

Egypt can lead Hamas to the new Middle East

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Slowly, painfully, fitfully, the new Middle East is emerging. Egypt is key to this, both in terms of its internal evolution and its response to regional events, such as the fighting in Gaza.

Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi has many balls to juggle. His political base is Islamist, anti-Israel and anti-U.S. But Cairo depends on billions of dollars annually from the United States and the European Union, which want the Egypt-Israel peace treaty to survive. It is also likely that the still-powerful Egyptian military has no interest in a return to the days of tension with Israel.

Moreover, although Mr. Morsi's base is Islamist, it has many elements. I was in Cairo a few days ago. From my hotel room, I had a perfect view of Tahrir Square, where a demonstration of several thousand Salafists was taking place. These are the hard-line Islamists who believe in a government based on their own literal interpretation of the Koran. It was a noisy and angry affair. They were angry at Mr. Morsi for upholding and implementing a court decision to protect the property of the Coptic Christian minority from Salafist attempts to seize it.

No guarantee of an eventual pluralist democracy in Egypt, but not what one would have expected either.

The fighting in Gaza offers another insight into the emerging Middle East. Rhetorical support aside, it is clear that Arab states want the fighting to end – and want Hamas to stop dragging the region toward conflict. Thus, Mr. Morsi's Egypt has taken the mediation role that Hosni Mubarak took and is bringing together a number of other states, such as Qatar and Turkey, to push this along.

Egypt is tired of Hamas disturbing the regional peace and using the Sinai as a training ground and base of operations. Quietly, there have been clashes between Hamas fighters and Egyptian troops that have resulted in deaths, and rumours abound that Hamas even test-fired a few of its longer-range rockets into the Sinai before turning them on Israel.

Through an interesting confluence of events, Mr. Morsi's Egypt has more influence than Mr. Mubarak's did in the delicate task of weaning Hamas from its relationship with Iran. Hamas is a historical child of the Muslim Brotherhood and there are more religious and ideological links between the two than between Hamas and Iran. Indeed, it is likely that Hamas's relationship with Iran was largely forged when no one else in the region would have anything to do with it. That is now different. Although it will be difficult for many reasons, Egypt and Hamas may well affect a reconciliation that will see Hamas come under pressure to moderate its methods. The recent Gaza visit by the Emir of Qatar, the first Arab head of state to go, was likely also an element in turning Hamas toward more moderate Sunni regimes as its base of support.

The trend toward a new relationship has been given its biggest push by the fighting in Syria, where an Alawite regime, supported by Shia Iran, is slaughtering a mostly Sunni population. Sunni Hamas has been undergoing profound soul-searching over this, and many of its elements, including the Hamas government in Gaza, have turned very cool on Iran. Hamas needs new friends, and these new friends may be able to turn it toward a more moderate course.

All of this will be painful, confused and uncertain. Amid the chaos in Gaza and the changes under way in Egypt, one can construct many scenarios. In some of them, Hamas becomes less confrontational under pressure from moderate Sunni Arab regimes and less willing to turn to Iran for weapons and support. The current crisis may push this along. Other scenarios are far less hopeful, and Iran will no doubt seek to avoid being marginalized in Gaza.

Even if the more positive scenario plays out, that does not mean Hamas will come closer any time soon to accepting Israel's right to exist and making peace. But even if Hamas merely turns away from Iran and from violence, it would be a significant development.

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