



Dueling mediators

For the Saudis and Egypt as well, Qatar has become insufferable

EFFORTS BY US Secretary of State John Kerry to cobble together a lasting cease-fire to the Israel-Hamas war have triggered a mini-firestorm of criticism from Israel, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and numerous analysts in the US.

The core of the complaint is that Kerry undermined, in both form and substance, an Egyptian cease-fire initiative in favor of a plan more favorable to Hamas, which had been fashioned by its allies Turkey and Qatar. Diplomatic historians will have a field day parsing the episode. Whatever their conclusions, it highlights the larger rift over a host of regional issues between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Turkey and Qatar, on the other. Moreover, it raises serious questions about the ability of America to shape events in the region.

Ever since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Egypt has claimed pride of place as patron of the Palestinians, as part of its overall regional leadership ambitions. Although Egypt mid-wifed the PLO's birth in 1964 and enabled it to receive all-Arab legitimacy in 1974, the Egyptian-Palestinian relationship was often rocky.

The emergence of Hamas as a significant force in Palestinian politics, especially in Gaza, on Egypt's northeastern border, complicated matters further as Egypt struggled to achieve a modicum of Palestinian unity and prevent additional rounds of conflict with Israel. The decline of Egypt's influence in the region had left Cairo with few alternatives for asserting its influence, making the Palestinian sphere that much more important.

For Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the rise to power of the Brotherhood in Egypt in 2011-12 seemed to herald a new dawn. But it was a false one. During his year in power, president Mohammed Morsi did not fully open the Gaza-Egyptian border while struggling to cope with an Islamist insurgency in Sinai. And, with his removal by the army in July 2013, Hamas was dealt a major strategic blow.

The new regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi declared the Brotherhood to be a terrorist organization, imprisoned thousands, and accused Hamas of providing vital support to Islamist militants who continue to draw the blood of Egyptian security forces in Sinai. It also moved forcefully to close down the network of tunnels between Sinai and Gaza vital to the Gazan economy. Not surprisingly, Israeli-Egyptian security cooperation reached an unprecedented level, and Sisi clearly hoped that Israel's military would deal a sharp, and even fatal, blow to Hamas.

Throughout the Israel-Hamas conflict, the Sisi-directed Egyptian media and pro-regime public figures have kept up a steady stream of withering criticism of Hamas for repeatedly bringing disaster to the Palestinian public. They were joined by generally more circumspect Saudi-Arabian commentators. Their critique resembled that leveled against the Lebanese Shi'ite,



Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani: His tiny country has long punched above its weight

Iranian-backed Hezbollah for provoking the Israel-Lebanon war in 2006. But this time, it was an all-Sunni affair.

For the Saudis, the Muslim Brotherhood is anathema – it posits an alternative, more modern form of Islam than the Saudis puritan Wahhabi creed, and poses a strategic threat of the highest magnitude were it to definitively capture the Egyptian state. Hence, Riyadh poured almost \$20 billion into Sisi's coffers in the last year (together with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates) to stabilize his anti-Brotherhood regime, and

more is on the way. Saudi commentators have characterized Hamas's vision of destroying Israel as a fantasy. Signs of ongoing Saudi-Israeli contacts and dialogue have been apparent for some time, against the background of their mutual concerns over Iran's nuclear program and power projection in the region.

Turkey and Qatar, as unlike as two countries can be, both aspire to play major regional roles. For Turkey, this is natural, being a large and relatively prosperous state, and with an Ottoman imperial legacy to boot. More often than not, Turkey and Egypt have been rivals and competitors. After coming to power in 2003, the Islamist AK party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan warmly embraced Hamas, to Egypt's dismay.

The Mavi Marmara flotilla to Gaza was a blatant example of Turkish intrusion into Egypt's traditional bailiwick. The Tahrir Square uprising and the Muslim Brotherhood's subsequent rise to power were warmly welcomed in Ankara, as they were in line with Erdogan's promotion of political Islam through the ballot box. Not surprisingly, the Brotherhood's removal, and now the Israel-Gaza war, have raised the level of mutual invective between Cairo and Ankara to new heights.

For the Saudis and other Gulf Arab states, and Egypt as well, Qatar has become insufferable. A country with only 250,000 citizens (and 1.2 million foreigners), Qatar has long punched above its weight thanks to its phenomenal natural-gas revenues. These have enabled Qatar to simultaneously host a large US air force base and spend billions of dollars in purchasing advanced US military equipment, maintain quiet diplomatic links with Israel for many years, serve as the headquarters of Al-Jazeera television (whose coverage of Egypt has been utterly hostile to Sisi), support the Muslim Brotherhood, bankroll assorted radical Islamist movements, and maintain cordial relations with Iran.

Mediators mediate disputes to gain credit and influence events. No wonder, then, that the Israelis, Egyptians, the Palestinian Authority, and the Saudis were up in arms with Kerry's diplomatic gambit, which seemed to be rewarding their regional rivals and thus was damaging to all their respective interests. The diplomatic endgame to the war will surely bear watching. ■

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