

## **What's Behind al-Sisi's Cold Shoulder Towards Hamas?**

Mira Tzoreff

Egypt's President 'Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's harsh attitude towards Hamas, which he treats as an enemy, is conditioned by the circumstances that brought him to power in July 2013. One year after the election of Mohammed Morsi, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party to the office of president, Sisi ousted him in the name of "the people's will" (*eradat al-sha'b*). After assuming power, Sisi declared war on the Muslim Brotherhood. He outlawed the movement, declared it a terrorist organization, and then ruthlessly pursued jihadi terrorist groups in the Sinai. Sisi has made little distinction between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its Palestinian offshoot, Hamas. He has destroyed hundreds of Hamas tunnels used to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip, and from Gaza to the global jihadi groups active in Sinai.

Sisi has devoted much of his time and energy to rehabilitating Egypt after almost four chaotic years of political turmoil. The economy is on the brink of collapse, poverty has swelled, and the number of the unemployed – 70% of which are youth, between the ages of 15-29 – increased. Tourism, one of the drivers of the Egyptian economy, has declined precipitously in the absence of public security. Last week, during a visit to Ismailia, Sisi announced his plan to expand the Suez Canal with a 45 mile parallel waterway in order to increase capacity through Suez from 49 to 97 ships per day.<sup>1</sup> This ambitious project will add four new seaports, a new industrial zone, and a "technology valley." It is expected to create one million new jobs and will be financed by the private Egyptian sector as well as by loans from neighboring allies. Sisi declared that the first phase of the project will be completed by July 26, 2015, the 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gamal 'Abdel Nasser's

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<sup>1</sup> Summer Said and Nicolas Parasie, "Suez Canal Set for First Major Expansion," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2014.

nationalization of the Suez Canal.<sup>2</sup> The date is no coincidence, as Sisi has been actively cultivating an image of himself as the new Gamal 'Abdel Nasser.

Sisi recognizes that although he is perceived as someone capable of restoring stability, security and economic growth to Egypt, he does not have unlimited time or authority. Ibrahim Daoud, in the daily newspaper *Al-Youm Al-Sabea*, noted that “the president understands that his people, who have put two presidents in prison... will not hesitate to do it a third time if the president will follow one of their paths.”<sup>3</sup> Young activists in Egypt have also launched a number of websites under the name "Sisimeter" to "serve as a measure of the achievements of the president."<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Egypt's position during Israel's military operation against Hamas (“Operation Protective Edge”) should be understood in the context of Egypt's internal challenges and Sisi's position as a president “on probation.” Sisi perceives Hamas as an affiliate to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that is threatening Egypt's borders and endangering its security. He also views Hamas as jeopardizing Egypt's attempts to revive tourism in the Sinai and improve the socio-economic standing of the Bedouin population in the peninsula.

The Sinai population was neglected for generations by the various regimes in Egypt and, as a result, many have supported the jihadi groups active in the northern Sinai, near Gaza. Sisi believes Hamas was responsible for attacks by these groups on the Egyptian military and security services. In February 2011, following Mubarak's ouster, several Egyptian police officers were abducted in the Sinai and reportedly held hostage in the Gaza Strip, where they were used as a bargaining chip for the release of political prisoners. In August 2012, an attack in Rafah killed 16 Egyptian soldiers during the Iftar meal (that follows the Ramadan day-time fast). Additionally, in May 2013, seven Egyptian soldiers were abducted in Rafah: the incident was intended to embarrass Sisi, who was serving as Defense Minister.

Just over two weeks ago, on July 23, Sisi delivered an important speech to mark the anniversary of the 1952 Egyptian Free Officers Revolution that brought Gamal 'Abdel Nasser to power. Sisi used the occasion to refute the claim that Egypt was turning its back on the Palestinian people. He stated that throughout the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Egypt has sacrificed one hundred thousand people for the Palestinian cause. Sisi criticized Hamas for adhering to armed resistance (*muqawama*), declaring that after forty years of going in this direction, it was time to stop and weigh the balance of

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<sup>2</sup> Dina Ezzat, "Mega Projects make a Comeback," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 7, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Graff, "Egyptian Intellectuals Columnists Warn against Al-Sisi Presidential Candidacy," *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 1079*, March 28, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Fouad, "'Sisimeter' Keeps Tabs on Egypt's new president," *Al-Monitor*, June 6, 2014.

achievements and failures. He concluded with the unequivocal declaration that Egypt's policy would be governed by Egypt's national security needs.

The Egyptian media has stood behind Sisi's position, conveying the unambiguous message of "Egypt first" (*misr awalan*). In other words, Egypt's difficult economic and social problems should take priority over the troubles of their Palestinian brethren. "Mash'al [ Hamas Political Bureau head ], we are tired of defending the Palestinian cause... We have enough problems of our own," wrote Hamdi Rizq in his column in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*.<sup>5</sup> Amr al-Shobaki, another columnist, stated that "no one should place the Egyptian army in an external war that has nothing to do with the protection of its national land." Mahmoud Sultan, one of the editors of *Al-Mesryoon*, wondered "how a hungry civilian, deprived of health care and proper education, who does not sleep safely in his home, is not healthy, and has nothing to feed his children, can be asked to soldier in the battle for the liberation of Jerusalem?"<sup>6</sup>

According to Sisi's supporters, this policy does not contradict the solidarity and empathy they feel towards the Palestinian people in general and those residing in the Gaza Strip in particular, Palestine is not just Gaza and Gaza is not just Hamas. Egypt, they emphasize, differentiates between the Palestinian people and their leaders. Hamas, they say, has abandoned the Palestinian national interest, works for foreign interests – primarily those of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Iran – and has forsaken the Palestinian people in their quest for power.

Some Egyptian analysts view Egypt's behavior as an attempt to drive a wedge between the Palestinian public in the Gaza Strip and Hamas, in order to prove that the election of Hamas in 2006 was a mistake. Doing so would pave the way for the return of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, who hopefully would rescue Gaza from the disaster brought upon it by the Hamas leadership. For these Egyptians, Abbas, who has long given up the option of armed struggle and chosen to pursue the goal of Palestinian statehood through negotiations – reminds them of Egypt's late president Anwar Sadat. Sadat ultimately abandoned war after 1973, which had exhausted the Egyptian people and impoverished it, and chose peace as an alternative, through which Egypt was able to restore its dignity and territory.

In this spirit, Gamal Abu Hassan published an article in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* one day after Sisi's speech, titled "Why Don't the Egyptians shed tears for Gaza?", Egypt, he stated, is opposed to the self-proclaimed "heroic" strategy of Hamas and believes that its disadvantages outweigh its advantages. In fact, he claims, Egypt hasn't changed its

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<sup>5</sup> *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, July 10, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Al-Mesryoon*, July 10, 2014.

position on the Palestinian issue in the last three years, since it realized the risks entailed by the “Resistance” strategy. Egypt, Abu Hassan emphasized, has adopted a different strategy, which has proven to be much more effective in this complex conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Egypt’s official policy regarding Hamas naturally affects its position towards Israel as well. The sympathetic opinions voiced in Egypt’s state-run media regarding Israel’s posture towards Hamas even before “Operation Protective Edge” were unprecedented. Tawfik Okasha, the principal anchor and owner of the *Al-Fara’een* satellite television channel, [said](#), “I’m taking my hat off to Israel, and I’m telling the Israeli army, people, and leadership – you are men.”<sup>8</sup> This expression of naked admiration notwithstanding, Egypt’s position towards Israel during its conflict with Hamas is driven by *raison d’état*. Egyptian Petroleum Minister, Sherif Isma’il, told the Egyptian *Daily News* that importing gas from Israel “is a must... whatever is in Egypt’s interest must be implemented immediately, as we are dealing with an energy crisis. The president and the government working indirectly with Israel is no longer taboo.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in the security realm, Sisi’s Egypt has been persistent in its destruction of the tunnels connecting Sinai to Gaza, consistently thwarted attempts to fire missiles from Sinai into Israel, and stopped suicide bombers’ attempts to cross into Israel and carry out attacks. The Rafah crossing has been tightly managed, and only opened for infrequent, short periods of time for humanitarian purposes.

None of these measures have led to mass protests in the Egyptian streets. It seems as though most sectors of Egyptian society realize that the increasingly tight economic and security cooperation with Israel is indeed in Egypt’s interest. The *Tamarud* movement has been an exception, calling for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador from Cairo. There have also been isolated individual and group initiatives to collect donations for people in the Gaza Strip, but this support for the suffering of the Gazan people is not necessarily an expression of support for Hamas. It seems that when faced with the choice between the Egyptian home and the Muslim collective, between the uncompromising defense of the Egyptian border in Sinai and the protection of Gaza and its inhabitants, Egyptians have, for the time being, chosen “Egypt first.”

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<sup>7</sup> Gamal Abu Hassan, "[Why Don't the Egyptians Shed tears For Gaza?](#)", *al-Arabiya*, July 14, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5a8mF\\_ESuVQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5a8mF_ESuVQ)

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed Ayyad, "[No Shame in Egypt Using Israeli Gas through British Oil Company](#)," *Daily News-Egypt*, July 6, 2014.

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