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Gaza crisis reveals regional splits over the Brotherhood

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<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/gaza-crisis-reveals-regional-splits-ov...> [1]

Gaza crisis reveals regional splits over the Brotherhood

[Hussein Ibish](#)[2]

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The American biologist Barry Commoner famously observed as a fundamental law of ecology that “Everything is connected to everything else”. That truism has rarely been more applicable than in the contemporary Middle East. Hostilities between Israel and Hamas may superficially appear to be a limited conflict, but powerful regional and international forces are expressing their influence in both the fighting and the diplomatic wrangling over a ceasefire.

One of the most significant regional fault lines clearly at play is the sharply diverging attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

To put it crudely but accurately, there are essentially pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood factions among states in the region. This context is having a major impact on Hamas (the Brotherhood organisation in Palestine), the Palestinian Authority and Israel in their unhappy triangulation. Egypt, several key Gulf states and Jordan are the most significant in opposing the Muslim Brotherhood, and hence sceptical about Hamas.

This does not, of course, mean that these states are insensible to the tragic death and destruction being meted out by Israel primarily against the civilian population of Gaza. But they view Hamas’s willingness to place that population at risk by engaging in a desperate and bloody confrontation with Israel partly in the context of the regional fortunes of the Muslim Brotherhood movement as a whole.

The most obvious manifestation of this perspective is Egypt’s barely concealed sense that Hamas rule in Gaza, along their troubled border with Sinai and its various insurgents and terrorist groups, is a significant national security concern. Hence Egypt’s ceasefire proposal that offered Hamas “calm for calm” and, crucially, the people of Gaza immediate relief from Israeli bombardment, but denied Hamas any major political or strategic gains. “Had Hamas accepted the Egyptian initiative, at least 40 Palestinian souls would have been saved,” Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Shukri bitterly complained when it was rejected.

On the other hand, Turkey and Qatar, the regional champions of the Muslim Brotherhood, have attempted to bolster their allies. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Israel of “genocide”. Qatar has a standing aid package to salvage Hamas’s budget, but the transfer of these funds is being blocked by Egypt physically and the United States and Saudi Arabia in terms of financial institutions.

Hamas has been attempting, without success, to bring Turkey and Qatar into the diplomatic process regarding a potential ceasefire. The United States appears to have some interest in trying to leverage Qatar’s influence with Hamas, but as a practical matter Egypt remains the decisive player in any potential ceasefire, because of its political importance and geographical location.

Another major regional fault line that is rippling through the conflict concerns the role and influence of Iran. The once solid patron-client relationship between Iran and Hamas has been shattered by the Syrian conflict, which cost the Hamas politburo its headquarters in

Damascus and its primary funders in Tehran. Yet Hamas's paramilitary wing, the Qassam Brigades, never fully broke with Iran. There were also Hamas political leaders that, early on, wanted to try to recuperate as much of the relationship as possible.

In the run-up to this current phase of violence, splits within Hamas – between factions who wanted to focus on repairing relations with Iran versus others who wanted to see what could be done about mending fences with Egypt, Jordan and some Gulf states – were clearly discernible.

They still are, in spite of considerable wagon-circling in the face of a massive Israeli onslaught. And while most of the rockets being fired from Gaza into Israel (and sometimes the occupied West Bank) are made in Gaza itself, the expertise and some of the material that makes this possible are indisputably Iranian in origin.

Yet if Hamas is perceived by some Arab states, including some presently sympathetic to Hamas, as once again leaning too closely towards Tehran, there will certainly be a cost for that. However, the rise of even more extreme non-state actors, particularly the so-called Islamic State, in the short term at least, may offer a counterintuitive form of protection for Hamas. Israel, for all its fury, ultimately does not want Hamas to fall from power in Gaza, fearing the rise of anarchy or Islamic State-style extremists far more radical than Hamas, and perhaps to keep Palestinians divided.

And it's even conceivable that the threat from the Islamic State and similar next-generation takfiri hyper-radicals will prove so threatening to mainstream Sunni states and societies (as well as to Shiites including Iran), that the common peril may undermine the starkest of sectarian suspicions.

That could open the space for Hamas to resume closer ties with Iran while mitigating outrage in some Arab capitals. Alternatively, the rise of Islamic State could cast all armed non-state actors, including Hamas, as part of a universal menace.

The Middle East is in a radical state of flux, characterised by instability, disintegration and the rise of militias and armed gangs to local power. Significant question marks hang over most established alliances and sources of regional order. The fate of Palestine, including Gaza, will depend on, and affect, how these questions are answered. In the Arab world today, everything is connected to everything else as never before.

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[2] <http://www.thenational.ae/authors/Hussein-Ibish>

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[4] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/diplomacy>

[5] http://www.americantaskforce.org/hamas_0

[6] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/terrorism>