

# Cairo's Fears as it Faces an Israeli Incursion in Rafah: Confrontation and Radicalization

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Brief Analysis

**Even if an incursion into Rafah occurs without sparking a clash between Israeli and Egyptian forces, Israel will be facing two key challenges in its relationship with Egypt: the eventual status of the Philadelphi corridor and the rapid rise of support for Hamas inside Egypt itself.**

**H**amas's original plan, when it launched its insane operation on October 7, appears to have been to lure Israel into a very harsh response, resulting in thousands of innocent victims in the Gaza Strip. The hope was that this would ultimately lead to igniting a major war between the Arabs and Israel.

It is certain that Hamas has succeeded in the first part of its plan, triggering a response from Israel in its efforts to destroy the group that has killed 29,000 Palestinians and injured 69,000. However, Hamas has not yet succeeded in igniting a **major war (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3622401/hamas-leader-gaza-be-ready-great-battle>)** between the Arabs and Israel. Even its allies from the so-called "resistance axis" in Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah have disowned the conflict in practice while paying lip service to Hamas's war.

However, it is also certain that Hamas will not easily surrender. Now, it is a question of whether Hamas will achieve its second intention through a war between Egypt and Israel through a last stand in Rafah, a means of sparking broader conflict after being abandoned by all its allies in the so-called "resistance axis."

## Potential for Cross-Fire in the Battle of Rafah

A battle in Rafah—about which Egypt, the United States, and the European Union have previously warned regarding

its consequences for Israel, Egypt, and the entire region—has the strong likelihood of placing Israeli soldiers in confrontation with their Egyptian counterparts perhaps for the first time since October 1973.

Washington has repeatedly expressed its concern about humanitarian aspect of an operation in Rafah, with President Biden during his meeting with King Abdullah at the White House stating (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/02/12/remarks-by-president-biden-and-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-of-jordan-after-a-meeting/>) that it should not continue without a credible plan and adding that "the major military operation in Rafah should not proceed without a credible plan — a credible plan for ensuring the safety and support of more than one million people sheltering there." The American president continued, "Many people there have been displaced — displaced multiple times, fleeing the violence to the north, and now they're packed into Rafah — exposed and vulnerable. They need to be protected."

However, Cairo is also extremely concerned about the potential for an Israeli miscalculation with military operations so close to the Egyptian border. Rafah straddles the border between Egypt and Gaza, meaning that an operation in Rafah would bring Israel right up to Egyptian territory. According to Reuters ([https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-steps-up-security-border-israeli-offensive-gaza-nears-2024-02-09/#:~:text=CAIRO,%20Feb%20%20\(Reuters\),two%20Egyptian%20security%20sources%20said.](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-steps-up-security-border-israeli-offensive-gaza-nears-2024-02-09/#:~:text=CAIRO,%20Feb%20%20(Reuters),two%20Egyptian%20security%20sources%20said.)), Egypt has already sent about forty tanks and armored personnel carriers to northeastern Sinai near the border. Any mistake in the expanding circle of violence along the Egyptian-Palestinian-Israeli borders could lead to a disaster. One such incident (<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/10/22/israeli-army-an-israeli-tank-hit-an-egyptian-site-accidentally>) has already occurred; at the beginning of the Israeli military operations in Gaza on October 22, an Israeli tank hit an Egyptian border watchtower, causing injuries among the Egyptian border surveillance personnel according to the Egyptian army's statement.

In Rafah, Tel Aviv will be faced with tough questions: if Hamas elements succeed in their operations against Israelis and flee across the border with Egypt, will Israel pursue them? Will Israel do so even if it risks the 40-year-old Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, one of the main pillars of peace in our troubled region and into which the United States itself has invested tremendous political effort and billions of dollars annually to Egypt and Israel to continue chasing Hamas? These are all questions that are currently haunting Cairo.

According to Western and Israeli sources (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-egypt-warns-israel-rafah-offensive-may-lead-to-suspension-of-peace-treaty/>), Egypt has warned Israel of the potential suspension of the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David peace treaty if Israel proceeds with a ground invasion of the Palestinian city of Rafah. The Egyptian warning, which possibly came through closed diplomatic channels, appears to have been deliberately leaked by Cairo to Western media outlets to ensure the message reached Tel Aviv and Washington.

### **Cairo's Concerns over the Philadelphi Corridor**

Cairo is also preoccupied with the Israeli military buildup on the borders of the Philadelphi Corridor between Egypt and Israel in preparation for taking control of the Palestinian side of Rafah. This would not be the first time Israel controlled the corridor, which lies within Palestinian territory and stretches approximately 14 km in length and about 100 meters in width. It remained under complete Israeli control from the Palestinian side until 2005, alongside a buffer zone with the Egyptian border in the Gaza strip protected by Egyptian police forces.

Yet lengthy negotiations between Israel and Egypt during Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza concluded with what is known as the security arrangements agreement, which stipulated that Israel would withdraw from the Palestinian side and the Palestinian Authority would take over responsibility, while a limited number of Egyptian border guard forces would be deployed on the Egyptian side. Armed with light weapons, these forces would conduct land, air, and sea patrols in coordination with the Israeli side to prevent smuggling and infiltration. These arrangements

continued even after Hamas's coup and its takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007.

Cairo is concerned that Israel's reassertion of control would mean, in the short term, the complete isolation of the Gaza Strip from the world and, presumably, the closure of the Rafah land crossing from the Palestinian side. This could halt the passage of humanitarian aid to the sector and the evacuation of the wounded, sick, and stranded to Egyptian territory. With the Palestinian side of the border crowded with hundreds of thousands of displaced people living in extremely difficult humanitarian conditions, this tactic would result in a humanitarian disaster, both in terms of casualties from military operations and from a lack of relief and medical supplies.

On this front, Egypt has also received some criticism; **Dr. Sami Abu Shehadeh (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kPVtl04OeA>)**, a former Arab member of the Israeli Knesset, said in a previous interview with Al Jazeera that Egypt has indeed prevented the displacement of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, but it can certainly do more. This is especially the case regarding sending more humanitarian aid to the besieged sector, as it is the only country that shares a border with Gaza alongside Israel.

### **A Wave of Radicalization**

The current course insisted upon by Tel Aviv can have catastrophic consequences not only for Israel but also for all the Arab countries that have established good relations with it. Nationalist and Islamic currents could form a populist tsunami wave that sweeps away all recent attempts to establish regional cooperation and stability. Recent events in Gaza have contributed to the rise of the "throat-clearing resistance" currents once again, whether in Yemen, Iraq, or Syria.

**A recent poll (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypt-polling-shows-rise-positive-views-hamas-iran-backed-groups-and-muslim>)** by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy showed that after years of increasingly negative views of Hamas, three-quarters of Egyptians now view the movement positively. On the other hand, polls in Israel show a general rejection of the idea of a Palestinian state—both in large part consequences of the ongoing war in Gaza that has left thousands dead and wounded and caused unprecedented destruction to the sector's infrastructure.

The rise of extremist rhetoric, especially from elected Israeli officials—from both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his more extremist partners Ben-Gvir, Smotrich, and Lieberman—has sparked a particular backlash among Egyptians, where the public mood in Egypt is more inclined to take stronger stances against Israel. The incitement of the killing of Palestinians and the displacement of those who remain to Sinai, statements that were used by South Africa in its case against Israel in the International Court of Justice, sharply color many Egyptians' perceptions of Israel's operations in Gaza.

The state of anger and public discontent among the Egyptian street has seeped into many officials in Cairo, where Diaa Rashwan, head of the State Information Service, confirmed that the reoccupation of the Philadelphi Corridor would **represent a threat (<https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/191152/Egypt-warns-Israeli-retaking-of-Philadelphi-Corridor-would-violate-peace-treaty?lang=en-us>)** to peace between Cairo and Tel Aviv, and amid leaks that Cairo plans to suspend the Camp David peace treaty between it and Israel.

Given the rhetoric of officials and some Israeli analysts about displacing Palestinians to Sinai, many in Cairo may believe that the ultimate goal of a Rafah operation is to put pressure on Palestinians to push them to cross the border to the Egyptian side—throwing the entire humanitarian crisis on Cairo's shoulders. Many circles in Cairo see any displacement, moreover, as an unacceptable "liquidation" of the Palestinian issue.

Security circles view this potential as a significant security threat. Specifically, there is urgent concern that Hamas fighters or other Palestinian factions will infiltrate and use Sinai as a launch pad for terrorist operations against Israel or Egyptian security forces, reviving the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist Islamic groups that would

declare jihad against Israel from Sinai, and plunging the region into an endless cycle of instability.

In reality, securing the Egyptian border with Gaza and ensuring the prevention of infiltration or smuggling is vital for Egypt, perhaps even more so than for Israel. This is especially the case since the past years have witnessed the smuggling of weapons and explosives, as well as the infiltration of elements affiliated with Hamas and other factions to fight alongside Islamist terrorist groups in Sinai.

As Netanyahu and his allies apparently continue to follow the entrapment plan orchestrated by Hamas and prepare for the invasion of Rafah, Cairo is hoping that those in Tel Aviv realize the potential recruitment benefits Hamas, backed by Iran and the so-called resistance axis, see in the continuation of fighting in its favor, especially with the rising toll of civilian casualties. The longer Arabic news covers innocent Palestinian casualties of the war, the more Hamas garners sympathy and cleanses its reputation, transforming in many Arabs minds from an extremist terrorist movement that hijacked Gaza in 2007, conducting terrorist operations targeting Palestinian civilians themselves, into a resistance force.

Cairo is hoping someone will whisper in Netanyahu's ear that while an incursion in Rafah might succeed in defeating Hamas, he could risk igniting the entire region, especially as it faces increasing public pressure to intervene more significantly to prevent the mistreatment of Palestinian civilians in Gaza by the Israeli war machine. Cairo has its own history in Gaza—Gaza itself was administratively part of Egypt until 1967. Even the former Egyptian President Abdel Nasser was besieged along with three other Egyptian battalions in Faluja, northeast of the Gaza Strip, during the 1948 war with Israel, where he was injured. It is difficult to imagine Cairo continuing to ignore these myriad historical, cultural, and humanitarian links between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

Therefore, both parties must consider the other's concerns and needs. Maintaining coordination is essential for the continued and increase supply of humanitarian aid to beleaguered Palestinians. And in the long term, it is possible to move towards a post-conflict scenario in Gaza where Cairo could play a pivotal role if these communication lines remain open. As the past months have proven, peace requires truly committed parties who can work together effectively, find necessary understandings, and ensure shared security and prosperity based on action, not just rhetoric. Israel must also recognize that continued bloody losses among innocent Palestinians increase the likelihood of reigniting the danger of extremist Islamic groups, not only against Israel but against all moderate states in the region, Egypt included.

Egypt is committed to working towards de-escalation. This includes through political mediation and sponsoring negotiations that have resulted in the release of some hostages and the establishment of a humanitarian truce alongside the introduction of thousands of tons of aid and the evacuation of the wounded and stranded. Supplying the Gaza Strip with potable water lines and establishing camps to accommodate the displaced within Gaza allows it to continue its positive role as an impartial mediator.

Moreover, if the relationship escapes this tense period, Cairo can actively engage in launching a political process that achieves stability and peace in the sector with the effective participation of moderate Palestinian parties. It can also work on rebuilding Palestinian institutions and training their staff, as well as participating in reconstruction operations and providing the Gaza Strip with essential services like energy and water.

Egypt can contribute significantly to the region's recovery. But all this requires keeping the lines of communications open as Tel Aviv develops its future plans and avoiding reaching a point where Cairo feels compelled to respond. ❖



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