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Israel Concerned about Egypt's Declining Role in Palestinian Issue

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Given the fact that the Egyptian General Intelligence Services (GIS) failed to conclude a truce between Hamas and Israel about three months ago while Qatar succeeded in achieving de-escalation there; and after Cairo's failure to hold a meeting between Palestinian factions while Turkey was able to bring them together; Israel has recently called for supporting the Sisi regime to avoid isolation in the Palestinian arena, due to Cairo's great importance to Tel Aviv as a close ally, unlike Qatar and Turkey.

It is true that there are a gap between the positions of Israel and Egypt on issues of permanent settlement with the Palestinians, but Israel's common interests with the Sisi regime are increasing in other areas, which pushes Tel Aviv towards boosting Cairo's political role in this concern, as the Gulf states and Turkey have recently played major roles on the Palestinian issue.

Qatar took the lead in talks between Hamas and Israel to achieve calm between them and provided economic assistance to the Gaza Strip. As for Turkey, it also succeeded in hosting internal Palestinian reconciliation meetings. In light of these regional interventions in the Palestinian-Israeli arena, Israel tends to deepen Egypt's participation in these events, to achieve the Israeli interest on the long run, amid their joint efforts for the sake of the Mediterranean future, and for mobilizing Washington's support.

The Israeli interest in involving Egypt in the Palestinian issue is mainly related to preserving the state of calm on its southern front with the Gaza Strip, strengthening deterrence against Hamas, and sending a message to the Palestinians that they should realize that there is no alternative to the Egyptian role, because its position in the region is important to Israel for many reasons and considerations.

Among these reasons is the fact that Egypt is considered Israel's most important neighbor, and its partner in peace. Over 41 years, the Israelis have been accustomed to taking relations with Egypt for granted, that is what makes it imperative for the security, foreign policy and intelligence system in Israel, especially on the political level, not only to preserve Egypt's status, but to strengthen it as an influential force in the Palestinian and regional arenas.

Egypt, under Sisi's leadership, joins Israel in a wide range of fields; thus, deepening its participation in the Palestinian arena will serve their long-term strategic interests, and will have a positive impact on Washington as well. Cairo's immediate response to the announcement of normalization of Israeli-Gulf relations was positive. In addition, Egypt also played a major role in the Arab League's decision not to respond to the Palestinians' request to hold an emergency hearing to condemn normalization with Israel.

Note that Israel views the current Egyptian behavior as contradictory to the Egyptian politics in the nineties, when it repeatedly attacked the "bold feet" of the Arab countries towards Israel. However, the Israeli reading does not express surprise at the current Egyptian position, as the Emirates and Saudi Arabia have been the two main supporters of Egypt, specifically the regime of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Nevertheless, the available Israeli data indicate the presence of anxiety, or at least unease in Cairo, whenever another country in the Mediterranean region and the Arab world overwhelms its traditional role. Apart from considerations of Cairo's self-image, this has practical, strategic, and even economic implications regarding the regional and international system's perception of Egypt, as their investment policy is important for the future of Egypt.

Of course, Sisi has got his own interest in obstructing Turkey's attempts to interfere in the Palestinian scene, because Turkey's Erdogan has been denouncing Sisi since his military coup against Morsi in 2013. Therefore, it is important for Israel that Sisi would not be in a weak position; especially that the Egyptian economy, which has been severely affected by coronavirus, is currently going through a deep crisis.

The Turkish presence

The active Turkish role in promoting Palestinian reconciliation coincides with the difficulties and failures that the Egyptians are facing in this regard, given the fact that Egypt does not have the necessary resources to help the people of the Gaza Strip in its ordeal. Since there is need for the Qatari financial support Israel has no choice but to directly work with Qatar in this regard.

At the same time, Israel's basic and long-term interest in preserving Sisi's Egypt remains in place to confront Hamas in Gaza, as the Gaza Strip has a geographic and strategic position that gives Egypt significant influence in this regard.

Israel is interested in boosting the Egyptian relationship with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank because Egypt, as the traditional PA sponsor, can convince it (PA) to accept the new political reality of Israeli normalization with the Gulf states, either by the carrot or by the stick.

In terms of movement on the ground, an official delegation from the Fatah movement leadership has recently visited Turkey to hold meetings with a delegation from the Hamas leadership and discuss ways to end the Palestinian division and activate "joint leadership".

The arrival of the Fatah delegation to Ankara was preceded by a call phone call from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, asking him to support the Palestinians to achieve reconciliation between Fatah, Hamas and other Palestinian factions, requesting provision of Turkish observers to monitor the upcoming elections.

The meeting of the secretaries-general of the Palestinian factions in Beirut in early September formed three committees, most notably the dialogue committee between Fatah and Hamas to end the division. Therefore, the recent Istanbul meetings come as an introduction to dialogue among all factions, taking into mind that the Palestinians have no problem with any country hosting their dialogues, according to its own circumstances.

Currently, Egypt needs the American position in the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam negotiations, and thus it is keen not to anger the Americans in the Palestinian file. Therefore, the previous Egyptian enthusiasm in the Palestinian arena is relatively waning.

While Istanbul witnessed the recent meetings between Fatah and Hamas, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh met with Turkish President Erdogan, which may indicate Ankara's presence at the expense of Arab capitals in the Palestinian scene, especially Cairo.

The Palestinians' focus on a permanent presence in Turkey, and the request for Ankara's support, comes after disappointment with Cairo, which sided with the ongoing normalization, and opposed the

official and popular Palestinian position. However, the question remains about Ankara's ability to replace Cairo's influence in the Palestinian arena.

On its part, Turkey's positions appear supportive of the Palestinian cause, rejecting the jogging of some Arab countries, particularly Gulf countries. Undoubtedly, the Turkish position is balanced with regard to all Palestinian parties, especially Fatah and Hamas, and also keen to achieve reconciliation, and support the Palestinian position rejecting normalization.

Thwarting reconciliation

According to well-informed sources, Cairo had sought to organize meetings between Fatah and Hamas, but it did not succeed, perhaps for fear of keeping Haniyeh being in Cairo and preventing him from completing his foreign tour. At the same time, Saudi Arabia exercised great pressure on Lebanon to prevent holding meetings of the leaders of Palestinian factions on its soil, but Iran and Hezbollah used their influence on the Lebanese state institutions to achieve it.

Turkey's embrace of the Palestinian meetings came after Egypt's absence, being preoccupied with internal and other regional files, in addition to its lack of enthusiasm with respect to the reconciliation of Fatah and Hamas, perhaps because it realizes that the whole matter is not encouraged by Israel and the United States that rather watch these meetings with concern.

On the other hand, it does not appear that the Palestinian Authority intends to reposition itself with respect to its regional alliances. Although the PA is disappointed by the Egyptian position, it is not likely to join the Turkish, Qatari axis that also include Iran and Hamas, although some Palestinians believe that Egypt cannot escape from the influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and that Egyptian positions will not meet the aspirations of the Palestinian Authority.

The recent Istanbul dialogues came in light of the dangers threatening the Palestinian national project due to the regional and international axes that are forming in the region following the rounds of normalization with Israel, and even manifested in regional and American calls to impose an alternative leadership on them.

These dialogues are also taking place under regional and official Arab conditions that may pose more obstacles than facilitations. It is true that the Palestinians feel that what is required is to build an Arab

incubator, both popular and official, but the problem is that a number of Arab countries, including Egypt, are preoccupied with their internal crises, and seem dependent on other regional countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE whose interests are conflicting with those of Turkey that has hosted the Palestinian meetings.

The Qatari influence

It is not the first time that an agreement has been reached between Israel and Hamas to stop the mutual escalation between them, but what is different this time is the success of the Qatari mediation, and the failure of the Egyptian efforts, due to engagement of the highest Qatari levels in the efforts to contain escalation between Israel and Hamas, amid an early Egyptian withdrawal from the mediation efforts, unlike previous negotiations rounds, when the Qatari role was limited to providing financial support. Moreover, it seems that the two sides, Hamas and Israel, preferred Qatari mediation over the Egyptian efforts this time, but the question here is: Why?

The available information about what happened in this regard was that the Egyptian mediator showed willingness at the beginning of escalation between Hamas and Israel to take on the task of mediation, where the Egyptian delegation passed Hamas' demands to Israel. However, when Israel did not agree to the Palestinian demands, the Egyptians were prompted to withdraw, which led Qatar to assume this task that ended with concluding a truce agreement that met the Palestinian factions' demands with no humanitarian cost or political bargaining, where Qatar has shown remarkable interest in recent days for the success of the de-escalation efforts, more than the previous rounds of escalation seemed to be.

The head of the Qatari Committee for Reconstruction, Ambassador Mohammad al-Emadi, did not leave the Gaza Strip during the period of escalation, and his negotiations were carried on directly with the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, while Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammad Abdul Rahman Al Thani contacted the head of the Palestinian movement's political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, hours before the announcement of the truce agreement, which earned the Qatari mediation a political dimension this time, while Egypt whose GIS officers are always present in Gaza, was absent from these efforts!

Qatar was able to forge strong relations with the Palestinian factions in Gaza, particularly Hamas, which has developed over time into mutual trust, where Hamas did not put any obstacles in the way of the Qatari de-escalation efforts, so as not to lose it as a future strategic ally.

One of the reasons for Qatar's interest is its desire to reinforce its presence in the Palestinian arena and block the road to any other country, particularly the UAE, seeking to secure a foothold in the Palestinian arena, specifically in Gaza, after the UAE-Bahraini-Israeli peace agreement.

From the first hours of the last military escalation against Hamas in Gaza in August, Egyptian intelligence officers presented a vision to Hamas for restoring the state of calm in Gaza without reaching a military confrontation, because the political circumstances, according to the Egyptian viewpoint, would not be in the interest of the Palestinian movement, which made Hamas understand that it was a threatening message, not mediation efforts; so the Egyptian efforts failed to persuade Hamas to accept the Egyptian vision.

The Egyptians did not provide guarantees or pledges to pressure Israel to abide by the demands of the Palestinian factions, unlike the Qataris, who played this role with high efficiency, in addition to financing the necessary humanitarian and relief projects.

Qatar maintains close relations with the Palestinian factions in Gaza, particularly Hamas; and Doha has provided financial aid to the Gaza Strip since 2012, in addition to implementation of dozens of major projects; and at the political level, Qatar hosts Hamas overseas offices on its territory, where Hamas leaders regularly hold meetings with Qatari officials, including the Prince himself.

The recent escalation showed that Qatar benefited from its strong ties with the Palestinian factions in Gaza, particularly Hamas, which developed over time into mutual trust between them.

Israel, for its part, is concerned with the presence of more than one player and mediator on the Gaza front; and perhaps Qatar is at the top of these countries thanks to its active diplomacy and generous funding, while Egypt comes in second place, where the Egyptian role has decreased dramatically in recent years.

Israeli concern over the decline of the Egyptian role in the Palestinian issue is also due to the security measures taken by Sisi since 2015 for serving Israeli security ends, including destruction of border tunnels with the Gaza Strip through bombing them and flooding them with sea water.

The security coordination

It is not surprising that Israel is keen to keep the Egyptian role present in the Palestinian file, because Israeli-Egyptian relations have witnessed successive developments since Sisi came to power in 2013, considering these bilateral relations as a source of strength for the region, especially for the moderate Arab axis countries, as well as for the United States and other powers, as the Israeli-Egyptian relations are based on cooperation in strategic defense fields on the basis of the common threat posed by Iran and the Islamic movements.

Four decades of Israeli-Egyptian peace have proven their ability to cope with any shock waves they have been subjected to, and provided a platform for their strategic cooperation, even though their relations are described as a cold peace, as long as the conflict with the Palestinians remains unresolved.

Despite the crucial common interests, Egypt is unable to progress towards full normalization with Israel; however, their growing strategic defense cooperation still dictates the nature and extent of the two parties' bilateral relations.

From the Israeli point of view, Egypt formed a pivotal component in the Israeli relations with the Palestinians, and played a central role in the efforts to cease fire with Hamas mediated by the United Nations and Qatar. Moreover, Israel and Egypt seek to limit Iran's influence in the Middle East, impose more sanctions against it, fight its proxies spread in the region, and restrain the reins of Turkey's activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Egypt and Israel have also launched campaigns against armed organizations, and now have common perceptions of the threat they pose and the required responses. They also share similar views on the role of the United States in the region, which has led to Israeli-Egyptian coordination in some areas such as the qualified industrial zones, according to the QIZ agreement, in addition to their diplomatic and security cooperation, what strengthened their relations in recent years.

Besides strategic diplomatic coordination, cooperation between Israel and Egypt on energy issues appeared prominent, where important steps were taken to enhance their cooperation with Cyprus, Greece, and perhaps Lebanon in the future, by forming a regional center for the production of natural gas as a basis for export to Europe, and launching the EMGF Forum in Cairo from seven Middle Eastern and European governments, including Israel and the Palestinian Authority, excluding Turkey and Lebanon.

Cairo and Tel Aviv believe that strengthening multilateral cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean will help them strengthen bilateral relations, including gas supplies from Israel to Egypt.

There have been an increase in the number of Israeli tourists to Egypt, as hundreds of thousands visited Sinai, and thousands wandered inside Egypt; and the number of Egyptian Copts traveling to Israel increased, especially during the Easter holidays, where their number increased to seven thousand in 2019 against five thousand in 2015. Also, there has been progress in Egypt's commitment to renewing Jewish heritage sites, including the Al-Basateen Jewish Cemetery complex in Cairo, the restoration of the Eliyahu Temple in Alexandria, and the invitation of ambassadors of many countries to the Jewish synagogue ceremony.

This confirms that the Israeli-Egyptian relations have witnessed a growing development to preserve their common interests over four decades, despite the obstacles, differences and tensions. The emerging regional and international reality, especially since Sisi came to power, increased their cooperation. However, avoidance of cultural cooperation between the two countries remains a major obstacle to their relationship, although the social networking sites provide a direct and comprehensive dialogue between them, another arena in which Israel operates.

The Sinai challenge

It is difficult to talk about Israel's desire to consolidate the Egyptian role in the Palestinian arena, regardless of the two countries' security coordination in the Sinai and on the borders with the Gaza Strip, which perhaps coincided with their recent concern about the expected evacuation of the American forces operating in Sinai, as part of the international forces there, because they fear that this step would be followed by similar steps from other countries, which could strengthen the armed organizations in Sinai, due to a likely security chaos in the peninsula.

Security coordination between Egypt and Israel in the Sinai is witnessing very advanced levels, where both are working against Hamas and the Islamic State.

With regard to the Egyptian-Israeli stances towards the Palestinian factions, Tel Aviv and Cairo have shown a common anger at the growth of Hamas's relations with certain countries in the region, especially Iran and Turkey. The Egyptian intelligence services did not hesitate to deliver a message to Hamas that if it wanted to remain in control of Gaza, its leadership must choose what it described as the "right path" by rapprochement with Egypt and severing relations with its enemies, Iran and Turkey.

Egypt and Israel have a common interest in management of the Palestinian file in general, and specifically in the Gaza arena, because the role Egypt plays as an important mediator between Hamas and Israel is crucial in ending the periodic rounds of violence, which makes Israel consider its peace with Egypt a very important asset. In fact, the increased Israeli interest in activating the Egyptian role in the Palestinian arena coincides with the challenges that Egypt faces on several fronts, including the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the Turkish role in Libya ,and the activities of IS local affiliate in the Sinai.