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ISRAEL, HAMAS, AND “THE EGYPT WE WERE WAITING FOR”

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The current confrontation between Israel and Hamas has its roots in Egypt. On 5 August, sixteen Egyptian soldiers were killed by militants crossing into Egypt from Gaza. During the attack the militants seized two Egyptian Armored Personnel Carriers and attempted to attack Israeli forces at the Kerem Shalom crossing. Hamas, which is an ideological offshoot of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, temporarily shut down access to the tunnels connecting Gaza with Egypt. The tunnels had been used to bring its construction (and military) materials into Gaza. Since the August attacks, Egypt has closed down much of the heavy traffic through the tunnels by bulldozing its end of the thoroughways.¹ This crackdown on the tunnels, when combined with the ongoing blockade on Gaza, led to rising prices in Gaza and an economy that was grinding to a halt.

Before the August attack, the tunnels were fueling a rapidly growing economy despite the siege and blockade. If some estimates are to be believed, Gaza's economy leaped from 6 percent growth in 2008 to 27 percent growth in 2011.² Those are remarkable statistics for a community that is supposed to be under siege. In a 30 September article published in the Hamas backed newspaper, *Filastin*, Dr. Yusuf Rizqah, an adviser to Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, wrote "Gaza's tunnels represented a genuine outlet for construction and reconstruction materials. The tunnels have become an artery of life for the Gaza Strip...without a normal trade route, Gaza will never accept the closure of the tunnels. In so doing, Gaza will be killing itself or better, committing suicide and sentencing the people of Gaza to death." The strong language used by Dr. Rizqah underscored the importance of the tunnels not only to Gaza's economy but also to Hamas' ability to rule Gaza. Nicolas Pelham noted that there are a group of 600 “tunnel millionaires” in Gaza. It may be fair to say that without the tunnels as steady source of independent revenue from which to tax and distribute patronage, Hamas' power would erode.

During the last three months, as a result of Egyptian policing, tunnel traffic dwindled to a third of pre-August 5 levels, and if Israel had not eased its restrictions on goods into Gaza prior to the current conflict the damage to the economy in Gaza would have been much worse. On 30 September and 1 October, there were large protests in Gaza at the Rafah Crossing in response to the rising prices of construction materials and fuel. The protests were directed at Egypt as much as at Israel.

¹ Nicolas Pelham, “Gaza: A Way Out?”, *New York Review of Books*, 26 October 2012. Accessed at: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/oct/26/gaza-isolation-way-out/>

² Ibid.

And therein was the paradox for Hamas: Hamas was born out of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. It shares the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology and worldview, and it views its political and economic future as closely aligned with the fortunes of Morsi's Egypt. Hamas' ambition had been to replace the tunnels into Egypt with a legitimate free-trade zone along the border. Not only was there no progress on this front, but Egypt was locking down the Gazan tunnels, damaging Hamas politically, and Gaza economically.

In a delicately written article written by Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh's advisor, Dr. Yusuf Rizqah, and published in *Filastin* on 2 October, he outlined the heart of the problem: "Gaza is complaining *to* Muhammad Morsi about its burdens and pains, but it is not complaining *about* him [emphasis added]. The difference between the two is as significant as the difference between love and hatred." Rizqah's comments reflect the political tightrope Hamas was trying to walk with respect to Morsi and Egypt. On one hand, Gaza was being squeezed by Egypt in the wake of the August attack at Kerem Shalom, but on the other hand Hamas was reluctant to place the blame on Morsi and Egypt.

Hamas was in a bind. Its authority in Gaza was being increasingly challenged by Gaza-based Salafi-Jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida (groups such as Ansar Jerusalem, Tawfid and Jihad in Jerusalem, and Ansar al Sunnah, and their umbrella organization, Mujahideen Shura Council)³, who had been attacking both Israel and Egypt regularly in 2011 and 2012. In the wake of the August 2012 attack at Kerem Shalom crossing, Hamas was pressured by Egyptian officials to crack down on these Salafi-Jihadists. And that is when Hamas began playing its double-game. It attempted to satisfy Egypt, as well as placate its Salafi-Jihadist rivals in Gaza by publicly announcing the arrest and detention of suspects involved in the Sinai attacks, but later quietly releasing those same suspects.

Israeli forces, which for some time had been coming under increasing attack from Gaza were not interested in the subtleties of Hamas's double-game. On the night of 12 October, an Israeli drone killed Abu Walid al-Maqqdisi, the 43 year-old leader of Gaza-based Tawhid and Jihad in Jerusalem – one of the groups that was suspected in the 5 August attack on Egypt and Israel at the Kerem Shalom Crossing. Maqqdisi had been released by Hamas just two days before the August attack. In response to his mid-October death, Maqqdisi's group vowed to convert Gaza into an Islamic state, fire rockets at Israel, and launch attacks inside Sinai, which put the Egyptian military on alert.⁴

The current confrontation between Israel and Gaza is, in part, a product of Hamas' poorly managed double-game, which backfired. Hamas was attempting to satisfy its would-be Egyptian patrons that it was cracking down on Gaza's Salafi-Jihadis, in the hope of broadening its legitimate trade relations with Morsi's government, but, at the same time, it was permitting the same Salafi-Jihadis to have a free hand to act against Israel.

The Salafi-Jihadists stepped up their attacks against Israel during the last two weeks of October, which were not limited to just an increasing volume of rockets against civilian population centers. They also conducted increasingly bold ground operations against Israeli forces at the border fence between Israel and Gaza. These operations were designed to ambush and capture Israeli soldiers, in the same fashion that Hamas had captured Gilad Shalit in 2006. Israel was determined to push militants back from the border fence on the Gaza side, which Hamas, for its part, resisted as a violation of its sovereign authority.

This spiral of escalation between Israel and Gaza-based militants culminated in an anti-tank missile attack on an IDF jeep on 10 November that injured four Israeli soldiers, two critically. There was also a noticeable escalation in the volume of rocket fire into southern Israel. The escalation from represented a miscalculation about Israel's will to respond as well as perhaps Hamas' inability to exercise full control over the Salafi-Jihadi groups operating within its territory. Whatever the case may be, Israel couldn't ignore the escalation, and was forced to take action in order to deter further attacks and reassure its citizens that it was capable of protecting them.

In the meantime, Hamas' double game of arresting and releasing Salafi-Jihadists appears to have empowered its rivals at its own expense, led to an unwanted and perhaps unexpected military confrontation with Israel, which has

³ David Barnett, "Mujahideen Shura Council is consolidation of Salafi-Jihadist groups in Gaza: sources," The Long War Journal, 14 October 2012. Accessed at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/mujahideen_shura_cou.php

⁴ Nicolas Pelham, "Gaza: A Way Out?," *New York Review of Books*, 26 October 2012. Accessed at: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/oct/26/gaza-isolation-way-out/>

decimated its ranks and depleted its strategic resources, and placed Muhammad Morsi's government under enormous pressure to violate Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. This was a dangerous game Muhammad Morsi surely did not want to play. Nevertheless, the Egyptian President is making a grim effort to capitalize on the events without risking vital Egyptian interests.

In *al-Quds al-Arabi* (Nov. 18), Abdel Bari Atwan triumphantly declared that, "Here is the Egypt that we have been waiting for." Atwan praised Morsi for bringing dignity at long last to the post-1967 Arab world. But apart from symbolic support, Morsi has been careful not to provide Hamas with any material aid or to threaten Israel with active Egyptian involvement in the conflict. One suspects that Morsi knows it is in Egypt's interest to bring the fighting to a swift end. The longer the fighting continues, the greater the domestic political pressure Morsi will face to do more than simply make fiery speeches in defense of Arab and Islamic solidarity.

Morsi is no doubt wary that Egypt's Salafi party, al-Nour, will seek to exploit the crisis at the Brotherhood's expense. Further, a passive Egypt may invite a renewal of jihadist activity in the Sinai. Egypt needs stability, the question is what role it is willing to play to bring it about. In all likelihood, Morsi will use Turkey and Qatar as political cover for reassuming Egypt's traditional role as a behind the scenes broker between Israel and Hamas. Yet it may be fair to expect that Morsi will play his own double-game. In other words, while Egypt works to broker an end to the fighting, Morsi will continue to exploit the crisis as a means to demonstrate that the Muslim Brotherhood's Egypt is no longer Israel's, or the West's, lapdog.

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