at the crossing[104]. In effect, Cairo showed concrete efforts to alleviate the suffering of Gazans, by facilitating medical evacuations.

Egypt's diplomacy was not without friction with its American patron and Israeli neighbour. U.S. pressure at times irritated Cairo, as when national-security advisers publicly solicited Egyptian acquiescence to the Gaza depopulation plan; Egypt rebuffed these advances, insisting that reconstruction of Gaza follow Egyptian proposals, not foreign diktats. Relations with Israel grew tense as well. Cairo noted with alarm the Israeli military expansion along the Philadelphi corridor in March 2024 and again warned that further Sinai redeployments might breach Camp David. Nevertheless, Egypt continued the uneasy "cold peace": security coordination, especially on Sinai counterterrorism, remained intact, even as Cairo vocalized its condemnation of the

[103] Matamis, Joaquin. "Egypt's Delicate Balance: Maintaining US Support While Confronting Gaza Challenges • Stimson Center." *Stimson Center*, 18 Apr. 2025, www.stimson.org/2025/egypts-delicate-balance-maintaining-us-support-while-confronting-gaza-challenges/.
[104] "Palestinian Patients Enter Egypt as Rafah Crossing Opens after Nine Months." *Al Jazeera*, Feb. 2025, www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/1/palestinian-patients-on-way-to-egypt-as-rafah-crossing-opens-after-9-months.

Gaza war. In sum, Egypt pressed its diplomatic advantage by juggling U.S. engagement and solidarity aimed at limiting Gaza's destruction.

On the home front, Egyptian public opinion and civil society reacted strongly to these events. Despite stringent protest laws, many ordinary Egyptians sympathized openly with Gazans. In late March 2025, for example, thousands reportedly gathered outside mosques in Sinai after Eid prayers to denounce Israeli displacement plans. Social media in Egypt was flooded with rejection of any idea of welcoming Gaza refugees: hashtags like "#سيناء_خط_احمر", "Sinai is a red line", trended as public figures – from MPs to journalists – echoed the official line that moving Palestinians to Sinai was off-limits. At the same time, the government cracked down hard on solidarity activism. The majority of Egyptians are empathetic towards Gazans and deeply invested in the Palestinian cause, but their government views any unsanctioned protest as a challenge to its tightly managed order. Human rights monitors report that, since October 2023, Egyptian police have launched a broad campaign against Gaza solidarity: an EIPR study found at least 186 people – including minors – charged in terrorism cases simply for peaceful support of Palestinians[105]. State media framed such activism as a threat to national security, while independent outlets and NGOs decried the repression as turning solidarity into a crime.

Gazans themselves and their civil society networks also reached out diplomatically. Since autumn 2023, Palestinian NGOs, professional unions and activists have launched international campaigns to break the siege. One prominent example is that of the May 2025 open letter from a coalition of Palestinian civil-society groups demanding a diplomatic humanitarian convoy into Gaza[106]. This appeal urged foreign governments to dispatch ambassadorial-level delegations to accompany waiting aid trucks through

[105] El Houri, Walid. "Solidarity under Siege: Egypt Cracks down on Palestine Support Movement." *Global Voices*, 13 June 2025, globalvoices.org/2025/06/13/solidarity-under-siege-egypt-cracks-down-on-palestine-support-movement/.

[106] "Unified Call to Confront Famine in Gaza: Launch the Diplomatic Humanitarian Convoy Now - Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect." *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*, 12 May 2025, www.globalr2p.org/publications/unified-call-to-confront-famine-in-gaza-launch-the-diplomatic-humanitarian-convoy-now/.

Rafah, a novel mobilization of civilian diplomacy. It reflects how Gaza-based actors tried to influence international decision-making from the bottom up. Even if the immediate response has been muted, such initiatives indicate that Gazans themselves have not been passive: they have engaged conceptually with Egypt, addressing Cairo and its allies. In practice, however, the only negotiations that matter remain those among state actors; Egyptian leaders undoubtedly received Gazan civil society's communications, but they are bound to operate within the framework of diplomacy.

In conclusion, Egypt's policy toward Gaza in 2020–2025 has evolved through a series of crises with a consistent underlying logic. Egypt has not abandoned Gaza; it has meditated ceasefires, opened avenues for aid and devised reconstruction plans in line with international law as well as the mutually agreed upon right to self-determination. The framing of massive displacement as an option is illegitimate, which is mirrored in Egypt's approach: Cairo treats the inhabitants of Gaza as a separate national community with a right to remain, not as a burden for Egypt to carry. Indeed, Egyptian leaders draw on the 1948 Nakba history to justify their stance: any repeat transfer of Palestinians, they say, would stoke extremism and undo peace for all. The final outcome remains uncertain: international diplomacy is slow, and Gaza's suffering severe. Yet Egypt's voice on the refugee issue has, for now, held firm. By insisting on Palestinian self-determination and rejecting any plan for forced relocation, Egypt has helped preserve the possibility of a just solution under which Gazans rebuild in peace. That position offers some hope that there is a just future for Gaza. Furthermore, Egyptian stances also had the possibility to evolve because, since late 2023, a new context appeared.

Namely one in which Egypt is no longer as isolated in their aim of defending Gazans, since an important part of the international community has been watching the Strip for over a year and a half. Additionally, institutions and processes, such as South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have been welcomed by Egypt, who voiced its intention to formally intervene in support of South Africa. Though of course, Israel's actions have the potential to destabilize the whole

region, Egypt has first and foremost stressed their catastrophic effect on Palestinians. October 2023 thus represents another shift.

# IV: Conclusion

## IV.1 Limitations

This work is subject to countless limitations. The history could have been studied in far more depth; political actors could have been followed more closely, and greater attention could have been given to the reading of treaties, archival records, and other official documents. The scope was broad, but necessarily selective. The decision to focus on key turning points meant leaving out episodes and details that may well have deserved more space.

As the relationship at the heart of this work is ongoing, the present could have been emphasized further. This would, however, entail a much greater reliance on news articles and contemporary commentary, sources that are often urgent and valuable, but tend to lack academic depth or long-term perspective. The fast-moving nature of events in Gaza, especially since October 2023, presented a particular challenge. At times, it was difficult to verify claims or assess the credibility of unfolding reports. I chose to include these events where they were essential to understanding the trajectory of Egyptian policy, while trying to maintain a critical distance.

Time was another constraint. More voices, especially Palestinian and Egyptian scholars, civil society actors, and affected communities, could have been incorporated. Within the scope of my own possibilities, I hope to have achieved the goal of creating a work of some worth. In my research, I have encountered many fascinating academic works, which have aided me greatly in this process. However, none that I have read treated Gaza's and Egypt's entangled relationship over time as their focal point. If this

study manages to fill even a small part of that gap, then it will have served a purpose, despite its obvious limits.

## IV.2 Final remarks

The question concerning the mass expulsion of Gazans into the Sinai Peninsula is, unfortunately, not a new one. Some voices still advocate for this so-called "solution," disregarding the rights, dignity and humanity of the Palestinian people. What is often misunderstood, or wilfully ignored, is that the vast majority of Palestinians, especially those in Gaza, have spent generations fighting for the basic right to exist on their own land. Attempts to violently push them out, or to make life in Gaza so unliveable that people are coerced into leaving, are not only inhumane, but also politically and morally bankrupt.

Reducing Palestinians to their general "Arabness" and therefore concluding that they can or should live in any neighbouring country is a complete denial of their national identity, and of Arab diversity more broadly. While it is true that Egyptians and Palestinians share a deep, intertwined history, linked through time, geography, and sentiment, this does not mean they are interchangeable. Though some Palestinians hold Egyptian citizenship, or have lived in Egypt for years, that does not make Gaza Egypt's responsibility. Egypt is not the occupying power controlling Gaza's airspace, coast, and military operations.

This is precisely what has been forgotten in much of the recent debate: instead of applying pressure where it is due, on the Israeli state that has devastated Gaza under the guise of "eradicating Hamas", many international actors continue to place the burden on Egypt. But Egypt, a state that has historically shown sympathy for the Palestinians and continues to mediate in their favour, should not be expected to absorb the consequences of occupation. What we are witnessing now is not a border crisis, but a siege. The consequence of this siege is slowly transforming into one of the largest civilian atrocities in modern history.

But beyond the political posturing lies a deeper truth. Gaza cannot be understood purely in terms of strategy or borders. It is a place where people have lived and resisted for generations. Egypt's relationship to Gaza, as this thesis has shown, is shaped by contradiction: proximity and distance, responsibility and denial, solidarity and fear. It is a relationship forged through shared history, but it is also one fraught with power asymmetries and state calculations.

I am unable to predict what the future holds. It is too soon to say whether Egypt's stronger tone in 2024 and 2025 will translate into long-term policy change. What is clear, however, is that Gaza has once again become a test, of regional diplomacy, of international law, and of political conscience. Egypt's role, as always, is complex. But it is also indispensable. From the very beginnings of Palestinian history up until this day, Egypt and Gaza have been linked. Though the relationship is not a simple one, it has always existed and continues to play a role. With time, changing Egyptian governments have adapted different stances towards their southeastern neighbour but one thing remains true throughout all of them: there is a political and emotional urge to be there for Gazans and Palestinians at large. Although the present looks grim and future outlooks are far from being hopeful either, Gazans will exist and persist. The Middle East is currently facing instability of an unprecedented scale but as history has taught us, this too shall pass. The crimes committed against the Gazan population have not begun in response to the events of October the 7th. They are perpetual crimes, enduring over the past 76 years. Egypt has acted as a defender, a witness and, at times, a facilitator of those crimes. What the country has never done, though, is forget. Gazans have been on the Egyptian political as well as civil agenda ever since they became Gazans. The aim of this work is not to argue that there was no harm done through omission, but rather that Gazans have always mattered to Egyptians.

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