

Egypt's Recent Achievements in Conflict Mediation

Written by Chelsi Mueller

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CHELSEI MUELLER, OCT 31 2011

Egypt has emerged as the leading Middle East mediator, having brokered the Fatah-Hamas unity agreement of May 4th, 2011, and more significantly the exchange of Gilad Shalit for 1027 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails in October 2011. Under Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian mediators, Omar Suleiman and Ahmad Abdul Gheit, had been working toward the same goals since 2006 but ultimately proved unsuccessful in both endeavors.[1] With this in mind, the question arises: Why did Egypt's new mediator, Murad Muwafi, succeed where his predecessors had failed?

Regime change in Egypt was a key reason for the mediation's success. It was no secret that the Mubarak regime was unsympathetic toward Hamas, particularly after Hamas' armed takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Mubarak had been suspicious of the connection between Hamas and Egypt's then-outlawed opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood. For Mubarak, a victory for the Islamist group, Hamas, constituted a victory for his own Islamist opposition and could give momentum to the very forces he believed threatened to topple him. Therefore, Mubarak used Egypt's role as mediator to try to pressure Hamas and strengthen the hand of its rival Palestinian faction, Fatah, and Fatah's leader, Mahmoud Abbas.

On more than one occasion, Hamas leaders openly accused Egypt of biased dealing.[2] In the aftermath of Hamas' 2007 Gaza takeover, Mubarak himself called off the negotiations: In the end of August 2007 Israel and Hamas both appealed to Cairo to resume the negotiations that had begun prior to the outbreak of fighting in the Gaza Strip — but Egypt flatly refused because Mubarak did not want to take actions that would reverse the slippage in Hamas' popularity. [3]

Egypt and Hamas have expanded their cooperation since the ouster of Mubarak. Within two months of Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi's rise as *de facto* head of state in Egypt, Egypt and Hamas reached an agreement according to which Egypt would release Hamas prisoners, open the Rafah crossing to the passage of goods and people, and call for ending Israel's "siege" on the Gaza Strip.[4] These gestures were apparently some of the carrots offered to Hamas as part of the negotiations toward the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation. For its part, Hamas pledged to share intelligence about threats to Egypt, such as terrorist infiltration and weapons smuggling. Hamas was also pleased with internal developments in Egypt following the revolution, particularly the new regime's acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimate political party.

For Hamas, these agreements offered an opportunity to reclaim domestic legitimacy and political relevancy at a time when the group appeared to be sidelined by Mahmoud Abbas's high profile application for Palestinian membership in the UN. Hamas leaders opposed Abbas's UN initiative: only hours before Abbas's historic UN speech, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh told reporters that Palestinian people should not "beg" for a state, but should first "liberate their land" and *then* establish their state.[5] However, Abbas' UN initiative enjoyed overwhelming Palestinian support; consequently many Palestinians viewed Hamas' opposition as motivated by self-interest and opposed to the national interest. By signing the reconciliation agreement with Fatah, Hamas hoped to avoid being blamed for the failure of the UN initiative in particular, and for the lack of progress towards Palestinian national aspirations in general, owing to the ongoing intra-Palestinian conflict.[6]

Considering the aforementioned, the timing of the prisoner exchange deal was crucial. When it became clear that Abbas' UN diplomacy had not achieved concrete steps toward the goal of a Palestinian state, Hamas traded a single

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Israeli prisoner for the release of 1027 Palestinian prisoners. This appeared as a victory for Hamas and the Palestinian people, highlighted Hamas' relevance to the Palestinian struggle and drew attention to the results obtained by armed resistance as contrasted with Fatah's diplomacy.

Israel, which has been working with Egyptian mediators since 2006 to conclude an agreement that would secure the release of Gilad Shalit, was anxious to conclude a deal. For Israel, the timing was less important than the terms of the agreement. Therefore, the willingness of the mediators to spend grueling hours going back and forth between the Israeli and Hamas representatives to negotiate not only each name on the list but also the individualized terms of each prisoner's release was crucial.[7]

Another key factor in the success of the mediation efforts was a change in the regional alignments brought about by the events of the Arab Spring. Mubarak's mediation team had blamed the "interference of outside actors," namely Iran and Syria, for the failure to achieve a Palestinian unity government and the failure to conclude a prisoner exchange.[8] The breakdown of negotiations for a Hamas-Israel prisoner exchange in the Autumn of 2006 can serve as an example of that: Egypt notified Hamas that Israel had finally approved a prisoner list and urged Hamas to accept it; then Hamas leader, Khaled Mashaal, departed Cairo for Damascus to consult with the Syrian leadership and thereafter the negotiations stalled.[9] Two months later, in an interview with *Asharq al-Awsat*, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Abdul Gheit explained that at times, Egypt manages to reach an understanding with Israel, then "external parties" who have sway over Hamas interfere, Hamas takes an intransigent stand, and then negotiations break down.[10]

Iran's sponsorship of Hamas represented an invariable thundercloud over the mediation efforts of the Mubarak regime. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran had been expanding its influence throughout the Arab world at the expense of the more moderate pro-Western Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. As a result, a fault line widened across the region between the Sunni Arab states who accept the notion of peace with Israel, such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and the states and groups that support violence against Israel, namely Iran, Syria, and the radical groups, Hizbullah and Hamas.

For Hamas, a radical Sunni Palestinian organization, the support of the Sunni Arab states — particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia — was preferable to that of Iran — a Persian, Shiite state.[11] However, Egypt and Saudi Arabia pressure Hamas to renounce violence and accept the notion of peace with Israel.[12] Given the choice between moderating its core principles in order to have the support of the Sunni Arab states, or accepting Iranian support and maintaining its bellicose stance against Israel, Hamas opted for the later.[13]

New regional dynamics ushered in by the Arab Spring have brought about a change in Hamas's behavior, allowing breakthroughs in the Egyptian mediation efforts. The uprising in Syria and the brutal crackdowns of the Assad regime on domestic dissent have put Hamas in a precarious position vis-à-vis the regime and the opposition. On the one hand, Hamas is beholden to the Assad regime, since it is headquartered in Damascus. On the other hand, Hamas has supported the Arab Spring and is linked, financially and ideologically, to the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, Hamas, a Sunni Islamist group, does not want to help prop up the Syrian regime, which is viewed as heretical throughout the Sunni Arab world. Reports have emerged that Iran has even withdrawn financial support from Hamas as a result of its refusal to stand behind Bashar al-Assad.[14] Whereas the Hamas-Israel agreement was subject to a Syrian green light in 2006, Hamas did not ask Syria's permission in 2011. Thus, Hamas' relative autonomy from Iran and Syria in October of 2011, made the Hamas-Israel prisoner exchange possible.

Egypt's next goal is to push for the implementation of the May 4th Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement. At present, matters have been halted because Hamas and Fatah are unable to agree on who should serve as the interim Prime Minister until the proposed general elections. Even while the prospects of reconciling Hamas and Fatah's conflicting visions for the future are dim, Egypt has emerged as the only Middle East mediator trusted by both sides. These recent achievements in conflict mediation represent the efforts of the transitional military regime to lift Egypt's regional status out of the slump of the Mubarak era, and chart a course toward greater regional leadership and influence.

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Chelsi Mueller is a PhD student in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University.

[1] For a detailed analysis of Egyptian mediation in the intra-Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian arenas from 2006-2009, see Joseph Kostiner and Chelsi Mueller, "Egyptian and Saudi Intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (2006-09): Local Powers Mediation Compared," in *International Intervention in Local Conflicts: Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution since the Cold War* edited by Uzi Rabi (I.B. Taurus, 2010).

[2] See *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), 2 September 2008 and 26 September 2008 [Arabic].

[3] *Haaretz*, 2 September 2007.

[4] See The Palestinian Information Centre, "Resheq: Hamas ties with Egypt good, continuously developing," 30 March 2011; and Fares Akram, *The New York Times*, "Egypt and Hamas Reach Accord on Rafah Crossing, 8 June 2011.

[5] Reuters, 23 September 2011.

[6] The May 4th 2011 agreement is basically the same document that the Egyptian mediators proposed in 2009, with some additions that respond to Hamas' reservations. For more on Hamas' reservations to the 2009 document, see BBC (Arabic) 16 October 2009; and Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian Reconciliation Maze," US/ ME Policy Brief, 14 July 2010; An English language translation of the May 4th 2011 agreement is available here: <http://www.almubadara.org/details.php?id=hxnq07a1333ydzw80mrvh>.

[7] Ron Ben Yishai, "Behind the scenes of the Shalit deal," *ynetnews.com*, 14 October 2011.

[8] See *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), 10 December 2006 [Arabic].

[9] Ahmad Abul Gheit, interview, *Al-Arabiya TV* (Dubai), n.d., in BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2 October 2006.

[10] *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), 10 December 2006 [Arabic].

[11] See for example comments by Ahmed Yusuf, advisor to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, in *The Guardian*, 15 January 2007.

[12] See for example, Xinhua News Agency, "Haneya Reiterates Hamas Rejection to Arab Peace Initiative," 9 October 2006.

[13] See BBC, 22 February 2006; and the transcript of the interview with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal on "Lateline" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), 10 March 2006.

[14] Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Foreign Funds for Hamas hit by Syria unrest: diplomats," Reuters, 21 August 2011.