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Established in 2018 as an independent think tank, the Egyptian Centre for Strategic Studies (ECSS) endeavors to present different perspectives and alternatives concerning national, regional, and global strategic shifts. It focuses, in particular, on issues and transformations that are crucial to Egypt's interests and national security.

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Analytical Article

A Year Later: Egypt's Balanced and Pragmatic Policies in the Gaza Conflict

The October 7 attacks, along with the ensuing brutal Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, reverberated throughout the entire region. Cairo quickly recognized the severe risks posed by these events and dismissed the possibility that they would yield any positive outcomes for the Palestinian cause. The repercussions of October 7 and Israel's war on Gaza primarily harm the Palestinian cause and its people, but also directly impact Egypt, given its deep-

rooted connection to the Palestinian cause and its unique historical, political, security, and geographical ties with Gaza, the source of the attacks and the target of Israel's retaliation.

Pragmatic Considerations

Egypt, from the very beginning, struck a balance between two contrasting considerations: the logic of a sovereign state, focused on safeguarding its national interests through regional stability, and the logic of the Palestinian national liberation movement, which seeks to disrupt the status quo and destabilize the region in order to force recognition of its rights. As a responsible state, Egypt is dedicated to ensuring the security and well-being of its citizens. At the same time, it has been the closest ally to the Palestinian struggle since its inception, offering unwavering support while also possessing deep insight into the Israeli mindset, thanks to its extensive experience with Israel in both war and peace.

Supporting the Palestinian people and their cause is a cornerstone of Egyptian foreign policy. Egypt stands

with the Palestinians out of a sense of duty and natural solidarity with a fellow Arab nation, as well as a deep understanding that lasting regional stability hinges on the Palestinian people's ability to establish an independent state. Such a state would create the foundation for peaceful coexistence and foster wide-ranging, sustainable regional cooperation. Egypt's solidarity with the Palestinians is grounded in maturity, free from juvenile ambitions, political posturing, or the pursuit of media attention. It is an effective form of solidarity that is both proactive and forward-looking, going beyond the immediate circumstances to anticipate future events, steering them toward a more favorable outcome—bringing the Palestinian people closer to realizing their legitimate rights, while also guiding the region toward long-awaited stability.

Egypt's policy toward the Palestinian cause is based on a pragmatic understanding of the power dynamics at play. It acknowledges the deep sense of patriotism and anger that compels resistance fighters to make great sacrifices to inflict pain and frustration on the enemy, even if the repercussions are significant. Egypt does not dismiss the resistance's actions, but it constantly works to

steer them in a direction that yields concrete progress on the ground. While spite and harm to enemies may offer temporary comfort and satisfaction, Egypt looks beyond this, aiming to bring about real change in the existing realities.

Furthermore, Egypt had to consider the unique nature of the Palestinian national struggle and movement, which is deeply divided along ideological lines. Central to this is the Palestinian Authority, which operates with semi-governing institutions that hold some authority on the ground and possess a legitimate legal right to represent the Palestinian people. However, this legitimacy is contested by a Palestinian faction— Hamas— which has severed the Gaza Strip, the most impoverished yet autonomous part of the Palestinian Authority's territory. It was from Gaza, under Hamas' control, that the October 7 attacks were launched.

A Major Gamble

From a profit-and-loss perspective, October 7 stands as a bold risk with the potential for severely negative consequences for the Palestinian cause and the region. Egypt, recognizing this early on, acted swiftly

to mitigate the potential risks arising from such a critical development.

Israel, from the very first moment, sought to leverage October 7 as an opportunity to further its colonial and racist goals. The attacks on Israeli society and its government unfolded amid a surge of right-wing racism, an ideology that positioned itself to capitalize on October 7 as a chance for Israel to pursue its most extreme ideological ambitions in Palestine and the broader region.

October 7 and Israel's ruthless assault on Gaza have triggered numerous risks, the most critical of which being the threat of displacing Palestinians to Sinai, the danger of the conflict expanding into the West Bank, the risk of forcing Palestinians into Jordan, the potential dismantling of Palestinian national institutions, and the looming threat of the Palestinian cause being eliminated. Cairo has worked tirelessly to address these dangers and prevent the Gaza war from becoming a new nakbah.

The initial response to the October 7 attacks was intense, sparking a wave of support for Israel, particularly in Western countries with which Egypt maintains key political, economic, and security relationships. Cairo

quickly recognized the need to engage with the international community by crafting an alternative narrative to counter Israel's. This narrative sought to place October 7 in its broader context—as part of a genuine national liberation movement that has been consistently denied its right to achieve its national aspirations, with all avenues to a peaceful resolution deliberately blocked. This situation has driven oppressed Palestinians to go to the extreme to highlight the untenability of the current status quo in the occupied territories.

Drawing from its long-standing experience with national liberation movements and its keen insight into their strategic thinking, Cairo recognizes that the calculations of gain and loss for states differ significantly from those made by liberation movements. Taking what seems to be a bold gamble against a stronger adversary lies at the core of national liberation struggles, which are often waged against more powerful and well-equipped colonial forces. Cairo understands that as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved, the world should anticipate similar events to recur.


Restoring the Ethical Equilibrium

Cairo brought the Palestinian cause back to its rightful context, countering the Israeli narrative that framed October 7 as the starting point of history, as if no prior events and developments had taken place. Egypt took on a crucial role in advancing this narrative because the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, due to various challenges, found it difficult to engage with global public opinion, compelling Egypt to bridge this gap.

Egypt strengthened its diplomatic efforts with Arab and allied countries to forge a united front of states backing the Palestinian cause. Leading this front, Cairo advanced the Arab and Palestinian perspective on the Gaza conflict, emphasizing the two-state solution as the sole viable path to lasting peace in the Middle East. This stance gained momentum, with an increasing number of countries acknowledging the State of Palestine.

A few weeks into the conflict, Egypt convened the Cairo Peace Summit, bringing together a significant number of global leaders.

This summit presented a crucial opportunity to challenge and shift the pro-Israel narrative. Egypt's efforts in this regard persisted in the weeks and months that followed, leading to a considerable rebalancing of the ethical and media discourse in favor of the Palestinian cause. However, this shift was insufficient to halt Israel's war machine, which continued to ravage the Gaza Strip.



Egyptian Successes

Preventing the forced displacement of Palestinians to the Egyptian Sinai stood as Egypt's most critical achievement during this period. The Israeli right-wing pushed heavily for a plan to drive the Palestinians of Gaza into Sinai, aiming to turn it into their new homeland while clearing Gaza of its native population. This would pave the way for Zionist settlers to reclaim Gaza and annex it to Israel. However, Egypt's firm stance successfully thwarted these plans.

Egypt fiercely resisted Israel's attempts to eliminate the Palestinian cause by depopulating Palestine and shifting the problem onto Egypt, which would have jeopardized Egypt's national security and threatened regional stability for years to come.

One troubling aspect was that certain Western voices supported the Israeli right-wing's plan, reasoning that Egypt's vast, unoccupied territories could absorb the Palestinians without any significant impact. This simplistic, materialistic logic—devoid of any political or historical understanding—treated homelands as mere parcels of land, as if they were tradable assets in the real estate market. Egypt not only thwarted this proposal but also managed to convince key Western figures of its dangers, leading prominent Western leaders, including the US president, to openly reject the plan.

Israel imposed a suffocating blockade on Gaza, deliberately depriving civilians of basic necessities as part of its war strategy, aimed at driving them towards the Egyptian border. Egypt made it a priority to ensure aid reached Gaza, not only as a humanitarian duty but also as a political countermeasure. Meeting the humanitarian needs of the people in Gaza was crucial, while politically, strengthening their ability to resist Israeli pressure became a key strategy to block the occupation's plan to push Palestinians into Sinai. Egypt played a central role in coordinating and delivering aid through the Rafah

crossing, despite Israel's stubborn resistance. This required forging a broad alliance with both political and humanitarian aims, applying sustained pressure to break Israel's blockade and ensure aid deliveries.

Israel seized control of the northern and central regions of the Gaza Strip, shifting its focus to the southern areas and the border zone between Gaza and Egypt. Egypt voiced concerns, warning that any Israeli occupation of this border zone could jeopardize the peace between the two countries. The United States and several Western countries also stepped in, advising Israel against this course of action. Israel, however, argued that controlling the border area was crucial to stop smuggling across the Egyptian frontier and even suggested that Israeli hostages might be smuggled through that route.

Israel occupied the Philadelphi Corridor and took control of the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing, further complicating Egypt's efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza. Egypt firmly rejected operating the crossing under these new conditions and adamantly opposed the situation Israel imposed in the corridor. The

future of this corridor became a key point of contention in the stalled ceasefire negotiations over Gaza, highlighting the growing strain in Egyptian-Israeli relations.

Sensitivity and Intricacy

The management of Egypt's policy regarding the Gaza war has been marked by sensitivity and complexity. The core tenets shaping Egypt's policy included damage mitigation, conflict de-escalation, and the prevention of broader hostilities. Central to this policy is the commitment to support the Palestinian people while addressing Israeli intransigence, all without jeopardizing peace between Egypt and Israel.

Egypt maintained its focus on long-term strategic objectives, centering its efforts on the two-state solution as the ultimate resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a key to achieving broader regional stability. Egyptian diplomacy has exerted considerable effort in this area. While the two-state solution has received broad international endorsement, this support has not materially

impacted the immediate dynamics on the ground. Nonetheless, it remains crucial for paving the way toward long-term resolutions to the ongoing tensions and conflicts in the region.

The path to a Palestinian state hinges on the existence of a strong Palestinian Authority and a unified voice that articulates the aspirations of the Palestinian people. Egypt consistently endeavored to promote Palestinian reconciliation, even when the circumstances were less than favorable for making substantial strides. By channeling significant resources into supporting

the Palestinian Authority, Egypt recognized its vital role as the bedrock of Palestinian resistance in the face of an unprecedented and aggressive Israeli campaign.

October 7 and the ensuing Israeli assault on Gaza represented a formidable test for the entire Middle East. As the unrest endures and threats remain a year after the conflict erupted, Egypt must carry on its vital constructive initiatives in the coming year, in anticipation of the day when Palestinians reclaim their right to independence and stability is restored throughout the region.