EGYPT'S ROLE IN GAZA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL

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Egypt and Israel have maintained a cold peace for more than four decades. The two countries engage in significant economic and security cooperation, but their relations were strained by the Gaza war. While the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty was not seriously tested during wartime, diplomatic representation was downgraded, heavy criticisms were exchanged, and Egyptian defenses were readied in the Sinai Peninsula. Throughout the war, Egypt played a critical role in negotiations between Israel and Hamas. Cairo was integral to achieving the Gaza peace deal signed in Sharm El-Sheikh last month and is now a central player in efforts to rebuild Gaza, unify Palestinians, and forge a wider regional peace. The US government should work with Egypt to advance the October Peace Summit agenda and seize postwar momentum to finally warm the peace between Egypt and Israel.

Egypt's Role Before and After October 7

Before October 7

Egypt played a central mediating role in all four major conflicts between Israel and Hamas in Gaza that preceded October 7: Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009), Operation Pillar of Defense (2012), and Operation Protective Edge (2014), and Operation Guardian of the Walls (2021). Through diplomatic and intelligence channels, Egypt helped broker the ceasefires that ended these cycles of violence.

Given the border that it shares with Gaza, Egypt has long prioritized stability in the Strip and has serious concerns that instability in Gaza could spill over to its territory. Egypt uses the Rafah border crossing – the only land exit from Gaza that is not controlled by Israel – as a negotiating tool, granting or denying access to people and goods in order to pressure or reward the parties. Egyptian control of its side of the border with Gaza also functions as a security tool, which Cairo uses as an effective bargaining chip in negotiations. Egyptian security forces also prevent the smuggling of weapons between the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula.

After October 7

On October 21, 2023, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi urgently convened Arab leaders, including Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, for the Cairo Peace Summit to de-escalate the Israel-Hamas war. At the summit, Sisi condemned "in the clearest terms, the targeting, killing and intimidation of peaceful civilians" on October 7, and announced a surge of humanitarian aid delivery through Rafah in partnership with the United States.

From the outset of the Gaza war, Egypt rejected the mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza to Sinai, refusing complicity in ethnic cleansing. Still, foreign nationals, dual citizens, and medical evacuees were admitted to Egypt during the war, along with Palestinians who crossed through Rafah in exceptional humanitarian cases. Egypt also struck a careful balance between

maintaining its 1979 peace treaty with Israel and managing both domestic and regional expectations of solidarity with Palestinians. Cairo maintained relative stability at the border, protecting Egyptian personnel from Israeli bombardment and satisfying mutual Egyptian-Israeli security interests. Similar to the previous four conflicts, Egypt was eager to swiftly broker a negotiated ceasefire, but had not anticipated the catastrophe that unfolded.

The Future of Egypt-Israel Peace

Before the Gaza peace deal, Egypt and Israel were engaged in a war of words, worrying some that the 1979 peace treaty was at risk. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Egypt of "imprisoning against their will residents in Gaza who want to leave a war zone" by opposing mass evacuation of Palestinians to Sinai. An estimated 100,000 Gazans crossed the border during the war, and the Palestinian embassy in Cairo is now seeking temporary residence permits for them. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty responded to Netanyahu by saying that "displacement means liquidation and the end of the Palestinian cause."

In September 2025, President Sisi made reference to an "enemy" in the context of the September 9 Israeli airstrike on Doha, Qatar. This was interpreted as the first time since 1977 that Egypt referred to Israel as such. That same month, Egypt deployed a long-range missile defense system to the Sinai, fueling speculation about potential escalation with Israel. However, Egypt's military buildup in the Sinai and policy of not allowing Palestinian relocation there should be understood as a strategy for maintaining stability on both sides of the border. Egypt avoided complicity in Palestinian ethnic cleansing that would have created a temporary refugee crisis in the Sinai, fomented resistance within Egypt, and further destabilized Gaza.

After the two-year Gaza war, Egypt-Israel peace remains stable. Diplomatic relations may have been strained, but the peace treaty was never seriously tested. Sisi hailed the Sharm El-Sheikh breakthrough in October as the "last chance" for peace, committing not just to a ceasefire in Gaza but to a wider peace for the region that could finally warm the cold peace between Egypt and Israel.

Egypt's Role in the Gaza Peace Deal

Cairo to New York

During the two-year war in Gaza, Egypt served as a key mediator between Israel and Hamas, helping to broker the temporary ceasefires in November 2023 and January 2025, as well as the permanent ceasefire in October 2025. On March 4, 2025, Egypt hosted an emergency summit in Cairo, where the Arab League endorsed the $53 billion Egyptian plan for rebuilding Gaza over the next five years. The Egyptian plan served as a blueprint for the groundbreaking "New York Declaration," signed by the Arab League (alongside the EU and 17 other countries) at a UN conference on the two-state solution in July 2025.

Egypt leveraged this diplomatic momentum, coordinating negotiations alongside the US and Qatar that culminated in the Gaza ceasefire agreement last month. Egypt also relied on its historical role as the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel, as mediator between Israel and Hamas in previous Gaza conflicts, and as the gatekeeper of the Rafah crossing. Egypt functioned as a regional hub connecting Israel, Hamas, Qatar and the United States. While Qatar is a Hamas interlocutor and the US is a global superpower, Egypt utilized its leadership credibility in the Arab world, intelligence capability, knowledge, expertise, and institutional memory accumulated over decades of engagement in Gaza and with all the relevant parties. Ultimately, Egypt was able to provide guarantees to both sides regarding border control, humanitarian access, and security cooperation that helped bridge the gaps.

Sharm El-Sheikh

At the Sharm El-Sheikh Peace Summit on October 13, Egypt co-signed the Trump Peace Agreement to "end the war in Gaza and bring lasting peace to the Middle East." US President Donald Trump praised Egypt for its "very important role" in ending the war and President Sisi awarded Trump the "Order of the Nile," the highest state honor in Egypt. As host of the peace summit, Sisi reaffirmed Egypt's commitment to the two-state solution, including an independent Palestinian state "living side by side with Israel in peace, security, and mutual recognition." He issued a direct "call to the people of Israel," invoking the late Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977. Sisi also committed to Trump's 20-point plan for Gaza, which incorporates several components of the March 2025 Egyptian plan. Crucially, Trump's plan insists that "no one will be forced to leave Gaza," reflecting the emphasis that Egypt has placed on preventing mass displacement.

After initially rejecting the Egyptian plan back in March, Trump dispensed with his earlier "Gaza Riviera" proposal and adopted elements of Egypt's proposal, demonstrating the considerable influence and determination of the Egyptian government, as well as the trust between Trump and Sisi. The US was not the only player skeptical of the Egyptian plan early on; the United Arab Emirates reportedly criticized the plan as unworkable and lobbied the Trump Administration to reject it. Despite this opposition, Egypt continued advocating for the proposal until its eventual incorporation into Trump's framework. Had the parties heeded the Egyptians sooner, Gaza could potentially have avoided months of bloodshed.

Egypt's Role in the Future of Gaza

Reconstruction

After the October 13 Peace Summit, President Sisi announced that Egypt will host another conference in November for the reconstruction of Gaza. The international community is expected to gather in Cairo to start implementing Egypt's multi-phase reconstruction plan, which includes debris removal, rebuilding homes and critical infrastructure, restoring essential services, among many other development projects. In a preview of this direct Egyptian involvement, Egypt sent a technical team into Gaza with Israel's approval to help locate the

remains of deceased Israeli hostages. Egypt is asserting its role as the most important external player in Gaza, and indeed as the *Um al-Dunya* ("Mother of the World" in Arabic), determined to rebuild the Gaza Strip and help shape its future.

Security

The Egyptian plan acknowledges that "reconstruction requires arrangements for transitional governance and security arrangements," and outlines a process for returning the Palestinian Authority (PA) to Gaza. The plan calls on the UN Security Council to "deploy international protection/peacekeeping forces" and notes that Egypt is training PA forces for redeployment to the Strip. Similarly, Trump's 20-point plan proposes the formation of a temporary International Stabilization Force (ISF). While the international community expects Egypt to lead the ISF, Egypt expects significant global investment, including from the United States, as well as a clear pathway for Palestinian self-governance. Cairo will not lead a fight to defeat Hamas militarily, but instead provide support for Palestinian police to reassert basic security over Gaza. Per the US plan, the ISF will coordinate with both the IDF and the new US Central Command Civil-Military Coordination Center, "with the objective of a secure Gaza that no longer poses a threat to Israel, Egypt, or its citizens."

Governance

Both the Egyptian and American plans call for the establishment of an interim governance body composed of independent Palestinian technocrats with oversight by the international community. Under the Egyptian plan, this "Gaza Administration Committee" would manage Gazan affairs for a transitional period of six months within the framework of a PA return. Under the Trump plan, the Palestinian committee would be supervised by an international "Board of Peace," chaired by President Trump. In all likelihood, President Sisi will serve as a member of the board.

To facilitate Palestinian unity for postwar governance of Gaza, Egypt hosted Hamas and Fatah delegations in Cairo last month. The rival Palestinian groups came to an agreement on the technocratic committee for Gaza. While this committee will not include any members of Hamas or the other Palestinian political parties, Hamas will realistically need to at least consent to or agree on committee membership. Alongside the Hamas-Fatah talks, Egypt's intelligence chief Hassan Rashad met with other key Palestinian factions, Islamic Jihad, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to "achieve national Palestinian consensus on the implementation of the US president's ceasefire plan in Gaza." Egypt has demonstrated willingness to participate in Palestinian unification and transitional governance, without taking control of Gaza, doing Israel's bidding, or clashing with Hamas on the ground. Instead, Egypt has a vision for limited participation welcomed by all Palestinian factions that ultimately helps unify Gaza and the West Bank.