

An Ominous Matryoshka Doll: Egypt's Mediating Role in the New Middle East

Written by Dan Tschirgi

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DAN TSCHIRGI, APR 9 2012

On March 9 the Israeli Air Force (IAF) successfully targeted Zoheir al-Qaisi— the Gaza-based Secretary General of the militant Palestinian group, the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC)— in an airstrike that also killed another PRC activist and reportedly wounded an innocent bystander.^[1] Founded in 2000, the PRC remain adamantly rejectionist and enjoy an informal collaborative relationship with Gaza's post-2007 Hamas regime. Zohair al-Qaisi had only been the group's top leader since last August when its previous Secretary General also perished at Israeli hands. Al-Qaisi's assassination set off a by now familiar chain of events in which Palestinian militant groups in Gaza—but notably *not* Hamas' forces—retaliated against Israeli targets with rockets and mortars while Israel intensified its attacks on Gaza's population.

The violence raged for four days until an Egyptian-brokered truce finally took hold, more or less reinstating the normally abnormal state of tensions along Gaza's border with Israel. By that time, however, at least 25 Palestinians had been killed and scores more wounded. On the other hand, PRC and Gaza Islamic Jihad militants had launched some 200 rockets at Israel's southern towns and cities. According to press accounts, "dozens of these were shot down...by Israel's 'Iron Dome' missile interceptor system."^[2] Eight Israelis were injured in the attacks.

From the start, Egypt sought to promote an end to the March violence in Gaza. It was a role to which Cairo has become accustomed to playing since the Oslo Peace Accords were signed in 1993. This time, however, Egypt faced a new, complex situation as it attempted to mediate a truce. This new complexity was borne out of four interrelated factors.

The first and most obvious factor was the changes Egypt's own revolution brought about. For one thing, Egypt now had a truly popularly elected parliament. Another less mentioned, but nonetheless very real, factor was the upsurge of extreme nationalistic sentiments that seemed to affect virtually the country's entire population in the wake of Hosni Mubarak's downfall. This nationalistic sentiment had already been on display last September when a youthful mob overran the Israeli Embassy in Cairo.

Another complicating factor was the larger regional impact of the Arab Spring movement that gave birth to Egypt's own revolution. Syria had already become the pivotal point of this movement by the time Israeli-Palestinian violence broke out in March. The international community had failed to find an effective way to deal with the Assad regime's already yearlong violent crackdown on the growing popular opposition to its rule. The United Nations had been rendered impotent by the Security Council, which was divided between those countries favoring strong actions against the Assad's regime on the one hand, and Russia and China who employed their vetoes to prevent any such action from taking place on the other.

The resulting international paralysis inevitably heightened the importance regional actors placed on attempts to cope with the March Gaza-Israel crisis. This, in turn, firmly linked Iran – and with it, the ongoing international tensions that spring from the Iranian regime's generally anti-Western stance – to the violent confrontation between Israel and Gaza's Palestinians.

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With the Iranian factor now firmly embedded in the explosive Gaza situation, the final elements of the crisis's threatening architecture – the technological – were highlighted. One aspect of this was the Iranian nuclear question, which, although a constant cause of concern over the past decade, had taken on a new urgency by late 2011 because of persistent rumors that Israel, possibly with U.S. support, was planning a military strike against the Islamic Republic. The second technological aspect of the situation unfolding in Gaza was Israel's very successful new aerial defense system, the so-called "Iron Dome." According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the Iron Dome shot down over 90% of the rockets Palestinian militants fired at population centers during the first few days of the March crisis.^[3]

Together, then, the recent Israeli-Palestinian clashes in Gaza formed an intricate and multifaceted issue composed of: 1) Egypt's uncertain post-revolutionary political inclinations and power structure; 2) The regional impact of the "Arab Spring," and particularly the ongoing upheaval in Syria; 3) The Iranian regime's deep-seated hostility to Israel and the United States; and 4) The implications of militarily significant technological developments in the Middle East, particularly those related to Iran's nuclear capability and the enhanced defensive posture Israel enjoyed as a result of the "Iron Dome's" effectiveness.

The reality is hardly conveyed by the analytical description just recited. For the fact was that the various elements of the March crisis in Gaza interacted in ways lending a remarkable unity to the whole situation. For descriptive purposes, one might reduce the crisis to its component parts, but one should not lose sight their interrelations. In this sense, the image that perhaps best captures the recent Gaza flare-up is that of those cute and clever Russian Matryoshka Dolls, the ones of decreasing size that are placed one inside the other. Neither clever nor at all cute, the multilayered and highly integrated structure of March's Gaza eruption marked a distinctly malignant and dangerous feature of current Middle East politics. It also provided grounds for what many observers of the region have long been sensing: that the underlying dynamics of the Palestine issue are progressively pushing the area toward a major conflagration from which none of the sides can possibly benefit.^[4]

This time regional actors had sufficient sense to drawback from the brink of war before it was too late. By the fourth day of clashes, the *New York Times* was able to report that, "there was no sign that either Israel or Hamas...wanted an all-out confrontation."^[5] Almost simultaneously, however, the Arab Affairs Committee in Egypt's Islamist-dominated People's Assembly sent the entire Legislature an enthusiastically received report that called on the government to "revise all its relations and agreements with " the Israeli enemy."^[6] As Israel's former Ambassador to Egypt, Zvi Mazel, correctly predicted, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which currently holds the real power in Cairo, dismissed the Parliamentary declaration as "nonsense."^[7] Paying no heed to the parliament's wishes, the SCAF pressed on with efforts to secure the truce in Gaza.

As March drew to a close, Cairo had the satisfaction of seeing the success of its latest effort to mediate a more or less reasonable outcome to the most recent outbreak of violence between the Israelis and Palestinians. This satisfaction, however, was no doubt tempered by the reality its ability to secure this outcome was almost entirely due to the conflicting parties' unwillingness to sustain the confrontation.

By April, Egyptians were turning their collective attention to Cairo's upcoming presidential elections, currently scheduled for late May. The Muslim Brotherhood, having emerged as the clear winner of earlier parliamentary elections, and now suddenly deciding to field a candidate for the presidency, sent a delegation to Washington in allay U.S. concerns over the prospect of an Islamist government in Cairo. The delegation carried a powerful argument in support of the Muslim Brotherhood's "reasonableness": the organization's decision last Month to withdraw its support to Hamas' commitment to armed struggle against Israel. Instead, the Brotherhood would henceforth focus on reconciling the two wings of Palestinian nationalism—Hamas, in Gaza, and El Fatah, (which the Brotherhood had previously excoriated for "selling out the Palestinian cause") in the West Bank.^[8]

In short, the Brotherhood's delegation hoped to convince U.S. policymakers that Egypt, under its direction, would expand its mediation efforts in the Middle East to include not only conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, but also the Palestinians of different political stripes. It was a bold proposal.

There is virtually no hope that the Palestine issue will become less complex in the future. On the contrary, the issue

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will likely become more complex and, consequently, addressing it will become even more difficult. If Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood remains firm in its new position, the United States should accept it as a partner. This would merely reaffirm Washington's own long-standing declared commitment to a two-state solution. In turn, this would necessarily require Washington distancing itself from the clearly expansionist tendencies of Israel's current government.

Any other course of action seems almost certain to force the world to confront another round of the politically ominous Matryoshka Doll syndrome in the Middle East. Unfortunately, there is no reason to expect that the next time the same rational calculations, good sense, or just plain good luck will prevail against the possible alternative combination of miscalculation, unbridled ambition, and ideological idiocy.

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[1] "Fatal Strikes Continue in Gaza in Weekend of Attacks," *Common Dreams*, March 11, 2012.

[2] "Israel, Militants Agree to Truce, Egypt Official," *Al-Ahram*, March 13, 2012.

[3] Yaakov Katz and Yaakov Lappin, "Iron Dome Ups Its Interception Rate to Over 90%," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 10, 2012. Online at: <http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=261257>

[4] See my contribution to UNISCI Discussion Papers of May, 2011, online at: Dan Tschirgi, "The Context of Israeli-Palestinian 'Final Negotiations'," online at: www.ucm.es/info/unisci/revistas/UNISCI_DP_26_TSCHIRGI.pdf

[5] Isabel Kershner and Fares Akram, "As Rockets Fly, New Conditions Shape Fight in Gaza," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2012. Online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/http://www.nytimes.cNom/2012/03/13/world/middleeast/in-gaza-new-conditions-shape-old-fight.html>

[6] "Friends No More? Egypt's MPs Declare Israel No. 1 Enemy," *Russia Today (RT)*, online at: <http://rt.com/news/egypt-israel-enemy-gaza-485/>

[7] *RT*, "Friends No More," Op. Ci

[8] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Islamist Victors in Egypt Seeking Shift by Hamas," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2012, online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/24/world/middleeast/egypts-election-victors-look-shi...>