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## Egypt and the Events in Gaza: The “Official” Solution to the Crisis

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**Egypt’s official media lacked basic professionalism in reporting recent events in Gaza. By using a provocative language devoid of objectivity and credibility, it limited its intervention to reproducing dictated slogans. The events in Gaza as reported by the Egyptian press do not reflect a policy disagreement between moderates and extremists, as it happens in other countries of the world, but the utter failure of Egypt’s attempts to hold a moderate discourse. The basic ingredients of democratic governance, whether through professionalism, transparency or the careful avoidance of generalisations, were absent. Many Arab and Egyptian analysts and writers believe that the current political situation in Egypt is the outcome of its moderate policies and strategic alliance with the United States, and what is required is a confrontational policy towards Israel (what no Arab country does, except through the use of slogans). The true failure of the Egyptian government is to have failed to take advantage of its peace agreement with Israel to build a moderate position, whose success could be measured by the country’s progress towards democracy, stability and economic prosperity. Egypt ultimately fails to provide a successful example of Arab moderation that other countries in the region could emulate.**

### **Introduction**

The ongoing events in Gaza elicited a series of reactions inside and outside Egypt. They were triggered by Israel’s closure of the Strip, the storming of the Egyptian border by thousands of Palestinians, and ended with Israel’s attacks last February, which killed 150 Palestinians.

As hundreds of thousands of besieged Gazans broke through the Egyptian border, Egypt’s official reaction was contradictory and reflected the internal crisis pertaining to the manner the “Gaza challenge” ought to be dealt with. The emotions and reactions these events triggered on the official level ranged from outright condemnation of Israel’s actions in the

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Strip, to open condemnations of the Palestinian people themselves.

The Gaza events revealed a new method for Arab governments to address the sensitive issue of the Palestinian cause, considered by the Arab peoples to be by far, the most important and central of all. For the most part, official media used an unprecedented poor choice of language, particularly because the polemic came 30 years after the intellectual, political and propaganda clash regarding President Sadat's peace initiative; the most important the Egyptian and Arab elites have ever known. The Arab scene, in general, and the Egyptian scene in particular, staged the violent disagreement as to the implications of President Sadat's initiative. His supporters were never short of powerful political excuses to justify this unilateral move, which became the ideological cornerstone of the "Arab rightwing". This ideology rests on favouring and advancing above all the interest of the individual state, accepting the prevailing international balance of power and adopting the view that a peaceful settlement is the only way to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

It is difficult to view the manner in which recent events in Gaza were dealt with as the follow up to President Sadat's policies in the 1970s, or of his propaganda and media discourse, mainly because the Egyptian authorities reduced these events' implications to the security aspect. They dealt with the Palestinian violation of the borders as a danger and a threat to the security of Egypt and opened the door to a large-scale campaign of incitement and hate against the Palestinian people, beyond anything that had taken place in President Sadat's time.

So far, the official media and the political elite dealt with Israel's aggression against

the Palestinian people through condemnations and denunciations of Israel's policies. But this remained true as long as solidarity required nothing more than words. The same media made a 180° turn when it became clear a price had to be paid, no matter how small, to the besieged Palestinian people, who had no choice but break through the borders in search of temporary shelter from the freezing cold and the blockade.

### **Discourse of the Routine condemnation of Israeli aggression**

Like other 'moderate' and 'progressive' countries, Egypt routinely condemns Israel's aggression, and rejection of the Hebrew state's policies in the Arab occupied territories. These repeated and wordy condemnations gave birth to a "linguistic jihad" that involved the use of all kinds of ugly and negative adjectives to describe Israel. These words seemed sometimes inconsistent coming from a country that maintained relations with Israel for over 30 years.

Since Camp David, political authorities have dealt with the Arab-Israeli conflict as a media campaign issue. Whenever there was no consequence for doing so, they heaped heavy criticism on Israeli policies while giving maximum support to the Palestinian people providing it amounted to no more than ink on paper in the form of slogans.

Sometimes, we could hear serious objections by western countries, outside the confines of the Arab world, to discover that the Arab world has not witnessed any serious resistance movement since President Sadat's initiative, despite the slogans of "steadfastness and confrontation" once upheld by Baathist and so-called progressive regimes. Likewise, there were no serious attempts at

forging genuine moderate policies in order to bring democracy and prosperity to the people, as was the case in countries outside the Arab world.

Perhaps the difference between Egypt's and the Gulf States' situation, especially Kuwait and Qatar, is that the latter have agreed to enter into a strategic partnership with the United States and preferred American protection to the so-called Arab protection or self-defence, as a result of their past negative experiences (specifically after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait). Iran on the other hand, chose the route of the rejection of American plans in the region, and worked on defence and partnership agreements with and among states of the region. Internally, Iran countered American policies by establishing an efficient political system, more democratic than in any other Arab country. Externally, it forged political alliances with rejectionist fronts in Palestine, Lebanon and a number of Shiite militias in Iraq and in doing so, became the central anti-American player in the region.

Egypt took a unique stance in the region; not appearing as a rejectionist state and careful not to lead one a single strategy that could eventually clash with America's project in the Middle East. Officially, backed by the foreign minister, Egypt is the United States' ally, understating that "America is a superpower and should be feared" (statement of January 2008 at the ruling party's political committee meeting). On the same line, the President of the People's Assembly said that no one should provoke the United States about Palestinian rights, and that only a maverick would be able to deal with it on that issue. Neither official said anything about benefiting from America's experience, given its democratic credentials, whether in the political and economic domains, or in education, health, media and the law.

In the meantime, because it is "a superpower and should be feared" Egypt was happy to fulfil many of America's foreign policy demands, though the door was kept wide open for the official media and certain state officials to voice anti-American slogans. As if the aim is to give the impression that Egypt is governed by the likes of President Ahmadinejad of Iran or Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, while we know that, because of the nature the country's internal system, it is wholly incapable of effectively disagreeing with America, or countering Israeli policies.

Having a political regime allied to America leads Egypt's elite to making a difficult political choice; it has to pay the necessary price of this alliance, but does not seek to take advantage of this relationship in order to advance the people's conditions and promote political and democratic progress, as did other countries of the region such as Turkey. A big part of the Arab elite opted for the easier choice that entails no responsibilities, because those involved are not required to be democratic or despotic, able or ignorant. All that is required of them is to have a voice with which to curse America and its policies, day in and day out, and at the first opportunity (which in this case was the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who crossed the Egyptian border) shift from cursing America and Israel, to cursing the Palestinians.

Egypt has dealt with the Gaza crisis in a way that reflects its dual inability to either become an effective partner for America, like Turkey, or a rejectionist state with self-sustained development and independent regional might, like Iran.

### **The breach of the Egypt-Gaza border seen by the media**

#### ***A. The threat theory and Egypt's national security***

When hundreds of thousands of besieged Gazans breached the border between Egypt and Palestine, journalists who had once cursed Israel in defence of the Palestinian people, launched a campaign in the Egyptian media. On one hand, they repeatedly underlined Egypt's sacrifices for the Palestinian cause in constant harping on an issue of "Arab rivalry" and on the other hand, they levelled accusations at the dispossessed Palestinian people. "We will not mention the fact that Egypt has waged war after war for the sake of the Palestine, and welcomed many refugees" they stated, "nor will we forget the "mercy train" when the Egyptians gave their brothers in Gaza all they had". They highlighted the fact that they were also "aware of the American-Zionist plans for Egyptian Sinai, plans that have been lying in wait for thousands of years. We know what international Zionism says about a people without a land, meaning the people of Palestine, and a land without a people, meaning Sinai. We also know that everyone's eyes are set on Sinai as a refuge, and that they all believe that we should make it available to our Palestinian brethren as their substitute homeland, instead of Palestine." However, they said, "instead of fighting for their land and their nation, the Palestinians chose to confront Egypt with the aim of making Sinai their homeland, this very piece of land for which Egyptian blood was spilt in times of war and in times of peace!"<sup>i</sup>

In this context an Egyptian Television reported: "A group of masked Palestinians attacked Egyptian security forces, wounding 12 of them, while another group breached the border fence in many areas. The Egyptian security forces remained calm, and did not mount a counter attack against the Palestinians because of the ordeal the Gaza Strip is going through."<sup>ii</sup> A number of Palestinians provoked the Egyptian security forces, and one of them raised the Palestinian flag on the transmission tower mast in the town of

Sheikh Zouweid. The flag was brought down (though it is worth mentioning that raising the Palestinian flag by Egyptians is only natural and was often done in the past, especially during demonstrations in defence of the Palestinians and their just cause). The security forces arrested 9 Palestinians driving in the area of al-Ahrash and Jaradat Sinai, who were supposedly carrying weapons and live ammunition."<sup>iii</sup> These provocative accusations, which seem to have been planted, were never proven.

In its January 30, 2008 edition, al-Ahram newspaper reported that five Palestinians, carrying explosives to use in suicide attacks in Israel, were arrested in Taba. Another group was apprehended after entering the country carrying detailed drawings of various access points in the Egyptian-Israeli border; they were also found to be carrying sophisticated weapons. Sources said that some Palestinian elements offered large sums of money to Egyptian border guards to allow them to smuggle in large quantities of weapons without being searched, or subjected to the provisions of the law. Witnesses in Rafah said that a number of Palestinians tried to force their way into the town through a side road and that, as a result, 36 members of the security forces were wounded, some critically.<sup>iv</sup> An official security source in Rafah said that a large number of Palestinian private transportation vehicles and cars were able to push their way through the Salaheddin border Gate, but the security forces managed to stop them all near the Rafah Town Council. Agence France Press quoted a member of the Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigade, the military wing of Hamas, who threatened that this time round, a number of his fellow activists intend to blow up the entire fence, not only parts of it.<sup>v</sup>

Other Egyptian political forces and currents thought somewhat differently. The

Muslim Brotherhood bloc in parliament condemned the confrontations that took place on the Palestinian-Egyptian border. Their deputy-president and spokesman in the People's Assembly – Hussein Mohammad Ibrahim – expressed his “regret regarding the confrontations that took place Monday night at the border between Egypt and Gaza, leading to the death of one Palestinian, the wounding of 14 others, and the wounding of 36 members of the Egyptian security forces manning the border between the Egyptian and Palestinian towns of Rafah.”

The Secretary General of the Progressive National Unionist Party, Dr. Rifaat al-Said, highlighted in his statements the fact that the Egyptian government's reaction was well within its rights as guarantor of the country's sovereignty, and in line with its duty to safeguard its security, and did come in response to foreign pressure. Al-Said said that instead of applying pressure on Egypt, additional pressure should be brought on Israel and Hamas to accept President Mahmoud Abbas' initiative of sending members of the Presidential Guard to the Rafah Crossing, until the Europeans arrive and things go back to normal.<sup>vi</sup>

### ***B. Sinai's economy: failure or revival?***

Although a large number of the transient Palestinians purchased huge amount of goods from Egyptian shops and merchants, an economic windfall for Sinai's towns, especially for Egyptian Rafah and al-'Arish, some in the official Egyptian media distorted this most "natural" relationship between buyer and seller and deliberately politicized it.

Some official statements said that “this invasion by hordes from Gaza will not solve the problem of the Strip. The influx from Gaza has placed Egypt's budget under immense pressure, and led to subsidised Egyptian petroleum products and goods (flour, oil, sugar, fuel, food,

bread and gas cylinders) being taken out of the country. We do not believe that the Egyptian people would accept a rise in prices that only favours Gaza's millionaires who are able to spend, according to Palestinian figures, some \$260 in three days, or \$85 a day.”<sup>vii</sup>

According to an official in the al-'Arish Chamber of Commerce, the number of Palestinians who entered Egypt was around 500 thousand, and the average spent per capita was \$250, based on a survey of a sample of merchants, not to mention the wholesale deals and other agreements struck with merchants at al-'Arish, and at the border.<sup>viii</sup> Mohammad Saber, from the humanitarian relief agency of the Egyptian Doctors' Union, said that 13 trucks laden with food, blankets and medicine were confiscated at the bridge, and prevented from being taken into Gaza.

### ***C. “Plots” by Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood***

A few writers saw the Gaza incidents as a plot by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Palestine against Egypt's national security, designed to shake the country's stability.

“The aim was to use events in Gaza to spread discord among the Egyptian people, they stated, based on the assumption that the political street was ready to take advantage of a foreign issue to settle the score between nationalist groups and the regime. The first steps in this direction were taken immediately upon the outbreak of events in Gaza, when the banned Muslim Brotherhood Organisation, the mother organisation of Hamas, leader of the incidents in Gaza, attempted to seize the street before the people had acknowledged what was going on. The aim was to bring pressure to bear on Egyptian decision-makers, and compel them to take bold decisions that would get them mired in the Palestinian quagmire, since the coup

in Gaza, before taking part in a campaign to distort Egypt's position internationally, and in the Arab world...Why was there not a single voice raised in condemnation of Hamas' aggression against the Egyptian people in Rafah, al-'Arish and our vigilant soldiers along the borders?... Egypt's political

stance not only uncovered Hamas' folly and Israel's schemes to export chaos, hunger and dispossession to us, but also the deep, dark collusion and collaboration between the Brotherhood and their branch in Gaza acting under Hamas' banner 'We are at Israel's service.'<sup>ix</sup>

"It is clear that both Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are part of a plan associated with Israel's aims and intentions in Sinai in particular, and Egypt in general, and designed to undermine the Palestinian cause."<sup>x</sup>

Comments like these in the official press did not prevent many writers and journalists from offering their own, often contradictory, interpretations of what really transpired in Gaza. They saw the events as a popular *intifada* (uprising) against a savage occupation, and as an attempt by Gaza residents to break down the prison wall that surrounds them, rather than targeting Egypt in any way. They saw the markets of Rafah and al-'Arish as a lifeline for a people who has lived eight long years under a severe and demeaning siege. "If Egypt was generous enough to host the Israelis in Southern Sinai for 15 days, despite the public's hatred for them, why can't they be as generous to the people of Gaza, their own kin, and host them for the same period after being besieged for eight months? Why are the Palestinians not allowed to shop in Rafah and al-'Arish for a limited period each month, just like the Israelis?"<sup>xi</sup>

### **Egyptian sovereignty and national security seen from a different angle**

Egypt's security has been used as an excuse to spread hatred against the Palestinians. During January and February, we witnessed unacceptable deeds, read and heard threats by officials, parliamentarians and journalists who use Egypt's national security to foment sedition among brothers. They spread rumours about the danger of settling the Palestinians in Sinai. Members of the "cross-eyed lobby" know very well that behind this notion lies the Zionist dream, a dream that not only involves Sinai, but the entire area between the Nile and the Euphrates.

Members of the "cross-eyed lobby" keep quiet, and allow the enemy (Israelis) to enter southern Egypt through Taba, without a visa, but object to our Palestinian brothers entering from the north, through Rafah! ... Members of the "cross-eyed lobby" remain tight-lipped when our soldiers drop dead under the enemy's bullet on the border, but shriek in anguish when transient demonstrations mistakenly cause few injuries among them. The "cross-eyed lobby" disregards the fact that our brothers in Palestine are not asking for a homeland in Sinai, or for entry into Egypt as a special favour. They simply want the right to a safe crossing through official borders under joint Egyptian-Palestinian control, at Rafah, in an exchange that provides both brothers across the frontier with the right to life, security and integrity.<sup>xii</sup>

Statements by the Egyptian Foreign Minister to the effect that he will break the foot of anyone crossing Egypt's borders, meaning the Palestinians forced by the Israeli siege to break breach the border, indicate that this press campaign was not that far off from official manipulation. It's regrettable, that the Ministers' statement was not expressed in defence of the integrity of Egypt's borders but in a most condescending and severe language in reference to the Palestinians, whom he simply saw as weak, defenceless and easy target. He allowed himself to heap

accusations upon them and level threats at them, a language hitherto never used towards Israel on whose shoulders falls the responsibility of what took place in Gaza. The fact that there were too few soldiers guarding the Egyptian border was a condition set by the Israelis, not the Palestinians.

## **Conclusion**

Sympathy with Gaza and Palestine is separate from the decision to normalise relations with Israel, or break them completely; it falls outside the realm of war and peace, resistance or submission to the status quo. It is what normal human nature is all about, anywhere in the world.

The disagreement between the regime in Egypt and Hamas is understandable, as is the Muslim Brotherhood's sympathy with Hamas. It is also logical for the former to endorse Mahmoud Abbas' regime, and for the latter to endorse Ismail Hanieh. What is not understandable or acceptable, however, is the situation deteriorating to such an extent that restrictions were imposed on Egypt's financial aid to Gaza, and Iran's name removed from the aid it provides to the Palestinians, as the result of political disagreements.

It is painful to understand why various expressions of material support, from associations that have no ties whatsoever to the Muslim Brotherhood, or the aid that comes from neighbouring countries, is often turned down. The prevailing security mentality interferes in everything, from the appointment of ministers, university deans and village superintendents, to controlling human affection and sympathy. We are now required to "engineer" our human

hearts according to the limits set by the security services' batons, and learn hatred, spread stories about the Palestinians' weapons and bombs and forget the exemplary way they behave in Egypt's cities, though they come from conditions of extreme deprivation and suffering.

We should remember how the American Nation Guard intervened, and cut New York City's electricity supply, two decades ago, to confound the hordes of poor and deprived citizens that had descended on the city, committing unprecedented robberies and rape, to bring ourselves to forgive the small offences by a handful of Palestinians.

The Egyptian regime had a real opportunity to go further than its political opponents and score a political coup in Gaza, by granting humanitarian support to the Palestinians, since it could no longer support them politically, especially after Hamas' failure to deliver due to options that need thorough diplomatic efforts. As usual, not only did this not happen, the image of the Palestinians was wilfully distorted to maintain equilibrium between those who sympathise with them and those who hate them, making the result an absolute zero. The space where any normal human being could express sympathy for the Palestinian people (even if he believes in peace and a peaceful settlement with Israel) was left to the Muslim Brotherhood, who took advantage of the Egyptian people's natural feelings towards Gaza to advance their political agenda. In the meantime, the regime in Egypt lost the opportunity to use people's humanitarian sentiments to its favour and advance the discourse of moderation it and its ally, the Abbas regime, represent.

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- <sup>i</sup> Abbas al-Tarabili, “Palestine for the Palestinians and Sinai for the Egyptians, Bar None”, (Arabic), al-Wafd newspaper, 30/2/2008
- <sup>ii</sup> Al-Ahram newspaper, 26/1/2008
- <sup>iii</sup> Al-Ahram, 29/1/2008
- <sup>iv</sup> Al-Ahram, 30/1/2008
- <sup>v</sup> Al-Ahram, 2/2/2008
- <http://www.palissue.com/arabic/news/file/details/0/14256.html>, 28/1/2008
- <sup>vii</sup> Abdallah Kamal, Rose al-Yousef, (Arabic)
- <sup>viii</sup> <http://www.alquds.com/node/2855>
- <sup>ix</sup> Mohammad Hassan al-Alfi, Ibid
- <sup>x</sup> Abdallah Kamal, Ibid
- <sup>xi</sup> Fahmi Huweidi, Ibid
- <sup>xii</sup> Hamdein Sabahi, “The Cross-Eyed Lobby”, (Arabic), al-Karama  
<http://www.elkarama.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2662>