

Egypt's Wall with Gaza & the Emergence of a New Middle East Alignment

by Tally Helfont

Tally Helfont is an FPRI research fellow. Her research focuses on Middle East-related issues and radical Islamic movements. She also instructs training courses on behalf of K3 Enterprises in Civil Information Management to U.S. Military Civil Affairs Units and Human Terrain Teams assigned to Iraq and Afghanistan.

***Abstract:** In December 2009, Egypt began construction of an underground steel wall on its border with Gaza in a move designed to halt the smuggling of illegal weapons and other contraband via the Hamas-run underground tunnel network. Egypt's initiative, which is being carried out in the name of its own strategic-national interests, has been the subject of intense criticism throughout the region. This article examines the emergence of a new alignment in the Middle East, based upon a new fault line between moderates and radicals. This alignment is manifested in Egypt's construction of its underground steel wall. By exploring the motivations, responses, and implications of building such a wall, it will become apparent that two camps have emerged in the region on this issue and that their stances are but an illustration of the aforementioned shift.*

The Gaza Strip has long been home to some of the most radical elements in Palestinian society. Over the years, various steps have been taken by Israel, Egypt, the United States, and the European Union to try to mitigate the considerable threat posed by Gaza, though to no avail. Hamas' victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006, shortly following Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip some five months earlier, initiated a dramatic devolution of the local situation that, in the past three years, has gone from bad to worse. Since this time, Gaza has been viewed as a significant strategic threat to both Israel and Egypt and has been seen internationally as a powder keg ready to blow. Egypt has recently made a decisive move to protect itself from the instability and violence generated by Hamas and begun construction on an underground steel wall on its border with Gaza. This endeavor, which has been the subject of vitriolic criticism, is but the latest attempt to counter Hamas' influence.

Despite the fact that a number of parties have taken many steps to reign in the militancy of Hamas in Gaza, the dominant narrative is clear: Gaza today is a product of the Israeli blockade. This view ignores the role of Hamas' own

policies that have isolated Gaza, severely impaired its economic infrastructure and stoked intra-Palestinian enmities, forcing other regional powers to take sides. In particular, an examination of the evolution of Egypt's security measures with regard to the Gaza Strip makes clear that the Gaza problem is not one of religion or nationality. Rather, the Gaza struggle is more appropriately placed within the context of the struggle between moderates and radicals throughout the region.

This article examines the emergence of a new alignment in the Middle East, based upon a new fault line between moderates and radicals.¹ This alignment is manifested in Egypt's construction of the underground steel wall on its border with Gaza. By exploring the motivations, responses, and implications of building such a wall, it will become apparent that two camps have emerged in the region on this issue and that their stances are but an illustration of the aforementioned shift.

An Embargo by Many

In early 2006, Hamas emerged for the first time as a political party. Some hoped this would herald a new beginning for the Palestinian political scene and thus for the national project of creating a Palestinian state. News stories from around the globe were cautiously optimistic, reasoning that since Hamas had chosen to participate in a democratic election that it had subsequently won, it might be willing to moderate its policies. However, much of the international community remained skeptical of such assertions owing to Hamas' long history of terrorism and violence. Shortly after the election results were announced, the Middle East Quartet (the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union) issued a statement warning Hamas that it would suspend financial aid to the Palestinian Authority (P.A.) unless Hamas met three conditions: a) renouncing terrorism, b) accepting previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements, and c) recognizing Israel's right to exist.² However, Hamas refused outright and its militant wing continued to fire Qassam rockets into Israel. Therefore, upon the formation of the Hamas government, the Quartet followed through with its warning and imposed an economic embargo in April 2006. Since this time the Quartet has implemented a myriad of sanctions and blockades in an attempt to reduce the militant group's violent activities against Israel. Israel also included military campaigns in its attempts to deter Hamas from further use of violence.

Six months after its election, Hamas militants launched a raid into Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing two soldiers and capturing an Israeli reservist,

¹ These terms, while imperfect, will be defined in the body of the article so as clarify what each term encompasses and necessarily excludes.

² "Press Statement: Quartet Statement on the Situation in the Middle East," *The U.S. Department of State*, Washington D.C., January 30, 2006, <<http://2001-2009.state.gov>>.

Corporal Gilad Shalit. In response, Israel launched Operation Summer Rains three days later. Its stated goal was to secure the release of Corporal Shalit and prevent the launching of Qassam rockets into Israel. The operation consisted of: a) heavy bombardment of the infrastructure used by the militant group and b) targeted strikes against its senior personnel. In turn, Hamas' previously sporadic firing of missiles into Israel's southern cities became almost a weekly occurrence. However, Israel was not Hamas' only target. Hamas and Fatah had been at each others throats since the elections, vacillating between reaching a unity government agreement and launching an all out civil war. Now internal fighting among the Palestinian had reached a critical stage.

In June 2007, Hamas brought the intra-Palestinian conflict to a whole new level by consolidating its newly acquired power through a coup in Gaza. Hamas not only ousted Fatah members from their erstwhile government positions, but physically exiled them from the Strip. In certain cases, Hamas went beyond simply ejecting its rivals. It burned Fatah government buildings and threw the Fatah members off their roofs. After ensuring its unopposed reign in Gaza, Hamas deployed its previously underground militant wing, the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, to patrol the streets. According to several news sources, Hamas imposed various behavioral censures, punishing unIslamic dress with beatings and requiring women to cover their head and faces.³ Hamas' seizure of power proved to be dangerous for the local population that helped bring it to power in other ways as well.

The Hamas coup carried out against Fatah led the United States and E.U. to create a two-pronged policy towards the Palestinians: imposing restrictions and sanctions against the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip, and lifting the economic and political embargo on the Fatah-led P.A. in the West Bank. In furtherance of the latter policy, the U.S. and E.U. attempted to bolster the P.A. under President Mahmud Abbas and redirect previously appropriated funds towards this effort once Abbas expressed willingness to relaunch the negotiation process between Israel and the Palestinians.

As for Hamas in Gaza, aside from continued economic sanctions, its June 2007 coup triggered both Israel and Egypt to swiftly close their borders with Gaza, effectively sealing the Rafah crossing. Since November 2005, the "E.U. Border Assistance Mission at Rafah crossing point," or E.U. BAM Rafah, had been responsible for monitoring the operations of this border crossing as a neutral, third party actor. However, the mission was put on standby indefinitely as a result of the political situation. This closure translated into a land blockade, effectively halting the flow of goods, including fuel and energy supplies into and

³ For examples of Hamas' crackdown in Gaza, see Marie Colvin, "Defiant Hamas Rules by Fear in Isolated Gaza," *The Sunday Times – UK*, November 25, 2007, <www.timesonline.co.uk>; "Hamas 'Morality' Cops Enforce Islamic Law," *CBS News*, July 8, 2009, <www.cbsnews.com>; "Black Pages in the Absence of Justice: Report on Bloody Fighting in the Gaza Strip from 7 to 14 June 2007," *Palestine Center for Human Rights*, October 2007, <www.pchrgaza.org>.

out of the Gaza Strip. Israel justified the blockade on the basis of the claim that Hamas was a “hostile entity” and that “all needs which go beyond humanitarian needs will not be supplied by Israel to the Gaza Strip.”⁴ For its part, Egypt initiated the closure on the basis of its growing concern that there would be a spillover of Hamas-style militancy into its own territory. Alternatively, Egypt opted to work through diplomatic channels to try to change the situation in Gaza *and* reconcile the Palestinian factions,⁵ all while maintaining a tight grip on its border with the Strip. Unfortunately, even these efforts were compromised by new developments Hamas initiated on the ground.

Events in 2006 and 2007 clearly indicated that the situation in Hamas-run Gaza was out of control, but in the end, it was the constant shelling of Israeli cities that brought the situation to a head. The attacks, which included mortars, Qassams, Al-Quds, Katyushas, and Grad missiles totaling over 1,500 in 2007 and over 3,000 in 2008,⁶ were part of Hamas’ “resistance to Israel’s occupation of Palestine.” Hamas argued that Israel should cease military operations against the Palestinians and lift its blockade on the Gaza Strip. However, with Hamas unwilling to recognize Israel’s right to exist or renounce violence, Israel feared that Hamas would simply use open borders to import more advanced weapons, putting an increasing number of Israelis in danger. With ceasefire negotiations at an impasse and Hamas rocket-fire increasing daily, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in Gaza. Lasting but three weeks (December 27, 2008–January 18, 2009), the Gaza War — the motivations of which were defined and redefined by both parties throughout — resulted in the usual: high casualties on the Palestinian side owing to both Israel’s superior military capability and Hamas’ use of the civilian population as “shields;” and low casualties on the Israeli side; in addition the mass psychological impact of the Hamas attack led to political unrest and the election of a more conservative government in Israel. Ultimately, the war turned out *not* to be a game changer; Israel gained no more security than it had before and the situation in Gaza under Hamas has further deteriorated.

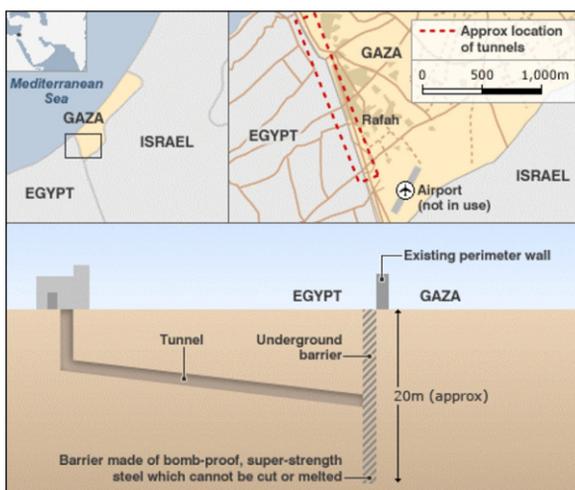
In order to circumvent the restrictions placed on both of Gaza’s borders, Hamas has supported the construction of hundreds of additional underground tunnels over the last three years.⁷ The tunnels run under the separation barrier between Egypt and the Gaza Strip along the Philadelphi

⁴“Joint Press Conference with Foreign Minister Livni and US Secretary of State Rice,” *The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, September 19, 2007, <www.mfa.gov.il>.

⁵For more on Egyptian efforts to mediate between Fatah and Hamas, see Tally Helfont, “Egypt Reenters the Fray,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note*, October 2008.

⁶“Hamas Rockets,” *Global Security Organizations*, <www.globalsecurity.org>.

⁷Tunnels have existed in this area in smaller numbers for decades; however, the effort to systematically build hundreds and hundreds of tunnels as well as the large-scale, organized smuggling that is going on until this day is a new phenomenon since Hamas took control of the corridor. For further details, see Jeremy M. Sharp, “The Egypt-Gaza Border and its Effect on Israeli-Egyptian Relations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, February 1, 2008, p. 2, n. 2, <www.fas.org>.

Figure 1.

Christian Fraser "Egypt Starts Building Steel Wall on Gaza Strip Border," *BBC News – Cairo*, December 9, 2009.
 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8405020.stm>>

corridor — a buffer zone created by 1979 Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty along the border — and bring in all manner of items such as livestock, medicine, food, clothes, cigarettes, alcohol, weapons and, in certain cases, people (See Figure 1). From a security standpoint, the tunnels play a decisive role in facilitating Hamas' efforts to arm itself, as was demonstrated during the Gaza War. Initially, Egypt bore harsh criticism for not doing enough to stem the smuggling given that the flow of goods into Gaza was coming from Egypt.⁸ However, Egypt's border with Gaza, already a growing security concern for the country, was subject to two major breaches in 2008-9. These events, coupled with: a) the fear that increased militancy in a neighboring territory might influence the already sympathetic Muslim Brotherhood to once again take-up arms and b) the economic pressure exerted by the United States, ultimately prompted Egypt to act in a more decisive manner. In December 2009, Egypt began the construction of an underground steel wall to block and therefore prevent the usage of the smuggling tunnels. This development, which has both local and regional implications, has caused a flare-up of tensions in the Middle East, with both political and religious figures taking to the airwaves and the internet to weigh in. Nevertheless, Egypt is forging on with its construction project, hoping to impede the tunnels that have been the source of so many problems.

⁸For more on Egypt's role in curbing the smuggling, see "President Mubarak's interview to Y'idout Ahronout," *Egypt's State Information Service*, December 28, 2007, <www.sis.gov.eg/En>.

Tunneling into a Steel Wall

Egypt's decision to construct an underground steel wall is its most forceful measure to date to combat the security threat on its border. The new underground barrier, which reportedly will reach a depth of 30 meters and span 10 kilometers, will parallel the above ground barrier. The hope is that the new underground foundations will firmly secure Egypt's borders from breaches by slicing through smuggling tunnels and blocking their paths. While construction began in early December 2009 and is slated to be completed sometime in 2011, it is unclear how long the process will take and what factors on the ground will hamper its already slow progress.

Under the terms of the 1979 Israel–Egypt Peace Treaty the border city of Rafah was divided, with the most densely populated part in Gaza and a smaller town in Egyptian controlled territory. When Israel withdrew in 2005, control of the Rafah border crossing on the Palestinian side was transferred to the P.A. and then subsequently taken over by Hamas. Although Rafah has been a smuggling hub for decades, Hamas' smuggling of illicit goods recently has begun to include sophisticated weaponry that, as in the case of the Gaza War, pose a serious threat to Israel. The influx of large quantities of higher caliber weapons could even elevate Hamas to a regional threat.⁹

Logistics relating to the smuggling tunnels are wide-ranging depending on the source. Many international reporters, from the New York Times and the Guardian UK, among others, have gained access to and reported on the inner workings of the tunnels. The tunnels are typically between 20 and 50 feet deep¹⁰ and vary in width depending on the types of items that are being transported through them. The digging of tunnels is usually bankrolled by a primary investor and rented out to members of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and independent individuals, who then move goods, weapons, and the like from Egypt into Gaza. Cables and electric motors are used to ferry packages through the tunnels and there are paid, armed guards on either end of each tunnel. The investor and his family receive a percentage on every shipment that passes through the tunnel, which make this business of constructing and running tunnels highly lucrative in the economically-stifled Strip.¹¹

As might be expected, the tunnels are extremely dangerous. Tunnels often collapse because of wear and tear and, in certain cases, have been flooded because tunnelers accidentally hit a water pipeline in the process of digging. Alternatively, the tunnels have been collapsed and flooded by Egypt and have been bombed by Israel on several occasions. The most prominent example of the latter occurred during Operation Cast Lead when Israel

⁹ Sharp, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰ “One Booming Business in Gaza: Tunneling for the Gunrunners,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2006.

¹¹ Sharp, p. 4.

bombed hundreds of smuggling tunnels and demolished the homes on the Gaza side that served as entrances. This endeavor eliminated less than 50% of the tunnels, and reconstruction efforts and smuggling commenced immediately following the War. In light of this reality, Israel and Egypt have been forced to reconsider their strategic approaches to the tunnels and even the U.S. is flexing its economic muscles on the subject.¹²

Egypt's Strategic Considerations

Until recently, Egypt has maintained a lax attitude towards the smuggling tunnels. Sporadic crackdowns were interspersed with a blind-eye policy, many argue, in order to express a degree of solidarity with the Palestinian cause and maintain its position as mediator between the two Palestinian factions. However, in January 2008, Hamas detonated an explosive device at its border with Egypt, causing a major breach in the barrier. With a portion of the barrier destroyed, thousands of Palestinians poured into Egypt. Egypt's leaders had no choice but to allow them to enter in order to obtain goods that were not available in Gaza and then return home. However, the Egyptian government had to work feverishly to reestablish and secure the border, even accepting funds from the United States in order to do so. Hamas, for its part, was emboldened by its successful breach, which earned the group some support among Gazans who benefitted from an impromptu sojourn into Egypt.

Less than six months later, following the Egyptian brokered 6-month ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, the militant group took advantage of the relative calm to smuggle in several tons of weapons from Egypt, "including longer-range Iranian-made rockets that brought 10 percent of the Israeli population within striking distance."¹³ By the time that Israel responded to Hamas' perpetual shelling by launching Operation Cast Lead, the militant group was armed to the teeth and ready to fight. However, Hamas was not the only group using the tunnels to smuggle weapons and plan attacks.

In early 2009, Egypt discovered a Hezbollah plot to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip using the underground tunnels. The multi-pronged plot involved 49 suspects — including Egyptian, Lebanese, Palestinian and Sudanese members¹⁴ — who planned to attack Israeli tourist sites in the Sinai

¹²"In the fall of 2007, a Department of Defense delegation toured the Gaza-Egypt border, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers drafted a geological assessment of the underground smuggling tunnels. As a result, the U.S. government has offered to allocate \$23 million of Egypt's annual Foreign Military Financing (FMF) toward the procurement of more advanced detection equipment, such as sensors and remote-controlled robotic devices." See Sharp, p. 1.

¹³David Schenker, "Gaza Tunnels: No Path to Peace," *The Boston Globe*, January 14, 2009.

¹⁴"Egyptian Media Says Hizbullah Cell Planned Bombings In Taba: Customs Officials to Take Special Measures with Lebanese," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), April 25, 2009, <www.dailystar.com.lb>.

Peninsula and to fire on ships in the Suez Canal.¹⁵ Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, acknowledged that his group was actively engaging in operations to support and arm Hamas in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Many argued, however, that Hezbollah's actions were aimed at more than simply helping Hamas, posing a serious security threat to Egypt on several fronts. For instance, it is not implausible that the weapons smuggled in by Hezbollah could be used in Egypt and perhaps against the regime itself. When considering Nasrallah's frequent outspoken criticism of the Egyptian government and his call a few months earlier for Egyptians to rise up against President Hosni Mubarak for not doing more to help Hamas, Egypt viewed the activities of Hezbollah in its territory as necessarily hostile. Alternatively, if Hezbollah were to succeed in carrying out attacks against Israel by way of Egypt and the tunnels beneath its border, Egypt might be drawn into a conflict with Israel not of its choosing. The implications of this transcend Israel and the Middle East alone; they affect the United States, the E.U., and the funding that Egypt receives from both. Finally, and perhaps most disturbing from the Egyptian perspective, this move seems to be yet another example of the long arm of Iran reaching east to stir up trouble and shift the balance of power in line with its own interests. Hamas maintains close ties with Iran, from whom it receives significant financial backing. Thus, Egypt has an incentive to thwart Iran's efforts in its own perceived sphere of influence, and indeed, in its own backyard.

An additional dimension of Egypt's concern with the Gaza Strip and the danger posed by Hamas deal specifically with Egypt's own Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood. For decades, Egypt has struggled, often violently, to contain and suppress the radical Islamist presence. The Muslim Brotherhood, which has historically been the main focus of these efforts, has in recent years abstained from violence and expressed its domestic opposition primarily within the political sphere. Nevertheless, the Brotherhood remains the staunchest critic of the Mubarak government; thus, from Cairo's perspective, the prospect of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood drawing inspiration from Hamas and its successes raises serious concerns of strategic cooperation and perhaps even ideological contagion. Likewise, there has been a long precedent of Brotherhood support for the Palestinian cause. This support, which has manifested in many different forms, included sending fighters to support the Palestinians against the British in the 1936 Arab Revolt all the way to the most recent rhetorical support in which the Brotherhood is agitating against its government to lift the siege on Gaza and reopen the Rafah crossing. Although Hamas grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood and has functioned as its own entity with its own evolving *raison d'être*, the Hezbollah scenario raises a similar possibility for the Brotherhood. It is conceivable that the Muslim

¹⁵ Michael Slackman, "Egypt Accuses Hezbollah of Plotting Attacks and Arms Smuggling to Gaza," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2009.

Brotherhood's support for Hamas in this latest drama could reach a tipping point in which rhetorical support turns into tangible financial or logistical support. Although not proven, some of the media coverage of the Hezbollah cell suggested that the Egyptian citizens who were involved belonged to the Brotherhood.

A final point to consider when assessing Egypt's strategic considerations in building a subterranean steel wall along its border with Gaza is the financial repercussions of not doing so. The United States, along with other countries in the West, contributes significant amounts of money to Egypt. Some of these funds are aid-based, some are meant to stimulate trade and other U.S. economic interests in the region, and some are meant as bargaining chips to affect regional stability and balance of power in the Middle East. However, what America giveth, America can taketh away. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008 stipulated the United States withhold its commitment of \$100 million in Foreign Military Financing until, according to the Secretary of State, Egypt has, *inter alia*, taken concrete steps to "detect and destroy the smuggling network and tunnels that lead from Egypt to Gaza."¹⁶ This type of leverage is bound to have a significant impact on Egyptian decision making and cause those in the higher echelons of the government to ask: what does Egypt gain from turning a blind eye to the smuggling? The border breaches by Hamas and Hezbollah, the threat of the Iranian "resistance" agenda, the potential for a flare-up of radical sentiments at home and the financial penalty for inaction, in the end, all contributed to Egypt's decision to strengthen its protection against Gaza. Moreover, many argued for an "Egypt first" policy; a sentiment that became more and more apparent in Egypt's responses to the harsh criticism it received regarding the construction its wall.

Reactions to the Egyptian Wall

What began as a trickle turned into a veritable flood of criticism, with every major religious and political figure sounding off on whether Egypt has the right to build its wall. Upon the release of the first press reports and photographs of the growing construction site that was emerging along the Egyptian-Gazan border, even before Egyptian government officials acknowledged its construction and purpose, the Islamic Research Academy at Al-Azhar issued a fatwa declaring that it was permissible in matters of Sharia law for Egypt to build the barrier.¹⁷ This statement, issued by the one of the most

¹⁶ "House Report 110-497, Section 690: Making Appropriations for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs for the Fiscal Year Ending September 30, 2008," 110th Congress, 1st Session, December 17, 2007.

¹⁷ "Egypt Fatwa on Gaza Wall Stirs Controversy," *Al-Arabiya News Channel*, January 3, 2010 <www.alarabiya.net>.

senior religious authorities in Egypt, was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Hamis employed a bilateral strategy against the wall. On the one hand, in an attempt to alleviate Egypt's security concerns, Hamas spokesman, Taher Al-Nounou assured its neighbor that "it is inconceivable that we should pose a danger to Egypt."¹⁸ On the other, Hamas harshly condemned the construction of the barrier in a barrage of articles and speeches, claiming that it is religiously prohibited. One such example can be found in a recent press release, that stated:

We in Hamas disapprove and are surprised by the fatwa of the Islamic Research Academy at Al-Azhar's that considers the steel wall, which is strangling Gaza, as being permissible by Sharia, and here we ask: Does this wall protect Egyptian national security from the Zionist occupation, which occupies Arab lands, or does the wall prevent the arrival of milk and medicine for children and the sick trapped in Gaza during the past four years?¹⁹

Hamis went on to chastise those who perceived the wall as legitimate saying,

We remind our distinguished *ulema* in Al-Azhar that Palestine is an occupied Islamic land, and that the Al-Aqsa Mosque, 'the first of the two Qiblas and third holiest [of places], is being subjected to desecration, Judaization and demolition, thus it would be more appropriate for the institutions al-Azhar to [religiously] forbid the barrier, and inflame the nation and its leaders to break the barrier by opening the Rafah crossing first.²⁰

Next to sound off was prominent Qatar-based Muslim Brotherhood scholar, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who said "The construction of the steel wall, which Egypt is building along its border with Gaza, is prohibited by the Shari'a, because the intention behind it is to block all exit and entry points for Gazans, to intensify the siege around them, to humiliate them, to starve them and put pressure on them to kneel in surrender to Israel." He went further arguing that "Egypt, which fought four wars for Palestine, should not carry out an act that is 100 percent against the Palestinians . . . it's as if Egypt is telling the Palestinians, 'Die, and let Israel live.'"²¹ For Qaradawi, the wall has no practical use but instead represents Egypt's choice of Israel over Palestine.

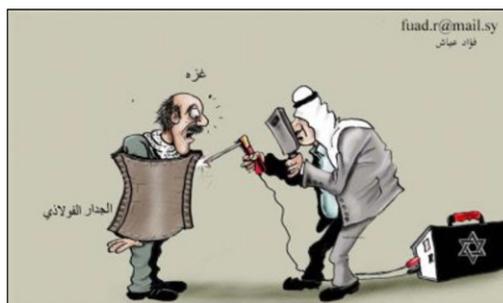
Qardawi's statements, which are said to be religiously based, also represent another oppositional technique common to the Middle East —

¹⁸ "The Steel Wall' . . . A Racist American Idea to Strangle Gaza and Dissatisfaction with the Egyptian Behavior," December 20, 2009, <www.palestine-info.info/ar>.

¹⁹ "Press Release: We Disapprove of the Al-Azhar Fatwa Legalizing the Steel Wall, Which is Strangling Gaza," *The Islamic Resistance Movement- HAMAS*, January 2, 2010 <www.palestine-info.info/ar>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Qaradawi: Egypt's Steel Wall Forbidden in Islam," *Ikhwan Web — Muslim Brotherhood Website*, January 4, 2010 <www.ikhwanweb.com>.

Figure 2.

"Caricatures of the Egyptian Steel Wall," *Palestinian Dialogue Forum*, Posted January 2, 2010,
 <<http://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=541202>>

discrediting and exerting pressure by accusing Egypt of conspiring and colluding with Israel and America — the ultimate derision. These types of accusations have been employed heavily in the emerging anti-Egypt campaign. For example, the Association of Palestinian Scholars stated that the steel wall, "which is being financed and planned under the supervision of Americans and the Zionists; is religiously prohibited and a major sin because it kills the besieged Palestinian people in Gaza."²² Similarly, Dr. Salim Salama, the deputy head of the Association of Palestinian Scholars argued that "Egypt, when it decided to build this wall, had renounced its expected role towards Arab and Muslim peoples and reflected its surrender to the Zio-American dictates."²³ (See Figure 2 above for an example of the caricatures that are being used to express this same sentiment.)

Taking into consideration the turn that the criticism has taken, the Egyptian establishment has begun to respond. Asserting that Egypt has the right to secure its border, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Gheit explained, "What Egypt is doing is placing structures on its territory related to Egyptian defense." Egypt's Shura Council issued a similar endorsement of the government's security measures²⁴ while its Minister of Religious Endowment, Mohamed Hamdi Zaqzouq, defended the wall, refusing to associate them with abandoning the Palestinian cause. "We will always support the Palestinian cause and we lost thousands of our sons in the struggle for Palestine," he said, "however, Egypt has the right to protect its borders."²⁵ The late Sheikh of

²² "Association of Palestinian Scholars: The Construction of the Steel Wall is Religiously Prohibited and a Major Sin," *The Palestine Information Center*, January 4, 2010 <www.palestine-info.info/ar>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Amid Protests, Egypt Defends Right to Build Gaza Wall," *Haaretz*, December 30, 2009 <www.haaretz.com>.

²⁵ "Egypt Fatwa on Gaza Wall Stirs Controversy," *Al-Arabiya News Channel*, January 3, 2010 <www.alarabiya.net>.

Al-Azhar, Mohammed Said Tantawi, responded to these criticisms explaining that “It is one of Egypt’s legitimate rights to place a barrier that stops the damage caused by the tunnels under Rafah, which are used to smuggle drugs and other (contraband) that threaten Egypt’s stability.” As if to up the ante, he added, “Those who oppose the building of this wall are violating the commands of Islamic law,”²⁶ However, these attempts to assuage the opposition have had little effect and it’s not just the primary actors that are sparring over the issue.

An entire front has emerged in support of Hamas and its stance on the Egyptian wall. Included in this faction are Iran, Hezbollah, Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood, and more recently, Qatar and Turkey, who have begun to shift their regional alliances in recent years in favor of Hamas and some of the more radical “resistance” elements in the Middle East. The critiques being made by this front are numerous and varied. For instance, several Iranian personages have claimed in the media that by means of its wall, “Egypt was aiming to topple the Hamas regime,” and that the “Gaza border proved that this [Egyptian] regime is evil, treacherous, and inhumane.” Likewise, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, making slightly more veiled comments, said “I must stress that anyone who participates in the siege on Gaza is responsible [for the shedding of] Palestinian blood.”²⁷ Qatar viewed the wall as a “submission to the wishes of Israel and America” and Turkey, aside from issuing likeminded statements, sent a delegation of protesters to Egypt to speak out against the government sponsored wall.

Despite the aggressive criticism of this front, Egypt does not stand alone in its efforts to moderate the more radical elements on its border. Egypt’s natural partners in regional anti-radicalization include the Palestinian Authority under Abbas and Salam Fayyad, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Its broader coalition includes Israel, the U.S. and the E.U., who have all striven for a quieter, more moderate Gaza through various measures. In a December 19, 2009 interview with Al-Ahram, Abbas expressed full support for the measures taken by Egypt on its border with the Gaza Strip, saying that “This is a matter of Egyptian sovereignty,” and accusing some parties of trying to divert attention from the facts that led to the aggression on Gaza. Abbas also intimated that Hamas carries out Iran’s instructions with regard to its anti-Egypt campaign and “receives \$250 million in return,” stressing that “Iran wants to hold all the cards in her hand, for use in any future dialogue with the United States.”²⁸ Whether or not these figures are accurate, it is clear that regional forces are at

²⁶ “The Minister of Waqfs Defended the Legitimacy of his Argument About Al-Azhar’s Fatwa Authorizing Construction of the Wall with Gaza,” *Al-Arabiya News Channel*, January 2, 2010, <www.alarabiya.net>.

²⁷ L. Barkan, “Reactions in Arab and Muslim World to Egyptian Steel Barrier along Its Border with Gaza,” *MEMRI: Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 580* (January 13, 2010), <www.memri.org>.

²⁸ “Abu Mazen: Egypt’s Measures are a Matter of Sovereignty,” *Al-Ahram (Egypt)*, December 19, 2009, <www.ahram.org.eg>.

play in a seemingly local problem. But what does the line in the sand that has been drawn on the Egyptian wall issue imply about the larger regional balance of power?

Solidification of the Two Camps

The reactions described in the previous section indicate the emergence of a new political order in the Middle East over the last decade. This order pits moderates against radicals, or more precisely, those who are willing to work within the established order to achieve political goals against those who are working against the status quo using radical and violent means. There have been several regional developments around which members of each of these groups have coalesced. The Iranian nuclear project is dominant among these developments. In recent years, Iran has sought to elevate its status in the Middle East and beyond. This goal is evident not only in its nuclear ambitions but also in its deliberate involvement in a host of smaller conflicts, far from its sphere of influence. Hezbollah and Hamas, both on Iran's payroll, view a stronger Iran as being vital to their interests. Syria, Iran's long time ally, perceives Iran's gain as being its own gain, specifically when it comes to western balance of power politics in the region. Turkey, whose government recently began developing closer ties with Iran, is perhaps less concerned with Iran's aggrandizing ambition than it is with its own potential to play the role of negotiator in Iranian-western relations. Nevertheless, these countries represent one side of the fence whereas Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the United States, to name a few, represent the other and remain strongly opposed to a nuclear-armed Iran becoming a regional hegemon.

Another key issue in which these two camps diverge relates to their support for *or* rejection of the Arab–Israeli peace process. This division is most clearly demonstrated in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War, and the 2008–9 Israel–Hamas War in Gaza. All three examples represent developments in which Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan were advocating normalization and a cessation of violence. These Arab countries, which certainly did not support the two latter events, were uncharacteristically silent in their criticism of Israel's actions, publicly blaming Hamas and Hezbollah for these wars. Abbas' P.A. and the United States supported the Saudi-Egyptian-Jordanian stance, both of which have much to lose from the ongoing conflict.²⁹ The converse can be said about the radical contingent. Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria admittedly have little to lose and probably much more to gain in terms of their own self-preservation from the continuation of the Arab–Israeli conflict. From the perspectives of both groups, the lives

²⁹ For more on this divide, see Samuel Helfont, "The Sunni Divide: Understanding Politics and Terrorism in the Arab Middle East," *Foreign Policy Research Institute Monograph*, November 2009.

lost by Hamas and Hezbollah are worth the struggle to achieve their goals. Furthermore, these groups are very much defined by the conflict and would become irrelevant if it were to end. For Iran and Syria, the conflict represents a potent bargaining chip in their own political caches and therefore its cessation would equate to a relative loss of regional bargaining power. Thus it is strategically beneficial for the so-called radical camp to work against the moderate one as illustrated yet again in the case of Egypt's steel wall.

A final point of divergence, albeit on a larger scale, is each camp's willingness, or lack thereof, to maintain relations with the United States. This aspect is more fluid and has evolved as international events have unfolded but in general, Syria, Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah have been uncompromising in their opposition to the U.S. and its interests in the region. Alternatively, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the P.A. have in many instances, either converged with U.S. interests or contended with them through recognized modes of engagement. The solidification of these two camps, unfortunately, has had the side effect of transforming every major development in the region into a piece of a larger balance of power game. However, at least the players have become clearly defined, which enables the United States to more clearly decide with whom it can work and with whom it cannot.

Conclusion

While Egypt's wall with Gaza represents a serious problem for Hamas, it could yield a significant reward in the long run. Economic and land blockades have been unsuccessful in budging Hamas from its policy of using violence against Israel as the sole means to achieve its goals. By cutting off the smuggling tunnels, the wall threatens to worsen the already unstable economic situation in Gaza. Egypt's wall may ultimately force Hamas to acquiesce to: a) the terms of the Egyptian-sponsored national reconciliation agreement and b) the terms stipulated by the Quartet. It then follows that the crossings could be reopened, the embargo lifted, and aid, financial and otherwise, restored.

One possible consequence of the Egyptian-built wall is that it gives Hamas yet another reason to "resist," therefore reinvigorating its waning *raison d'être*. On one hand, Egypt's effort to secure itself against Hamas changes the face of the "enemy." Israel put up one side of the blockade, but Arab-Muslim Egypt put up the other. How can the Jews or the Israelis be the only "enemy" if several Arab, Muslim actors join in the same initiative against the militant group? On the other hand, if it means a continued reason to exist and another foe against which to resist, perhaps the wall will only embolden Hamas. The manner in which developments unfold on the ground will be extremely important to the future of the conflict. While Hamas is caught up in this most recent dispute, the security and prosperity of the West Bank

Palestinians under the P.A. have been improving, and they are endeavoring to charge ahead in their quest for a national homeland. It is possible that if Hamas doesn't make a change soon, it could get left out of it altogether.

From a policy perspective, it is important for the United States to recognize the changing dynamic of Middle East alignments and orient its policies accordingly. The current administration has gone to lengths to prove that it is not working against Arabs and Muslims but rather against extremists, whose efforts come at the expense of the well-being of their people. This is an important step. However, an integral aspect of this endeavor lies in understanding the emerging regional alignment so that the U.S. may better gauge its policy prescriptions and their potential results. If the U.S. supports and encourages allies such as Egypt and the P.A. to fight these battles, rhetorical and otherwise, with Hamas, it will put further distance between the U.S.–Israel vs. Arab, Muslim narrative and encourage a coalition of moderates working against radicals. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that these roles are not fixed. The historic ebb and flow of alliances always offers the potential of luring some of the radical actors towards a more moderate, pragmatic policy. Then again, the opposite remains true as well.

