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‘Extremism begets more extremes’

Former Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Nabil Fahmy on Israel’s offensive in Rafah, its impact on Egypt and expectations of the West

The Israeli military campaign as a response to the brutal terror attack by Hamas is going on for more than four months now. How do you assess the situation in the Gaza Strip?

I think it’s barbaric, to put it candidly. Irrespective of whatever military objective any country has, 30 000 people killed – 70 per cent women and children – is not collateral damage. The announced target of the Israeli operation was to get rid of Hamas, to capture all its leaders and to destroy its network. Not a single one of these goals has been achieved. So firstly, it is inhuman to argue that 30 000 people are acceptable collateral damage. We live in the 21st century. Even a friend of Israel should not accept that it has gone so far. Secondly, cynically as well as militarily, if you look at it without the damages, did they achieve their goals? No, they certainly did not. Of course, they caused some losses to Hamas. But the announced military objective was to get rid of Hamas and catch all of its leaders. This objective, however, is impossible to attain. Hamas is an idea, a concept. It’s not the physical presence of Yahya Sinwar or other members. The ideology of Hamas feeds on the anger caused by the occupation that is going on for decades. Even if Hamas was gone, the anger would still be there.

Israel’s military is preparing a ground offensive on Rafah, where more than half of Gaza’s population – around 1.5 million – is currently sheltering. What does this mean for Egypt?

An intense bombardment in Rafah would be inhuman and irresponsible. The civilians there have nowhere to go. Increasing the intensity of the offensive – with or without ground forces – would lead to a tremendous number of civilian casualties. For Egypt, it would be a major problem for several reasons. First, providing medical and humanitarian services for a large number of people is very difficult. Second, Israelis have a premeditated policy of pushing

Palestinians out of their territories because they understand that the Palestinians, in the medium and long term, have a more powerful demographic. And thirdly, it would be a security problem because of the chaos. So, there are three issues: the humanitarian issue, the political issue and the security issue.

In the case of an Israeli offensive, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians could be pushed over the border into Egypt. Is your country ready to receive a huge number of Palestinian refugees?

It's complicated. Politically, we are not ready to do this. It's very difficult for the government to explain to the Egyptian people that Israel is forcing Palestinians across the border. But I also assume that there are contingency plans. There were satellite pictures in the media of construction sites. However, these areas were originally not constructed for refugees. This was an area of unlicensed housing that was torn down by the government. People were moved out. Then the area was rebuilt again with licensed buildings and people were invited to come back. But, they didn't come back because it was too expensive. There's clearly some work in that area, but it's hard to say what the purpose of these activities is.

Could you imagine a scenario where Cairo could suspend the peace treaty with Israel? What would the consequences be?

Suspending the peace treaty is a legality. Forcing Palestinians across the border would be a direct violation of the peace treaty by the Israelis. By the way, only a few days after the Gaza operation started, the Jordanians were the first to say, if there's forced displacement of Palestinians across the border, we will throw away our peace agreement with Israel.

What the Israelis are doing already on the Philadelphi Corridor is a violation of our understanding. That is an area, by mutual agreement between us and the Israelis, that they should stay away from so that they don't come too close to the border. However, with the present operations, they're all over that area. It's a problem and we're concerned. We raise it with them and we will continue to raise it with them. But it still happens on their side. The reaction to something on their side is different from a reaction to something that gets into our side. We would not be the initiator of a violation of the treaties. But we will not be passive towards anything that threatens our territory.

As a mediator and neighbouring state, Egypt plays an important role in talks between Israel and Hamas about a possible ceasefire and long-term peace.

These talks originated from discussions about exchanges: hostages versus prisoners. That was the first engagement. First civilians, then military personnel. For Hamas to give up some of the military hostages, they're going to ask for some of the captured militants on the Israeli side. And when you get to that level, which is close to where we are now, it's not only a humanitarian issue, it becomes also political. Hamas' proposal included also a medium-term ceasefire and indirect negotiations between the two sides. That's why you also saw, from the beginning, a very active Qatari role because they had strong relations with Hamas in collaboration with the Israelis. Egypt had a strong but different role because we were the ones on the ground, at the border. So, any releases would have had to deal with us. And at that point, our role expanded.

What kind of support would Egypt like to see from international partners like Germany and others?

The conflict will have to be solved with intensive engagement from the regional parties: Arabs and Israelis. But we can't solve it ourselves alone, we need help. Why? The Israelis look at non-Israelis in the region as adversaries. Germany, the US and a couple of others they see as friends. When they hear criticism from them, it resonates a bit stronger. The second point concerns international law. If you claim that you are a supporter of a world order based on the rule of law, you have to be consistent with your own determination. You can't refer to the rule of law in one case and ignore it in other cases, such as the war in Gaza.

Germany has the luxury and the responsibility of being a stronger state, part of a world alliance: NATO. Egypt, however, is a medium sized state. The security of these kind of states depends on international law. We need Germany and the five permanent members of the Security Council to be consistent. The acquisition of territory as well as attacking civilians and hospitals is a violation of international law. Israel cannot do that. The Israelis need to hear that from you.

What about the reconstruction in Gaza?

Will the Arab world reconstruct Gaza? Of course, the Arab world will contribute, because we are a family. But don't put the burden on us, we didn't destroy it. We would also need some idea of an end result. Should we build Gaza up again and then the Israelis bomb it again? Do you ask the Egyptians to go in and help train local authorities, help provide security and then fight the Israelis and Palestinians? There has to be some sort of logic here.

Do you see an end to the cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians?

Let's not hide around. We have today in Israel a racist government. They're talking more and more about pushing people out. People forget that Egypt and Israel have had peace for almost 50 years. There has not been a full-fledged Arab-Israeli war since the Seventies, only skirmishes in Lebanon and Gaza. But still, the Israeli body politic has moved from the centre to the extreme right. Israel had more peace and more security, and the economy is doing much better. And still the country moved to the right? Security and prosperity have led Israel to become more hateful towards the others in the region.

On the other side, especially after the carnage in Gaza, there are people in the Arab world who are saying: stop talking about peace, Israel doesn't want peace. They're not going to respond except to force. And the Western countries – or the Russians – don't have the capacity or the determination to intervene. Hamas had less popularity before 7 October than now. Its popularity didn't increase because people believe in their ideology. It's because they're frustrated, they can't find hope. For them, it's peace or retribution. We can either choose a path that is very difficult to achieve: peace, or we choose a path that is very easy but very costly. By the way, if you look at the cycle of violence, it's on both sides. Don't forget who killed the former Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin: an Israeli. Who killed the Egyptian President Sadat? An Israeli? No, an Egyptian. Extremism begets more extremes, even within our own societies. And that's what concerns me.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Nabil Fahmy

Nabil Fahmy is the former minister of foreign affairs of Egypt (July 2013 - June 2014). He published his newest English book *Egypt's diplomacy in war, peace, and transition* in February 2020, which seeks to inform future generations about the challenges of statecraft he and his compatriots

faced over the past fifty years.