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Hamas?s Desengaño With Morsi

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English has by far the largest vocabulary of any language, but there are still times when we have to look beyond its confines to convey a particular meaning. There is a Spanish word, *desengaño*, which connotes a combination of disappointment, disenchantment, disillusionment and despair, for which we have no precise English equivalent. And this, surely, best sums up the current attitude of the Hamas rulers in Gaza towards Egypt's new government.

Many Hamas leaders were apparently convinced that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere would mean a radical transformation of its fortunes and hold the key to its eventual victory over secular nationalists for control of the Palestinian national movement. At a minimum, they expected the new government of President Mohammed Morsi would adopt a much friendlier foreign policy, ease the blockade, pressure Israel and provide Hamas with a steady stream of support.

As the months have dragged on, it's become clear that this not only isn't the case, but that the Morsi government is at least as problematic from Hamas's perspective as its much-hated Mubarak predecessor. The recent flooding of Gaza smuggling tunnels by the Egyptian military with raw sewage (in contrast to Mubarak's occasional use of tear gas [2]), pursuant to an Egyptian court order to close all such tunnels [3], is only the last straw.

Egypt has moved to stop the transfer of all goods, including huge shipments of fuel, through the tunnels and has again closed the Rafah border crossing. The Egyptian side of the blockade has never been so intense. These actions have had a devastating effect on the Gaza economy. They have brought reconstruction efforts almost to a halt, and sent the price

of cement and building materials soaring [4]. And they are costing both Hamas and Gaza businesses at least hundreds of millions of dollars, if not more, in lost revenues.

Moreover, Egypt reportedly [5] recently refused to allow Hamas to establish a formal office in Cairo. Even more insultingly, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood officials reportedly [6] urged Hamas to abandon "armed struggle" against Israel and follow their example and "implement jihad in other ways." Hamas, of course, denies [7] these reports, but they scan perfectly with all other available information and political logic.

Several Hamas leaders in Gaza have erupted in anger in recent days, in spite of obvious efforts for many weeks to contain their rage and express "understanding" of Egypt's predicament. Senior Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahar expressed the group's growing infuriation by declaring [8], "The previous [Egyptian] regime was cruel, but it never allowed Gaza to starve." Yet Hamas leaders, including Al-Zahar, continue to pin their hopes on an eventual transformation of the Egyptian policy and, in spite of everything, pledge undying support for Morsi [9].

After all, what other choice do they really have? From a practical point of view, the answer is to increase trade with Israel, and Israeli-permitted exports to Europe and elsewhere. And, to their considerable chagrin and embarrassment, this is exactly what Hamas leaders have been doing, insofar as the Israelis have allowed it. As *The Economist* noted [10], this "makes Hamas more dependent on—and subservient to—Israel, to ensure vital supplies continue," as opposed to what they expected to be their new major partner and, indeed, salvation: the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo.

No doubt from a purely ideological and theoretical perspective, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is more sympathetic to Hamas at every level than the Mubarak regime had been. But there are ample reasons why a number of Israeli analysts recently argued [11], as I also have several times in the past, that Egypt's foreign policy hasn't actually changed even if its official rhetoric has shifted somewhat.

First, while the ideology of Egypt's presidency may have changed, its interests, challenges and options have not. Morsi may wish he lived in a different world, or inherited a different country from Mubarak, but he hasn't. Egypt is still Egypt, Egyptians still Egyptians, and their interests will always come first for them. Among other things, Egypt has a vested interest in not being sucked back into control of, and responsibility for, Gaza. And it has a mutually advantageous peace treaty with Israel that no rational government is going to gamble with.

Second, Egypt's national security policy remains both de facto and de jure in the hands of the military, which does not share the president's ideology. So even if Morsi were inclined to intervene on behalf of Hamas at the expense of Egyptian interests, the military would almost certainly prevent this. As an Army spokesperson rather gently explained [12], "We realize how much our brothers in Palestine suffer, but that doesn't mean that the Egyptian Armed Forces will allow anyone to harm national interests."

Third, Egypt has a massive national security crisis in the Sinai Peninsula, particularly in the regions bordering Gaza. There, political extremists, terrorists, bandits and others run rampant, killing Egyptian soldiers, attacking the gas pipeline to Israel and disrupting almost all Egyptian government activities in the area. This is not only a national security issue for the military. It is a grave political challenge for Morsi, who cannot be seen as a president who is incapable of securing strategically vital areas of his own country.

It must be understood that smuggling tunnels from Egypt to Gaza run in both directions. There is a symbiotic and cooperative relationship between Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza and those in Sinai. Therefore there is no reason to suspect that Morsi is inclined to restrain the Egyptian military, despite any abstract ideological affinities towards Hamas.

For these reasons, and more, there's no reason to expect that Egypt's basic stance towards Hamas, Gaza, Israel or the rest of the region is likely to undergo any major transformation in the foreseeable future. Rhetoric on both sides notwithstanding, relations between Egypt and Gaza have become in every meaningful sense worse under Morsi than they were under Mubarak. As an Islamist, Morsi can more easily claim to his public that he's acting in the essential national interest, perhaps even contrary to his own inclinations, and imply that it's really the military that's to blame.

As for Hamas, all they are left with is collapsing popularity [13], a retreat into increased reactionary social repression and misogyny [14] to play to their core base and bolster their Islamist credentials, and the increasingly threadbare fantasy that Islamist rule in Cairo and elsewhere will save Gaza and deliver control of the broader Palestinian national movement to its de facto rulers.

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