

THE PALESTINIAN DIMENSION OF THE EGYPTIAN UPRISING

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As soon as the Egyptian uprising of January 2011 grew into an avalanche threatening to tear down the major ramparts of Hosni Mubarak's regime, analysts rushed to witness these events and render judgment on their causes and consequences. Western analysts in particular declared unhesitatingly that domestic factors alone were to blame and that the dismantling of the corrupt liberal regime was unrelated to popular disapproval of Egypt's role in the Palestinian – Israeli conflict. Among these was *New York Times*' columnist Thomas L. Friedman who offered his astonishment at the intense popular passion and determination displayed at Cairo's Tahrir Square and at the visible absence of the Muslim Brotherhood from the epicenter of the avalanche. He also noted the non-presence of the word 'Israel' or representations of Egyptian 'martyrs' who died fighting the enemy to the north and east of the country. ⁽¹⁾ A few months later, Friedman was proven wrong on both counts.

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Middle East's main regional fissure separating the state of Israel from the rest of the Arab world. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to Egypt's top leadership rung finally injected some realism in the calculations of Western observers who suddenly began to dredge up the Brotherhood's history in Gaza and its continued multi-faceted connection to the Hamas government. This paper argues that predicting an inevitable clash with Israel also flies in the face of sound political analysis since the Brotherhood has already demonstrated that it is as much a prisoner of geopolitical realities as most of the previous regimes. Geopolitical considerations, therefore, will have to be balanced against an expected tilt towards greater realism once the Brotherhood's role was transformed from that of an oppositional political group to a ruling clique charged with protecting Egypt's interests.

Geography has linked Egypt's fate to that of Sinai and Gaza ever since the Ottoman state signed an agreement with the British Protectorate Government of Egypt in 1906, demarcating the Ottoman border in Palestine north of Sinai, thereby ceding the latter to Egypt.⁽²⁾ The creation of a non-Arab Zionist state in Palestine in 1948 inevitably led to

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Egypt's participation in the first Arab-Jewish War, leading it to assume administrative duties over Gaza. Several Egyptian-Israeli wars followed, interspersed by cross raids from and into Gaza, until the signing of the Camp David Treaty of 1979. The Palestinian population of Gaza, as well as the Bedouin tribes of Sinai, continued to be rebellious, producing a permanent state of instability along the Egyptian-Israeli frontier even during the post-treaty years.

Nasserite and Zionist Geopolitical

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Confrontations

Although most studies stress the Muslim Brotherhood's commitment to the Arab cause, few have cared to reflect on the Nasserite basis of the policy of pan-Arabism.

Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood's founder, often emphasized that Arabs were Islam's first adherents, espousing the principle of Arab unity not only to defy advocates of Egypt's Pharaonic identity during the 1920's and 1930's, but also as a first step towards Islamic unity. Palestine became the object of his rhetoric against Zionist settlers due to its Arab and Muslim identity. The configuration of Egypt's ideological scene prior to 1948, furthermore, led to the Brotherhood's adoption of the Palestinian cause. Since most of the political parties during Egypt's monarchic period such as the Wafd and the Liberal Constitutionalists advocated a narrow and secular brand of Egyptian nationalism, the Muslim Brotherhood fortified its appeal through the adoption of a wider Arab and Islamic nationalism.⁽³⁾

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Although it was commonly assumed that the Nasserite refinement of the concept of pan-Arabism, elucidated in his book *Egypt's Liberation* (Public Affairs Press, 1955),

was simply an effort to firm up Egypt's cultural and economic advantage within the recently-independent Arab states, a closer look at his early military career reveals other motivations for his entanglement with Israel. Nasser, who had studied strategy at the War College, viewed Israel's extension of its southern boundaries into the Negev Desert in October 1948 with great alarm. He bristled at this expansion since it was undertaken in defiance of the UN Security Council Resolution S/1070 of 4 November 1948 and was accompanied by the forced removal of the area's Bedouins to Jordan and Egypt. He viewed this as a deliberate attempt to disrupt ancient land routes which connected Egypt to the rest of the Arab world. Being more appreciative of the geopolitical value of a neutral or a pro-Egyptian land-bridge east of Suez than other Egyptian leaders, Nasser explained his understanding

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of the geopolitical significance of Sinai and Gaza to Egypt's defenses in an interview with British journalist Desmond Stewart.⁽⁴⁾ Nasser's awareness of the vulnerability of southern Palestine which borders on his country to sudden Israeli attacks was confirmed by the latter's 1955 raid on Gaza.⁽⁵⁾ Having failed to gain for Egypt a reasonable strategic depth in Sinai and Gaza, Nasser shifted his sights to unity with Syria in order to encircle the Zionist state. Then involvement with Yemen in the 1960s led to a protracted war joined by Saudi Arabia on the side of the royalist regime, a quagmire which ended only after the 1967 June war. The short lived Egyptian-Syrian union (The United Arab Republic, 1958-1961) which also failed, was a lesson which President Anwar Sadat absorbed well, leading him to achieve a different, and looser, strategic depth by briefly uniting with Syria, Libya, and the Sudan.⁽⁶⁾

Yet, Nasser while he lived, continued

to feel vulnerable in the north when Israel targeted Gaza in the wake of the 1967 June War by, singling it out for its usual effort to expel the area's Palestinian refugees as was done to the Bedouins in 1948. Evicting Palestinian refugees from Gaza's camps was the logical outcome of Israel's strategic thinking which always planned to fortify its southern defenses by seizing Gaza, but without its dense impoverished population. Prime Minister David Ben Gurion was always obsessed with the threat posed by the presence of 200,000 refugees in the Gaza Strip alone. Yigal Allon, Israeli arch-defender of the policy of conventional, rather than nuclear, deterrence, suggested during a cabinet meeting that a large number of Palestinian refugees be pushed across the Suez Canal into Egypt. Another official, David Horowitz, head of the Bank of Israel, resurrected the old Zionist tactic of trying to buy what appeared to be hard to acquire by any other means by suggesting purchasing the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt.⁽⁷⁾ Even though other territorialist politicians such as Menachem Begin and Allon objected to settling Gaza's refugees in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley which they wished to reserve for future Jewish settlements, the government of Levi Eshkol persisted in planning for a Gaza

evacuation. A special office attached to that of the prime minister and headed by Ada Sereni, a prominent Italian Zionist was devoted to this plan. She argued that Gaza's refugees could be relocated to Jordan within two years upon paying each family a modest compensation. But Eshkol rejected the idea of financing the operation, while the Palestinians proved too un-cooperative with the military governor's scheme. Resistance by the residents' of the Gaza Strip's largest refugee camp, Jabalya, was harshly suppressed.⁽⁸⁾

Thus, Egypt always viewed Gaza and Sinai through a defense prism, based on its understanding of the impact of geography on its own political choices, particularly after confronting Israel's expansionist intentions head-on. Israel, on the other hand, maintained a constant definition of its security needs in the southern parts of its territory. Israel's foreign policy approach to these geopolitical realities, which settled on an expansionist option,

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according to political theorist Philippe Moreau Defarges, grew out of its Promised Land theory which clashed with the country's borderland realities. The Cold War period proved greatly suited to Israel's determination to achieve the boundaries of its Biblical past by aligning itself with one of the two superpowers of that point in time, namely the United States.⁽⁹⁾

Demographic Restraints in Post-1967 Gaza

Israel's faith in its military invincibility following its unexpected victory of 1967, did not end Egypt's connections to Gaza. But as a result of its fateful decision to hold on to its new land acquisitions, Israel found itself confronted with the demographic realities of that area. More than any other part of historic Palestine, the Gaza Strip became home to the largest concentration of refugees from other parts of the country after the war of 1948. The Gaza District, which is among the largest of

the five districts in the Gaza Strip, became home to al-Shatii refugee camp. The Northern District became the location of the sprawling Jabalya camp, and the District of Deir al-Balah housed four other camps, while the Districts of Khan Younis and Rafah in the south housed two more camps. All of the eight camps within the Strip date back to 1948-1949. Thus, the Gaza Strip which is 45 kilometers long and 6-12 kilometers wide, measuring five per cent of the total area of Palestine became home to 1.5 million people who lived mostly on UN dole.⁽¹⁰⁾ Most of Jabalya's residents, for instance, came originally from Jaffa, Lyddah, and Ashdod. Residents of this large camp still refer their medical emergencies to hospitals in Gaza City.⁽¹¹⁾

The congested and impoverished conditions of the camps, as well as the harsh treatment of the Israeli military authorities, hastened the process of radicalizing the refugees.⁽¹²⁾ It was no accident that the spark which lit the first *intifada's* fuse in 1987 originated in Gaza, leading to the intensification of

Israel's iron fist policy. For a while, allegiance to Fateh, the Palestinian liberation group which emerged under Yasser Arafat's leadership in the late 1960s, began to compete with another grassroots formation which adopted an Islamist ideology of resistance, namely Hamas. Even though Gaza produced the earliest cadre of Fateh's secular leadership, such as Khalil al-Wazir (aka Abu-Jihad) and Salah Khalaf (aka Abu Iyad), Islamic ideological influences continued to seep in from Egypt and to take root in the Palestinian territory. Gazans who studied at al-Azhar Islamic university in Cairo and those who were attracted to oppositional movements gravitated towards the well-established underground network of the Muslim Brotherhood. By the 1960s and 1970s, the Brotherhood had acquired an extensive organizational experience and a well-defined ideology of re-Islamization of the global Muslim community. Hamas came into being when it released its first communique on

14 December 1987, as a participant in the national leadership of the first *intifada*. Having monopolized local educational and religious institutions,

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Hamas was never a propagator of al-Qaida's philosophy, known as '*Madrasat al-fikr al-salafi al-jihadi*' (The School of Jihadi Salafi Thought). Instead, Hamas had always adhered to the ideology of the Brotherhood's moderate wing which advocated a gradualist approach to the creation of an Islamic society in Palestine, and not necessarily the global, supra-Islamic state. In addition to emphasizing Palestine's distinct status as a sacred territory associated with Muhammad's ascent to heaven on his nocturnal journey to Jerusalem (*al-israa wa al-miiraj*), Hamas stated in Part 1 of Article 11 of its Charter that 'no Arab nor the aggregate of all Arab countries, and no Arab king or President nor all of them in the aggregate, have that right' to give Palestine away.⁽¹⁴⁾

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Palestine is considered a *waqf* (Islamic trust), the ownership of which cannot be alienated through deals as Article 13 indicates. It can only be liberated through the sacred struggle, or *jihad*. Additionally, Hamas never attempted to extend its liberation battle to areas other than the Palestinian arena. Nor did it engage in targeting foreign nationals as a means of avenging Muslim victims of Western aggression. These distinctions from other pan-Islamic movements have further differentiated Hamas from both the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Fateh's rule in the PNA's areas. Nevertheless, it should be easy to discern a clear similarity between Hamas and the Brotherhood in that both developed a specific nationalist-Islamic ideology, suited for each specific territory. As to Fateh and the PNA, its successor government, Hamas moved away from them since they renounced violence culminating in the recognition of Israel in the Oslo Accords of 1993, sans any legally-binding concessions on Israel's part.

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Hamas remained critical of the PLO's failure to obligate Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian lands. When the PLO, therefore, surrendered its commitment to the principle of the armed struggle, Hamas continued to define the national liberation battle through the prism of its Islamic world view. Hamas won the majority of seats in the second legislative council elections of 2006, only to suffer a final rupture with the PNA which attempted an American-backed coup resulting in its total expulsion from the Gaza Strip.⁽¹⁵⁾ Now, ideology fortified Gaza's geopolitical centrality to Egypt's defenses even before the rise of a Muslim Brotherhood government in 2012. Defeating the PNA has been a pyrrhic victory for Hamas, which, by exiling of the PNA to the West Bank, created a new dependence on Egypt. Israel responded with the imprisonment of most of Hamas' elected parliamentarians and embarked on a successful assassination campaign targeting the Gaza leadership. This turned out to be Israel's opportunity to shift

Gaza's burden from the West Bank to Egypt, as the latter became under Mubarak a willing partner in the segmentation of the Palestinian leadership.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Camp David Agreement and the Neutralization of Sinai

Just as Israel's acquisition of the Gaza Strip in 1967 failed to end the country's southern vulnerability, the neutralization of Gaza following the Camp David Treaty of 1978 remained tangled in the Israeli siege over Gaza. The single decade separating the June War of 1967 and the 1973 October War saw Israel gain an opportunity to sign a peace treaty with a major Arab state for the first time in the region's history. Israel's Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, though previously a hawkish and expansionist leader, resolved to cede Sinai back to Egyptian sovereignty for reasons unrelated to the area's geopolitical

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value.⁽¹⁷⁾ Egypt, which accepted the return of a demilitarized Sinai, unknowingly aided in the realization of a cherished Israeli strategic goal. By barring the passage of Egyptian troops through this land bridge, Israel, in effect, was denying the Arab world's largest land army the right to participate in future Arab-Israeli wars. The neutralization was, thus, complete which assured Israel's future security in Sinai and the rest of the Arab region. Begin, however, harbored another incentive, namely blocking any movement towards the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. By acceding to the symbolic restoration of Sinai to Egyptian control, Begin appeared to be willing to strengthen the Sadat government's claim of restoring Egyptian territory by diplomatic, rather than military, means. This attitude was based on a clear understanding of Sadat's prioritization of Sinai over the West Bank or Gaza, even though granting the Palestinians their state

would have greatly facilitated general Arab acceptance of the peace treaty.⁽¹⁸⁾

Additionally, Israel was not satisfied with Egypt's treaty guarantees against any further use of Sinai as a launching ground for hostile military operations. The Camp David Treaty was not only brokered by an American president, Jimmy Carter, it was followed by an American memorandum of understanding (AMU) with Israel which spelled out clearly the obligations of the former in case of breaching the treaty's clauses. THE AMU read as follows:

1. In the light of the role of the United States in achieving the Treaty of Peace and the parties' desire that the United States continue its supportive efforts, the United States will take appropriate measures to promote full observance of the Treaty of Peace.
2. Should it be demonstrated to the satisfaction of the United States that there has been a violation . . . of the Treaty of Peace, the United States will take such remedial measures as it deems appropriate, which may include diplomatic, economic, and military measures as described below.

3. . . . In particular, if a violation of the Treaty of Peace is deemed to threaten the security of Israel . . . or an armed attack against Israel, the United States will be prepared to consider, on an urgent basis, such measures as the strengthening of the United States presence in the area, the providing of emergency supplies to Israel, and the exercise of maritime rights in order to put an end to the violation . . .
4. The United States will oppose, if necessary, vote against any action or resolution in the United Nations which in its judgment adversely affects the Treaty of Peace.⁽¹⁹⁾

This memo was followed by another one specifically dedicated to Israel's oil needs, in which the co-signers, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and United States Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, agreed to extend the 1975 oil agreement between the two by another

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ten years. In view of Egypt's repossession of its oil fields at Abu Rudeis in the Sinai, the United States committed itself to undertake new arrangements for supplying oil to Israel.⁽²⁰⁾ Egypt, which gained back some land, was not given United States assurances in case of an Israeli breach of the treaty. But the agreement, nevertheless, provided Israel's ruling Likud Party with a rare opportunity and renewed self-assurance in its ability to defeat its Arab enemies, prompting it to strike Iraq's nuclear reactor. Israel also formally annexed the Syrian Golan Heights, invaded Lebanon in pursuit of PLO guerrillas, and rapidly increased the tempo of settlement building in the West Bank and Gaza. Thus, Begin's ideological predisposition favoring the fulfillment of Biblical promise of Greater Israel won over the Labor Party's advocacy of land for peace approach due to the absence of Egyptian military force from the Arab region.⁽²¹⁾

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in power during the remaining two years before his assassination, the Egyptian public developed a cold and rejectionist attitude towards the peace treaty. Boycotting Israel culturally and economically became a general Egyptian article of faith. Much of this deliberate campaign which was led by Egypt's intellectuals, journalists, and opinion-makers was a result of suspicion that the Egyptian government was secretly dealing with Israel. There was also public anger at other policies such as bearing down harshly on Gaza's national resistance activity lest it disturb the Egyptian-Israeli peace. For instance, it was not until 2009 that the Egyptian media uncovered Egypt's secret natural gas trade agreement with Israel which provided the latter with gas at reduced prices. Providing Israel with one of Egypt's valuable resources was bad enough, but then the Egyptians

discovered other concessions to the enemy state. During the same year, they learnt of the passage of a German-made dolphin-class submarine through the Suez Canal. Although the treaty assured Israel of safe passage for its ships through the Canal and the Straits of Tiran, a submarine was considered a military vessel. Egyptian fury increased when rumors circulated that this was a nuclear submarine making its way through such dangerous waters simply to drive a message to Iran that Israel possessed various means of threatening its nuclear capability. By that time, Egypt was beginning to coordinate its moves with Israel against Iran, while the Egyptian public remained fixated on the Israeli threat to its borders and to Gaza.⁽²²⁾

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Another development growing out of the pacification and neutralization of the Sinai front was the transformation of Egypt's military from an active force to a business conglomerate. By 2011, Egyptian military industries and business ventures were several percentage points of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Taking advantage of a 1956 ban on reporting on the military in the Egyptian media, the military's industrial and business empire grew under

the auspices of the National Service Projects Organization (NSPO) and similar groups directed by the ministry of defense. Neither was the military's annual budget known to the public. The whole enterprise was overseen by holding companies such as the NSPO, the Organization for Arab Industrialization, and al-Nasr Company. All of these industries came into being after the Camp David Treaty demobilized military industries, forcing them to turn into civilian plants. At the same time, the Egyptian Defense Ministry exited Sinai but continued to control large swaths of land along the eastern shore of the Red Sea which were eventually sold in the 1980s and 1990s to pro-government groups. These lands were developed as resorts such as Sharm al-Sheikh on the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba, which expanded the Egyptian tourism trade for the benefit of members of the ruling National Democratic Party. Cables of the American State Department released by WikiLeaks in 2008 revealed how these vast landholdings

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were the price of keeping the Egyptian military content their post-Camp David dormancy. Apparently, the military were not allowed a presence in the highest rungs of the Egyptian economy such as telecommunications and oil but were confined to a special economic niche. Until Egypt's revolution of 2011, the officer class stayed out of politics entirely but were credited with maintaining stability along the country's borders.⁽²³⁾

United States Foreign Aid and the Entrenchment of the Camp David Treaty

Nothing explains the acquiescence of the Mubarak regime and the military establishment in Egypt's pacification and withdrawal from Arab politics more than the manner in which foreign aid was dispensed and utilized. Whereas Egyptians of all political persuasions were aware of United States massive military

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assistance to the Israeli state, few expected that the former's aid to Egypt would be kept deliberately unmilitary in nature. For instance, by September 1978, the United States had affirmed its earlier promise to Israel to finance the building of two airbases in the Negev as a replacement for the evacuation of the airfields of Eitan and Etzion from Sinai. The Brotherhood was the leading critic of the strategic and economic consequences of the Camp David peace, making Mubarak's Palestinian policies the epicenter of its comprehensive opposition to the regime.⁽²⁴⁾

United States aid to Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s also had unanticipated consequences. Although Egypt received \$28 billion in development aid under Sadat, the volume of American assistance rose to \$50 billion after the Camp David Treaty. In the opinion of American analysts, foreign assistance, whether earmarked for

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development or military expenditure, would inevitably strengthen the internal dominance and power of undemocratic regimes. Larry Diamond, thus, wrote:

External support for Arab regimes . . . confers on Arab autocracies crucial economic resources, security assistance, and political legitimacy. In these circumstances, for non-oil regimes such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, foreign aid is like oil: another source of rents that regimes use for survival.

Like oil, aid flows into the central coffers of the state and helps give it the means *both* to co-opt and repress.⁽²⁵⁾

Satiating the Egyptian economy with United States aid produced similar outcomes predicted also by two economists, Giacomo Luciani and Hazem Beblawi in their landmark study, *The Rentier State: Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World* (Croom Helm, 1987). But not only did the United States increase its aid program to Egypt as a reward for its commitment to the treaty with Israel, the United States also devised a scheme making the Egyptian military the most dependent sector on its largesse. Egypt has been receiving \$1.3 billion a year in military aid since 1987, while Israel received a boost in

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the amount of aid it receives from the United States, bringing it to \$3 billion by fiscal year 2018. This was the result of the signing of a Memo of Understanding (MOU) in 2007 by President George W. Bush, while the level of aid to Egypt remained the same. The centerpiece of the military aid to Egypt was a joint US-Egyptian program for the production of the M1A1 Abrams field tank which has netted 1,200 tanks for Egypt since 1988. Some of the tank's parts were produced at a facility outside of Cairo, while the rest were made by General Dynamics in Sterling Heights, Michigan. Egypt was also the recipient of Excess Defense Articles, valued at millions of dollars from the United States Defense Department. Until recently, the latter was constantly trying to persuade Egypt to focus its military procurement on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency material in order to deal with its security problems in Sinai.⁽²⁶⁾

By FY2013, United States aid to Egypt

was divided on the basis of an allotment of \$1.3 billion in military assistance and only \$250 million in economic aid. By continuing its aid to Egypt, both military and economic, the United States hoped to achieve three goals which have defined the Egyptian-American and, by extension, the Egyptian-Israeli, relationship since the signing of the Camp David Treaty. According to a recent study by the Congressional Research Service, by assuring freedom of navigation and peaceful conditions along the Suez Canal route, the treaty also assured the United States Navy of smooth passage for its warships travelling to the waters of the Persian Gulf region. If the Canal was blocked, as occasionally happened during the Nasserite period, United States ships would be forced to use the much-longer route from Norfolk, Virginia to the Red Sea by rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Secondly, United States aid simply assured maintaining the treaty since any threat to this alliance jeopardized the flow of equipment and arms

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to the Egyptian military, thereby diminishing its domestic status and rendering it vulnerable to Israeli attacks. Thirdly, by boosting the domestic economy of Egypt, the United States hoped to reduce social discontent and strengthen democratic tendencies in the Arab world's largest country.

In reality, the steady infusion of civilian and military aid facilitated the isolation of the military from public life while at the same time providing the state with the means to resist public demands for a better economic performance. For instance, the Egyptian public never knew the extent of Egyptian and Israeli military and intelligence coordination, but in the absence of any published information on military matters, it always suspected the worse. This cooperation which always aimed at containing Palestinian unrest in Gaza and maintaining the security of Sinai against restive Bedouin elements also committed the Egyptians to play a large role in settling the Fateh-Hamas dispute later on.⁽²⁷⁾

In the past, no

group was as critical of Egypt's loss of leverage over security issues in Gaza and Sinai than the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet, clearly the Brotherhood was not the only formation opposed to this facet of Egypt's Arab policies. A broad Islamist spectrum dating back to the 1970s consisting of such groups as al-Azhar, independent Islamist preachers and sheikhs, university students and Jihadist underground cells coalesced around the Brotherhood in its defiance of Egypt's secularist regime. Although they looked approvingly at first at Sadat's peace initiative towards Israel, such groups as al-Azhar and a core Islamist nucleus within the National Democratic Party later became more critical without breaking ranks with Sadat's government. Thus, a moderate Islamist group could be distinguished from extreme Islamists while Sadat lived. As expected, al-

As expected, al-Azhar's head, Dr. Abd al-Halim Mahmoud, a government appointee, at first supported Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 on the pages of al-Ahram daily. He also declared that the Camp David Treaty was a victory for Islam since it will end all wars and bring the nation to a state of peace in accordance with God's teachings.

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The Muslim Brotherhood, however, took it upon itself to criticize the treaty and al-Azhar directly in all of its official and underground publications. Calling on members of the official Islamic establishment to defect and join its campaign, the Brotherhood engaged in an inter-Islamist struggle which prefigured the later effort in 2022 to gain adherents within al-Azhar. The Brotherhood used the pages of its official journal *al-Daawa* (The Call) to reject the Egyptian call to an Arab-Israeli peace conference to be held at Geneva in 1976, arguing that any peace effort will not triumph given Israel's refusal to end its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. When Sadat paid his historic visit to Jerusalem, *al-Daawa* expressed fear that peace with Israel will be used to pressure all Arab state to end their economic and political isolation of Israel. The paper added that United States, the sponsor of this peace, would never adopt policies inimical to Israel's interests. The paper also kept its readers apprised of Jewish attempts to destroy al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in order to replace it with a replica of the ancient

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Jewish Temple. The expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank even while the treaty was being negotiated was also highlighted. These editorials, which appeared between 1976 and 1977, carried such titles as: "The Dispute between the Americans and the Jews was a Hoax," "The Issue of Al-Aqsa Mosque Becomes More Dangerous," and "Begin Is Israel's Unadorned Face." A piece analyzing Sadat's foreign policy was headlined, "Palestine Is an Islamic Cause," emphasizing one of the Brotherhood's core beliefs.⁽²⁹⁾

Al-Daawa was vehement about the dangerous outcome of the treaty, declaring that once signed Israel will be the main beneficiary of the peace. The paper emphasized first and foremost the inevitable economic consequences of this treaty, economic gain being the primary Israeli objective here. As soon as Egypt opened its borders to Israeli goods, Israel would penetrate all Arab markets.

Israel would, thus, improve its own industrial opportunities and provide greater employment to its own citizens at the Arabs' expense. Israel would eventually dominate the Egyptian market since the latter was the weaker of the two. The paper also quoted an Israeli cabinet minister as saying that his country hoped to supplant Beirut one day as the most important financial center in the Middle East. Finally, the paper hammered at the uncertain future of the West Bank and Gaza once Jordan refused to join the Camp David negotiations. Neither did the treaty guarantee the security of Sinai since the Egyptian military presence in this region was confined to an area 50 kilometers in length, running from the Suez Canal to the Gulf of Suez. Even here, Egyptian troops were restricted to a lightly-armored military company. The rest of Sinai, comprising an area sixty-one thousand square kilometers, was left demilitarized and under the control of international troops. *Al-Daawa* then pointed out that the treaty limited the right to request removal of these troops to the five members of the Security Council, and not to Egypt.⁽³⁰⁾

Egyptian- Israeli Relations under Mubarak

The Muslim Brotherhood remained at the head of Egypt's oppositional movement throughout the years of Husni Mubarak's regime, 1981-2011

The Muslim Brotherhood remained at the head of Egypt's oppositional movement throughout the years of Husni Mubarak's regime, 1981-2011. Though poised to take advantage of any political opening that will jettison it to power, the Brotherhood disclaimed any exclusive role in starting the uprising of 2011. One of the movement's articulate defenders, Fahmy Huweidy, objected vehemently to the Mubarak government's accusations that the Brotherhood alone fomented and led the riots which launched the uprising. What really rankled Huweidy, however, was the regime's description of the Brotherhood as a group 'with special agendas.' The Brotherhood, he stressed, was simply following the lead of the angry masses who demanded an end Mubarak's tenure in office. All of these national forces, he wrote, had

Israel's harsh repression of the Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, delegitimized Egypt and the peace treaty.

suffered from the monopolization of power by a corrupt elite, being subjected to emergency regulations, restricted public freedoms, the squandering national wealth and resources, police brutality, and extreme poverty. All of these demeaned people and broke their back. But then he went on to enumerate what Egypt suffered from externally, claiming that the country had been humiliated by its reduction of stature and its annexation to American policy in the region, leading to holding Gaza under siege and strengthening Israel's national security.⁽³¹⁾

Huweidy's views encapsulated the Brotherhood's position against the liberal but corrupt Mubarak regime in order to distinguish its agenda from that of other nationalist forces in the field. Many of these groups were in agreement with the Brotherhood's critique of Mubarak's foreign policy but few could match its uninterrupted campaign against the peace treaty. The question remains how did Egypt get mired in the politics of Gaza despite withdrawing from Sinai under Sadat who committed to a total abstention from involvement in the affairs of the Arab world? The answer is that Sadat did not control Israeli policies, nor the response of Palestinians to

Egypt's entanglement in the affairs of Gaza reached a crescendo following Prime Minister's Ariel Sharon's decision to withdraw from the entire Strip in 2005 when it consented to become a party to the Philadelphi Agreement.

Israel's iron fist strategy. Once hostilities broke out in Gaza and the West Bank during the first *intifada* of 1987, Egypt's return to the Palestinian arena became inevitable. In no time, Israel's harsh repression of the Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, delegitimized Egypt and the peace treaty. During the second *intifada* in 2000, Gaza's deteriorating security situation resulted in pressure on the Egyptian-Israeli border as the besieged Palestinians sought to smuggle food, medical supplies and weapons into their territory. This led Israel to build a barrier along its Gaza border in 2000, and the Egyptians completed that barrier in 2005 as Israel was about to finalize its removal of its settlers from the Strip.⁽³²⁾

Gazans found a way of traversing the checkpoints and obstacles situated in the Philadelphi corridor between Egypt and Gaza, which were built on Rafah's no-man's land. As early as 1987, tunnels were dug below

disengaging from Gaza and the deployment of 8,000 settlers to the Maaleh Adumim settlement near Jerusalem was intended to solve Israel's security dilemma and at the same time putting an end to any possibility of an independent Palestinian state in the rest of the West Bank.

this area, functioning like an 'underground railroad' through which not only people, goods, medicine, and food illegally travelled both ways, but also served as storage places for contraband weapons and other supplies. A thriving economy developed around the tunnels, which included Gazans working in the digging and running of goods overseen by smugglers and merchants. Most of these goods, with the exception of weapons, were imported from Israel before it tightened the siege. This forced the Palestinians to breach the check-points through the subterranean tunnels in order to obtain merchandise from

Information released by WikiLeaks from the cables of the United States Cairo embassy in 2010, revealed Mubarak's disdain for Gazans who were supposedly under his protection.

Egypt.⁽³³⁾ After Israel complained of Egypt's inability or disinterest in controlling this illegal lifeline to Gaza, the latter built a tracking system to locate and destroy the tunnels with the help of United States Army Corps of Engineers. The system culminated in the construction of a steel barrier running deep underground to destroy the tunnels.⁽³⁴⁾

Egypt's entanglement in the affairs of Gaza reached a crescendo following Prime Minister's Ariel Sharon's decision to withdraw from the entire Strip in 2005 when it consented to become a party to the Philadelphi Agreement. This accord with Israel which was facilitated by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, committed both countries to regulate the flow of people and goods across the Rafah check-point leading into Egypt. The Rafah check-point was one of five controlling access to Egypt since the Israelis permitted the PLO to establish a foothold in Gaza following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. It is the only crossing point between Gaza and Egypt which was regulated by the Agreement of Access and Movement (AMA) of November 2005. This arrangement allowed representatives of the European Union (EU) to be nominally

When the Egyptian uprising broke out in 2011, the Brotherhood had already severed its ties to the ruling institution over a host of issues, but largely over Egyptian antagonism towards the struggle of the people of Gaza.

in control, allowing the PNA, or the PLO's government, the right to act as observer. Real control, however, was exercised by the Israelis through the use of video-cameras and computers connecting the area to Israel's systems. The Philadelphi Agreement, on the other hand, was signed in August of that year to ensure Israel's safety and security once it withdrew from Gaza. The agreement was a protocol which became a military annex to the Camp David Treaty, entrusting the Egyptian frontier army with the protection Israel's Gaza border. Egyptian border guards were charged with stopping 'terrorist' activities, the smuggling of weapons and munitions, and particularly the uncovering of the tunnels. The Philadelphi annex angered the Egyptian public due to its meticulous and detailed definition of the duties of Egyptian guards, limiting them to the deployment of four units along the length of the Egyptian-Gaza border. The number

of military equipment for Egyptian use was restricted to four observation ships to protect the waters, unarmed helicopters to monitor the skies, and three land and sea observation radars. The Egyptians were forbidden from building fortifications in Sinai and were subject to oversight by the multi-national force. The Egyptians, finally, were expected to exchange information and coordinate activities with the Israeli military.⁽³⁵⁾

Thus, disengaging from Gaza and the deployment of 8,000 settlers to the Maaleh Adumim settlement near Jerusalem was intended to solve Israel's security dilemma and at the same time putting an end to any possibility of an independent Palestinian state in the rest of the West Bank. This unilateral move was not intended to relieve Egypt's Gazan dilemma. Sharon's act also shifted the responsibility for maintaining security along its Gaza and Sinai borders to Egypt.

Egypt's military presence in Sinai, historically considered to be part of its territory since 1906, dwindled following the signing of the Camp David Treaty to 22,000 troops and 230 tanks which were restricted to the western part of the peninsula.

⁽³⁶⁾ It was not only the Egyptian public which was infuriated by this development, it was also the Israeli Knesset. What rankled this assembly about the Philadelphi Agreement was its government's willingness to partner with Egypt by permitting the introduction of Egyptian fighting men and increased arms in the demilitarized Sinai area. Even though the Egyptians pledged themselves against arming the Palestinians of Gaza, Knesset members such as Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee Chair and former minister Yuval Shteinitz, opposed the agreement. Calling it a dissipation of the main achievement of Camp David, namely pushing the Egyptian military away from Israel's borders, he demanded that the Knesset reject the military annex promptly. He added that, "Begin (former prime minister) is turning in his grave,"⁽³⁷⁾

But even after the ejection of the PNA from Gaza following the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections of 2006 and the violent clashes of 2007, Israel remained the mighty power which kept Gaza under siege. Israel continued to have exclusive control over Gaza's waters and airspace. Also, by cutting the Gaza Strip off from the West Bank, it doomed the former to

a state of perpetual siege. According to Saeb Erekat, the PNA's official most familiar with Israeli negotiations, Gaza, in effect, remained occupied by Israeli military power despite Sharon's disengagement from the Strip:

An occupying power can exercise effective control without being physically present in all parts of the territory it occupies. It suffices that it can project military power over the whole of the occupied territory by keeping forces in only parts of the territory.⁽³⁸⁾

Mubarak's Loss of Leverage

Both the AMA Agreement and the Philadelphi Protocol signaled the decline of Egyptian influence in the Sinai region by confining it to an Israeli-led policy. This pitted the beleaguered population of Gaza against the combined forces of Israel and Egypt, to the dismay of the majority of Egyptians.

Information released by WikiLeaks from the cables of the United States Cairo

Part of Egypt's security dilemma in this region was the lack of a centralized tribal authority, leading each of the three main tribal units to operate single economic monopolies on their own.

embassy in 2010, revealed Mubarak's disdain for Gazans who were supposedly under his protection. The diplomats asserted that Mubarak was totally antagonistic to Hamas, which he viewed as a source of danger to his own country and that he routinely cooperated with Israel, particularly in the area of intelligence. These policies cemented Egypt's relationship with the United States, Israel's patron state, without necessarily endearing Mubarak to his own people. The releases indicated that for the mass of Egyptians, settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not submitting to Israel's strategic agenda was a primary objective. This was proven following Israel's attacks on the Turkish flotilla in May 2010 which sought to break Israel's Gaza blockade when Egypt maintained its silence while Turkey launched a diplomatic campaign against Israel. The Islamist opposition in particular heralded Recep Tayyip Erdogan's defiance of Israel, adding one more critique to its list of grievances against Mubarak. WikiLeaks dropped another bombshell which enhanced the public's perception of Egypt's loss of all leverage over its erstwhile allies, the United States and Israel. Apparently, Egypt had asked the United States in October 2009 to delay by six years the planned referendum

on the independence of the Southern Sudan. Egypt pleaded that such a development would create a weak state, create an opportunity for meddling by Egypt's enemies such as Israel, and would most likely jeopardize Egypt's access to the waters of the Nile.⁽³⁹⁾

These revelations provided additional ammunition for the Brotherhood's arsenal which was engaged at the time in a constitutional battle against Mubarak's ruling group, the National Democratic Party. Having occupied 20 per cent (or 88 seats) of the Egyptian lower house of the People's Assembly by running as independents in the 2005 elections, the Brotherhood decided to withdraw from the 2010 parliamentary elections, citing widespread corruption and election rigging.⁽⁴⁰⁾ When the Egyptian uprising broke out in 2011, the Brotherhood had already severed its ties to the ruling institution over a host of issues, but largely over Egyptian antagonism towards the struggle of the people of Gaza.

After the fall of the Mubarak regime, the tribesmen succeeded in burning the trans-Sinai gas pipeline leading to the disruption of this trade for 45 days. The main reason was that their demands for transit fees were ignored.

The Israelis watched nervously as their allies in the Mubarak regime lost all power, maintaining hope that Egypt can still be led by General Omar Suleiman, the intelligence chief with whom they maintained a working relationship over Gaza. When that hope faded, Israel expressed its gratitude to the defeated president by offering him political asylum.⁽⁴¹⁾ But while he ruled Egypt, Mubarak regularly sought to placate public opinion by tolerating a massive outpouring of sentiment in support of the second *intifada* of 2000. This gave rise to two mass mobilizing movements which went on years later to hammer at his regime, namely the April 6 Movement and Kifayeh. Egypt's Minister of Culture Farouq Husni, who was a protégé of Suzanne Mubarak, routinely pushed artists and intellectuals to refrain from any contact with their Israeli counterparts. This officially-sanctioned cultural boycott of Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians extended even to the faculty of the American University of Cairo.⁽⁴²⁾

Sinai: Egypt's Achilles Heel

One of the overlooked reasons for Egypt's inability to extricate itself from the dangerous Gaza-Egypt-Israel border was its historic ties

to the Sinai Peninsula. Estimated to have a population of 49,769 according to the census of 1960, the Governorate of Sinai consisted of South and North Sinai. All Sinai fell under Israeli occupation as a result of the 1967 June War: South Sinai, the smaller of the two with a population of only 4,355 people, was the more valuable of the two. Egyptians began to move to this area in the early 1980s, providing the necessary personnel to work in Egypt's government-owned oil industry and newly-developed tourist sites. By 1986, the population of the Governorate of South Sinai grew to be 28,576 Egyptians and Bedouins, 40 per cent of whom lived in eight recently-developed urban centers. The largest of these were El-Tur and Abu Rudeis, the center of the oil industry. Administrative divisions of the Southern Sinai Governorate included the *qism*

Gaza's economic and ideological links to Cairo changed dramatically in October 2012, when the former Sheikh of Qatar, Hammad ibn Khalifa al-Thani, extended the sum of \$ 400 million in economic aid to the Hamas government. This signaled Qatar's seriousness in playing a major regional role after the popular uprisings of 2011-2012 in the Arab world.

(division) of St. Catherine, where the famed Coptic monastery (aka Santa Katarina) was a magnet for tourism, as well as the *aqsam* of rising Red Sea resorts such as Sharm al-Sheikh, Nuweiba, and Dahab at the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba.⁽⁴³⁾

Egypt's military presence in Sinai, historically considered to be part of its territory since 1906, dwindled following the signing of the Camp David Treaty to 22,000 troops and 230 tanks which were restricted to the western part of the peninsula. The demilitarization of Sinai and entrusting its defenses to a symbolic multi-national UN force (MFO), left the northern area and the main resorts of the southern region without any strong defenses. The MFO, which was stationed there to monitor the Egyptian-Israeli border and send early warnings of unauthorized troop movement, limited the deployment of Egyptian fighters, requiring significant inspection of any unlawful material. This left the area east of al-Arish defenseless and vulnerable to Bedouin attacks. But in the last 20 years, Egypt managed to introduce mass Egyptian settlement in South Sinai which attracted a tourist inflow of 2.5 million annually by developing economic and agri-business projects.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Throughout this period of Egyptian-Israeli tension and struggle over control of Egypt's historic trade routes to the Arab world, Sinai's indigenous Bedouin population sought to gain ownership of the region's limited natural resources largely by manipulating the antagonisms of the area's powers. In recent years, the Bedouins developed many economic grievances, beginning with what they perceived to be an infringement on their traditional and customary rights as result of the Egyptian gas pipeline which was extended to Israel under the Mubarak administration. The Care Service Company which recruited workers for the MFO and the pipeline had avoided hiring Bedouins since it regarded them as a security risk. Neither did the Egyptian military and security services in the area draft them, thereby eliminating their eligibility for economic benefits which accrue from the draft. Bedouin lands have also been seized by the Egyptian military, such as the small fishing village which was converted into the Sharm al-Sheikh resort. Only Nile Valley Egyptians were favored for Sinai's new employment opportunities, while development contributed to the degradation of the area's subsistence agriculture. At the same time, hostility towards Egyptians

encouraged the Bedouins to seek revenue through illegal activities such as smuggling, running unlicensed tourist services around the Taba resort, gun-running to Israel and Gaza, and the cultivation of opium. As a result, the Egyptians operated 13 jails in the northern Sinai. Part of Egypt's security dilemma in this region was the lack of a centralized tribal authority, leading each of the three main tribal units to operate single economic monopolies on their own. Thus, the Sawarka, Rumaylat, and Tarabeen dominated Gaza's illegal tunnel trade, while the same Tarabeen monopolized trafficking in marijuana. The Israeli port of Eilat was also not immune to the smuggling of illegal drugs, cigarettes, and migrant workers from East Africa, a trade dominated by the

The election of any democratic government in the future would increase popular pressure on the military to respond to any attack on Gaza, which, Americans fear, would further threaten the treaty.

Azazmeh and Ahaiwat tribes. Often, these collaborated with Gazans who were frustrated by the Egyptian-Israeli economic blockade, leading to attacks on the tourist trade.⁽⁴⁵⁾

After the fall of the Mubarak regime, the tribesmen succeeded in burning the trans-Sinai gas pipeline leading to the disruption of this trade for 45 days. The main reason was that their demands for transit fees were ignored. Neither did the pipeline of the Egyptian National Gas Company (GASCO) which delivers gas to Israel and Jordan through northern Sinai escape their attacks. The Taba crossing check-point into Sinai, which operated since its founding in 1989 when Taba was restored to Egyptian sovereignty, was forced to close in 2011. A more serious attack occurred on an Egyptian military base on 5 August 2012 after Mohammed Morsi came to power. Israel's response to these threats resulted in permitting Egypt to deploy two battalions in northern Sinai as a follow-up to the Camp David Treaty, the Philadelphi Protocols of 2005. Additional Egyptian battalions were permitted to take over guard duties of the gas pipeline.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Thus, the Egyptian public became deeply aware of Israel's hegemonic role in Sinai and Egyptian dependence on the consent and approval of Israeli military authorities even during the Muslim Brotherhood's rule from June 2012 until June 2013.

The Muslim Brotherhood, however, did

not prove much different than the Mubarak regime when it came to safeguarding Egypt's interests in Sinai. As soon as he assumed office as Egypt's president, Morsi closed the Rafah crossing, Gaza's lifeline to Egypt, after unidentified militants killed 16 members of the Egyptian police-force stationed near the area. The Hamas government denied that its territory was the home base of the attackers. Morsi used this opportunity to blame the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) for its negligence of Sinai's security, leading to the forced resignation of Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein al-Tantawi and Chief of Staff Samy Annan. The former chief of military intelligence, General Abd al-Fatah al-Sissi, was sworn in as the new head of the council.⁽⁴⁷⁾ It was the same al-Sissi who unseated Morsi in a pseudo-coup in July 2013.

Gaza's economic and ideological links to Cairo changed dramatically in October 2012, when the former Sheikh of Qatar, Hammad ibn Khalifa al-Thani, extended the sum of \$ 400 million in economic aid to the Hamas government. This signaled Qatar's seriousness in playing a major regional role after the popular uprisings of 2011²⁰¹²- in the Arab world.⁽⁴⁸⁾ But it also marked the first

time when another Arab state beside Egypt succeeded in establishing itself as an arbiter of Gaza's security disputes. In the meantime, the Morsi government backed off from the Brotherhood's historic antagonism to Israel by seeming to ignore the latter's economic strangulation of Gaza and quietly resume gas

when its Freedom and Justice Party came to power in 2012, the Brotherhood assumed control on the back of a popular uprising but ended up replicating the policies of the corrupt and liberal Mubarak regime in his fated attempt to manage the problem of Gaza and the Palestinians.

shipment to the Jewish state. Hostility to the Camp David Treaty also faded as the new government of Egypt began quietly to abide by its terms. Morsi has already expressed to the United States his willingness to abide by the terms of the treaty and maintain peaceful relations with Israel. Morsi has even mediated a cease-fire agreement between Hamas and Israel in November 2012, suggesting that his party was interested in pursuing a pragmatic approach towards Israel.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Yet, Gaza remained the main geographic gateway

to Israel, posing the possibility, based on its geopolitical significance to Egypt, as a staging ground for any future attacks on Israel if the Egyptians experience a threat to their northern and eastern boundaries. The United States, on its part, continued to be concerned for the possibility of rupturing the treaty if Egypt's revolutionary tremors persisted. The United States also realizes that the threat to the treaty may result from Israel's possible over-reaction to attacks emanating from Gaza or Sinai, as when Israel pursued attackers into Sinai in August 2011, ending in the killing of five Egyptian soldiers. This produced demonstrations against the Israeli embassy in Cairo and calls for abrogating the treaty at a time when SCAF was still in control of the Egyptian government. The election of any democratic government in the future would increase popular pressure on the military to respond to any attack on Gaza, which, Americans fear, would further threaten the treaty. Researchers in the Brookings Institute, a mainstream think-tank based in Washington, have already developed a theory in anticipation of such events. By focusing on Egypt's mounting fiscal and economic problems and the inevitable need to impose painful austerity measures on a suffering population, they

speculated that these circumstances may tempt the government to pursue populist measures, such as increased confrontations with Israel, thereby deflecting attention from its own failings. Israel has already responded to this eventuality by building a border fence and creating a new brigade to defend its southern region and the port of Eilat.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Conclusion: The Permanent Reality of Geopolitics

Even though Egypt's interest in the Palestine issue had always extended to events in the West Bank, the Egyptian military's concern always focused mainly on Sinai and Gaza. This obsession with safeguarding the country's routes to the rest of the Arab world due east was finally given an ideological twist by Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. After Egypt led a separate route to political independence than the rest of the Arab east beginning with the Revolution of 1919, its Liberal governments were unable to hue to this course after the rise of Zionist Israel. But having fought and lost several major wars against the militarized state on its borderlands under Nasser, Egypt tried to pursue an isolationist, Egypt-first policy, under

Sadat and his Camp David Treaty. Turmoil along these borders persisted despite United States' sponsorship of the treaty simply because, unlike what Sadat had predicted, Israel continued to enjoy the status of the number one United States ally in the region. Regime after regime was straddled with the problem of Israel's own unstable southern boundary which attracted the support of anti-government forces to the plight of the people of Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood led the popular struggle against liberalism in Egypt, but also made the fate of Gaza's people the centerpiece of its anti-government critique. But when its Freedom and Justice Party came to power in 2012, the Brotherhood assumed control on the back of a popular uprising but ended up replicating the policies of the corrupt and liberal Mubarak regime in his fated attempt to manage the problem of Gaza and the Palestinians. The Morsi state surrendered the initiative to Qatar as the latter began to manipulate Egypt's rudderless Arab ship of state to advantage. Now, another liberal regime has assumed power, strengthened by a popular mandate and charged again with the responsibility of seeking equilibrium between geopolitical realities in Sinai and ideological pressures at home.

notes

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