

# Holding the Line:

## A Strategy for Securing the Philadelphi Corridor





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# Contents

- I. Executive Summary ..... 1**
- II. Egypt’s Strategic Shift Towards Hamas..... 3**
  - A. Egypt’s Crackdown on Hamas and Cross-Border Smuggling (2014-2017)..... 3
  - B. Second Phase: Egypt’s Detente with Hamas (2017-2023)..... 4
    - i. The Hidden Smuggling Factor: The Bedouin Coalition..... 5
    - ii. The Hamas Military Buildup: How Much Did Egypt Know? ..... 5
- III. Israel’s Core Security Needs at the Gaza-Egypt Border..... 6**
  - A. Philadelphi Corridor ..... 6
  - B. Rafah Crossing..... 7
  - C. The Sinai Peninsula ..... 8
- IV. The New Security Puzzle: Threading Egypt’s Optics Needle ..... 8**
- V. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations ..... 9**
  - A. Building on Past Foundations..... 10
  - B. Crafting a Lasting Solution for the Rafah Crossing and Philadelphi Corridor ..... 10
  - C. Key Principles for U.S. Policy towards Egypt ..... 14
  - D. Developing Egypt’s Role in the Emerging Regional Architecture..... 16

## I. Executive Summary

Although often described as a “hostage” or a “ceasefire” deal, any agreement between Israel and Hamas will have to do much more than merely spell out the logistics for the return of the innocent civilians whom the terrorist group has been holding in Gaza for over 14 months or the conditions that will allow the guns to fall silent, finally. Any deal acceptable to Israel will also have to include basic security conditions that will ensure Hamas cannot rearm and regain its strength. Crucial to that goal will be security arrangements for the Philadelphi Corridor—the buffer zone along the roughly eight-mile-long Egypt-Gaza border—and the Rafah Crossing—the border’s primary checkpoint—through which Hamas, for years, smuggled weapons and goods.

The security measures needed to prevent a Hamas resurgence, including physical and technological barriers as well as Israeli freedom of action along the Gaza-Egypt border, will necessarily require buy-in from Cairo. Yet, both prior to October 7 and since, Egypt has preferred to turn a blind eye, at best, to smuggling into Gaza rather than publicly cooperate with Israel to stop it. Getting, and keeping, a good deal in Gaza, therefore, will be not just a function of pressuring Hamas to release hostages and accept a ceasefire but also of Egypt’s degree of obstinance or cooperation.

Israeli officials’ statements that an unsecured Philadelphi Corridor is tantamount to an “[existential threat](#)” to Israel should not be dismissed as hyperbole after the catastrophic events of October 7 and subsequent multifront, Iran-led, war. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has [argued](#) that if Israel withdraws from the Philadelphi Corridor “there will be enormous diplomatic pressure upon [Israel] from the whole world not to return.” Thus, without effective security measures guaranteeing that illicit weapons, money, and raw material transfers are not happening across the Philadelphi Corridor and through the Rafah Crossing, while allowing humanitarian and commercial goods to enter, Israel risks facing a resurgent Hamas and the rollback of its hard-fought tactical successes in dismantling the Iran-backed terror group.

To ensure this, the Philadelphi Corridor’s security will need to be guaranteed by robust physical and technological measures on both the Egyptian and Gazan sides, including but not limited to Egypt’s installation of fortified above- and below-ground barriers, cameras, radar arrays, sensors, watchtowers, and advanced monitoring and detection technology. A robust security regime involving third-party, namely U.S. and/or European, oversight with a designated Israeli role will also be required.

All these measures will require Egyptian support and involvement. Securing those will require a greater appreciation of the complex dynamics motivating Egypt.

However, the events of the years leading up to the October 7 massacre suggest Cairo’s interests and strategy are not always aligned with Israel’s security needs in the Philadelphi Corridor. The complexity of Egypt’s security role vis-à-vis Gaza and its longtime tacit acceptance of Hamas prior to the war, as observed by this paper’s co-author, who spent several years as the head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) International Cooperation Division and met with Egyptian military counterparts multiple times in that capacity, remain greatly underappreciated.

For several years after President Abdel Fateh el-Sisi came to power in 2014, Egypt took a strong stance against Hamas activity along the border. Egypt’s new leadership feared Hamas’s [ties](#) to the then-

[outlawed](#) Muslim Brotherhood and viewed Hamas as a threat to regime stability. This led Cairo to crack down on cross-border smuggling, destroy hundreds of smuggling tunnels, and build a buffer zone along the border. However, facing a growing Islamic State – Sinai Peninsula (IS-SP) threat, in 2017, Egypt adopted a lesser-of-two-evils approach and reconciled with Hamas, successfully inducing it to [break from](#) the Muslim Brotherhood and [refrain](#) from continuing to aid IS-SP. During this time, Hamas’s illicit smuggling of both weapons and materials used to construct weaponry into Gaza increased considerably, likely with the involvement of some Egyptian officials but without Cairo’s approval.

Since the October 7 massacre, Egypt’s security considerations now include a strategic paradox. Egypt retains a strong interest in securing the Gaza-Egypt border to prevent security threats to its homeland, large population outflows, and a resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood inside its borders. However, simultaneously, Egypt has well-founded fears of stoking internal unrest by overtly cooperating with Israel and thereby undermining its image as a stalwart defender of the Palestinian cause.

To overcome this paradox, U.S. policy levers and diplomatic leadership will be needed to incentivize Egypt’s cooperation with Israel to meet the latter’s security needs. This will necessitate U.S. diplomatic leadership to ensure Egypt installs and monitors more smuggling barriers and detection and monitoring equipment fitted with advanced technology. Imperatively, Egypt must also interdict any efforts by tribal militias, Egyptian security personnel, or any actors to breach the corridor, either above- or below-ground, for smuggling or other terror activity. Finally, Egypt should provide an explicit commitment to permit Israel’s freedom of action on the Gazan side of the Philadelphi Corridor as needed to respond to tunnel smuggling and terror threats.

The United States will have to undertake any and all requisite measures to secure Egypt’s assent to these conditions. This should include both threats to withhold foreign military aid and pledges to increase economic aid to secure Egyptian cooperation. U.S. negotiators will also have to be mindful of the importance of Egypt being able to plausibly deny direct collaboration with Israel in order to mitigate domestic backlash. In this respect, Egypt might actually appreciate the United States publicly strongarming it, enabling Egyptian leaders to retain a veneer of plausible deniability and blame U.S. coercion. Additionally, the involvement of third parties, such as the United States and the European Union (EU), to serve as intermediaries between Israel and Egypt in monitoring the border and implementing a ceasefire deal could also help alleviate Egypt’s concerns about direct cooperation with Israel.

Yet, Egypt’s relationship with both the United States and Israel should not be reduced to just the issue of the Philadelphi Corridor. While that remains a pressing priority, securing the Gaza-Egypt border, and Egyptian cooperation in doing so, should be tied to strengthening Egypt’s role in the broader regional architecture.

A new Middle East is emerging from the ashes of Iran’s evaporating proxy strategy. If Egypt can be convinced to overcome its concerns, agree to Israel’s needs, and hold the line along the Philadelphi Corridor, both Egypt and Israel will benefit. It would help ensure that the new Middle East is safer and more peaceful—and that Egypt plays an important role in it.

## II. Egypt's Strategic Shift Towards Hamas

The Egyptian regime's policy towards Hamas over the decade leading up to the October 7 attack can be divided into two periods, each with a widely different strategy: between 2014 and 2017 Egypt worked to neutralize Hamas's cross-border tunnels and crack down on its smuggling and terror activity; but from 2017 onwards, it adopted a policy of détente towards Hamas.

### A. Egypt's Crackdown on Hamas and Cross-Border Smuggling (2014-2017)

Between 2014 and 2017, Egypt, perceiving Hamas as both an operational and ideological threat, conducted an all-out campaign against the terror organization. This decision was motivated primarily by Egyptian concerns about Hamas's links with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement as well as [Hamas-aided terrorism](#) inside of Egypt. Under the new leadership of President Abdel Fateh el-Sisi, Egypt feared Hamas's [ties](#) to the then-[outlawed](#) Muslim Brotherhood movement represented by el-Sisi's predecessor and ideological rival, Mohammed Morsi, and thus saw Hamas as a threat to regime stability. Following Morsi's 2013 ouster, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood leaders were imprisoned, executed, or fled to Qatar and Turkey. Egypt's Supreme Court charged Morsi with collaborating with Hamas and Hezbollah and [sentenced](#) him to death in 2015. Though the sentence was eventually [overturned](#), Morsi [died](#) in Egyptian prison in 2019.

Egypt also feared the then-rampant IS-SP terrorist group, which was [enabled](#) by an increasing volume of terror operatives, know-how, and training provided by Hamas via numerous cross-border tunnels. Major IS-SP terror activity in Egypt during this period included the 2015 bombing of a Russian commercial airliner, killing over 220 people; the [attempted assassinations](#) of senior Egyptian officials, and; in 2017, the bombing of a Sufi mosque in Al-Rawda, [killing](#) over 300 people in the worst terrorist attack in modern Egyptian history. The same year, IS-SP [nearly killed](#) the then-Egyptian Minister of Defense and the then-Minister of the Interior with an anti-tank Kornet missile fired at their helicopter at El-Arish Airport in the Sinai.

These terrorist attacks undermined the regime's stability both directly—through terror plots and assassinations—and indirectly, by undermining the image of strength and stability the regime tried to project to the Egyptian people. They also posed an economic threat, as the Sinai Peninsula abuts the Suez Canal—a key source of Egyptian revenue—and Sinai tourism is an important contributor to the Egyptian economy. All this, combined with fears that IS-SP attacks would spill over into Egypt's main population centers, convinced Cairo that the cross-border tunnels were a national security threat.

In response to these threats, Egypt began actively exerting pressure on Hamas, including initiating a campaign to seal the Gaza-Egypt border. In early 2014, Egypt launched a campaign to eliminate the cross-border tunnels. By March 2014, the Egyptian military [announced](#) that it had destroyed 1,370 cross-border tunnels. In September 2015, the Egyptian military began [flooding](#) the remaining tunnels with seawater. The same year, the Egyptian military [created](#) a buffer zone—which remains in place—between the border fence and Egyptian urban areas, destroying about 3,255 buildings and more than 600 acres of agricultural area along the Egyptian side of the border in the process. The Egyptian military strengthened the barrier on the Gaza border, implemented new means of observation, and deepened cooperation with Israel to thwart tunnel construction.



## B. Second Phase: Egypt's Detente with Hamas (2017-2023)

Egypt's policy towards Hamas shifted in 2017 as Cairo reappraised its approach to the worsening Sinai security situation. Increasingly concerned about IS-SP terrorism, Egypt elected to pursue a warming of relations with Hamas and utilize the terror group in counterterrorism operations against IS-SP. This also represented a continuation of Egyptian efforts since 2014 to drive a wedge between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood—the latter remaining a potential source of instability—with carrots rather than sticks. Egypt's shift also likely reflected Cairo's desire to use engagement with Hamas as a stepping-stone to again be a key mediator in the Palestinian issue and garner leverage vis-à-vis Washington.

The policy change manifested in Egypt [reclassifying](#) Hamas as a “resistance movement” rather than a terrorist organization, followed by the announcement in mid-2017 of a [rapprochement](#) with Hamas. It also led to two [official visits](#) to Cairo by senior Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh, one in January 2017 and another in September 2017, after Haniyeh became the leader of Hamas's political bureau. In May 2017, Hamas leadership [publicly announced](#) that the terror group was severing all ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, paving the way for closer yet relations with Egypt. From that year onward, cooperation between the Egyptian security apparatus and Hamas regarding IS-SP became more pronounced and Hamas's support for IS-SP dissipated.

As part of Egypt's decision to warm ties with Hamas, it loosened restrictions on the cross-border transfer of aid and supplies between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Following several years of routine closures, Egypt permitted the Rafah Crossing to more regularly open for the transfer of goods from 2017 onwards. Egypt's strategic interests in opening the Rafah Crossing—an initiative spearheaded by Egypt's General Intelligence Service (GIS)—were twofold: the increased influence over Hamas that followed from this inducement and the economic profit that some Egyptian personnel stationed around the border crossing likely derived from the cross-border smuggling trade. However, in their public comments, Egyptian officials continued to insist that Egypt's policy was to [prevent](#) arms smuggling between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

The inaccuracy of Egypt's claims that it had stopped cross-border smuggling operations after 2017, as well as those made by Egypt after the October 7 attack that it had [demolished](#) all cross-border tunnels, was revealed during Israel's operations in southern Gaza. During the Rafah offensive, the IDF [located](#) over 200 tunnel shafts and 35 tunnel routes in the immediate vicinity of the Philadelphi Corridor, including at least 25 tunnels that [crossed](#) into Egypt, some large enough for vehicles to transit through.

This newfound Egyptian laxity provided a twofold opportunity for Hamas to exploit. Hamas was able to increase the smuggling of weapons, weapon components, and dual-use materials to prepare its terror army, while also [collecting](#) vast revenues—[reportedly](#) in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually—by [levying taxes](#) on commercial goods, such as clothes and cigarettes, illicitly smuggled in from Egypt. As JINSA has previously [noted](#), the cross-border tunnels were “used to smuggle hundreds of tons of explosives, thousands of rockets, and countless firearms and weapons components [into Gaza].” JINSA's Julian & Jenny Josephson Senior Vice President for Israeli Affairs IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish, former head of the IDF General Staff Operations Branch, has [stated](#) that in addition to weaponry, Hamas exploited the vast tunnel network “to bring in [to Gaza]... financial support ... and even [conduct] communication with [Hamas's] outside leadership ... via couriers.” These smuggling networks thus enabled Hamas to, as JINSA noted in its May report [The October 7 War: Observations, October 2023 –](#)

[May 2024](#), develop “many of the attributes of a modern, standing military—including a conventional force structure, centralized command and control and hierarchical order of battle, heavy weaponry, and even a rudimentary industrial base for producing munitions.”

i. The Hidden Smuggling Factor: The Bedouin Coalition

At the same time as its détente with Hamas, Egypt created and [armed](#) a coalition of Bedouin tribes to counter IS-SP’s presence in the Sinai in another bid to bring stability to Egypt’s east. The newly created [tribal militia](#) was tasked with capturing terror operatives, collecting intelligence, and managing local counterterrorism operations against IS-SP. However, the tribes Egypt selected to lead the militia—the Tarabin and the El Sawraka tribes—both happened to be historically involved in the cross-border Gaza-Egypt criminal smuggling trade. They were soon back at it again.

Egypt’s relaxing of its crackdown on the cross-border tunnels, as well as at least tacit tolerance of the tribes’ illicit activities to keep them on-side in the fight against IS-SP, allowed Hamas-Bedouin cross-border illicit trade to resume and flourish. Bedouin businessman reportedly [generated](#) large profits from the smuggling industry. In addition, the exposure of Egypt’s military and local political leaders to the tribes’ economic networks involved in smuggling materials over, and under, the Philadelphi Corridor likely created favorable conditions for institutionalized corruption among some of the Egyptian security officials overseeing the border areas. The actual role of Egyptian officials in the illicit trade into Gaza, however, remains an open question.

ii. The Hamas Military Buildup: How Much Did Egypt Know?

The full extent of Egypt’s role in Hamas’s military buildup over the several years preceding the October 7 attack falls into three possible categories:

- Smuggling occurred both above-ground across the Philadelphi Corridor and in the cross-border tunnel system without the knowledge or involvement of the Egyptian security and intelligence establishment;
- Hamas conducted its cross-border smuggling in coordination with rogue, corrupt Egyptian security officials in contravention of official Egyptian policy; or
- Most troublingly, that Egypt’s intelligence and security establishment broadly and deliberately turned a blind eye to the smuggling.

Though the degree to which the Egyptian security establishment facilitated Hamas’s force buildup remains unclear, there is no smoking gun to suggest Egypt actively aided in Hamas’s weapons smuggling as a matter of official policy. Nor would doing so serve Cairo’s security interests, given that, despite its reconciliation with Hamas, Egypt still viewed the Muslim Brotherhood-linked terror organization as a primary threat to the regime’s stability. It is also unlikely Egypt’s political leaders would have jeopardized Egypt’s security ties with Israel, which [assisted](#) Egypt in its counterterrorism operations against IS-SP, by formally adopting a policy aiding Hamas’s buildup. In 2017, as Egypt’s détente with Hamas became a central pillar of its Sinai counterterrorism strategy, Egypt also deepened its military-to-military ties with Israel.



The most plausible scenario is that at least some elements of the Egyptian security establishment, likely at the lower level, turned a blind eye to the rampant cross-border smuggling. This tacit acceptance may also have been an effort to strengthen the commitment of Hamas and the Bedouin tribes to Egypt's counter-ISIS policies as part of an informal Egypt-Hamas arrangement that emerged following [rapprochement talks](#) in 2017, or a combination of political aims and institutionalized corruption. It is possible that local Egyptian border and security officials, and Bedouin tribal leaders, in turn coordinated smuggling efforts through an institutionalized corruption system with rogue actors in the GIS, the Egyptian Border Guard Forces (BGF), and the Egyptian police. This scenario would also allow for greater Egyptian plausible deniability regarding Hamas's military build-up when the issue came up in dialogues with Israel and the United States.

### III. Israel's Core Security Needs at the Gaza-Egypt Border

The role that above- and below-ground smuggling, and Egypt's role in allowing it to resume, played in Hamas's ability to equip and fund itself for the October 7 war require Israel to ensure that these channels for illicit resupply into Gaza are permanently cut off. Israel's tactical successes in the Gaza Strip and beyond, against Hezbollah and Iran, have now opened up an opportunity to put in place the security arrangements along the Philadelphi Corridor and at the Rafah Crossing to ensure Hamas cannot rearm: recent [reports](#) suggest that Hamas is now open to Israel remaining along the Philadelphi Crossing for a period of time in a ceasefire agreement.

Part of a push to capitalize on Hamas's newfound pliancy, however, must include the United States exercising diplomatic pressure on Egypt until it fully agrees to take on the security arrangements conducive to Israel's security needs. A fulsome strategy to address Israel's security needs should account for not only future security measures for the Philadelphi Corridor and the Rafah Crossing, but Egypt's Sinai border area more broadly. It is the assessment of the co-author, who spent years working with Egyptian military counterparts on security issues, including Gaza, that the strength or weakness of such arrangements will largely make or break the prospects of a lasting peace and a demilitarized Gaza.

#### A. Philadelphi Corridor

Fundamentally, many of Israel's achievements in Gaza will be reversed over time without a pronounced shift away from the yearslong security arrangement that led the Philadelphi Corridor to become so dangerously porous, both above- and below-ground. Israeli authorities are also reportedly [concerned](#) that, if insufficiently secured, the Philadelphi Corridor may be exploited by terrorists to enter Egypt and then infiltrate into southern Israel to perpetrate attacks on Israeli communities, in the mold of the October 7 attack. As JINSA and the Vandenberg Coalition's Gaza Futures Task Force, a task force of retired U.S. senior officials, noted in its February 2024 report, [The Day After: A Plan For Gaza](#), "permanently dismantling Hamas's military capabilities cannot succeed without a dramatically improved effort to staunch the smuggling of weapons and other military-related goods and equipment across Gaza's border with Egypt."

To meet Israel's minimal security conditions for the Philadelphi Corridor, several elements will be required, including:

- External actors helping provide safeguards—potentially including the United States and/or European partners;
- Israeli involvement in some capacity, such as oversight;
- Israel’s freedom of action along the Gaza side of the border if threats arise, to be acknowledged formally in an agreement involving both Egypt and the United States;
- Greater physical fortifications along the border, such as a physical barrier, sensors, or both, including an underground component; and
- The involvement of advanced detection technology.

Implementing Israel’s world-leading anti-tunnel technology, including sensors able to detect changes in soil and soundwaves [generated](#) by digging, should be utilized as part of these efforts.

## B. Rafah Crossing

Preventing Hamas from reconstituting itself will also require new measures to keep unauthorized materials and persons from being smuggled in and out of the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing.

Important aspects of that arrangement will include: extensive transparency and oversight measures, such as data and video feeds sent to a central location; Israeli oversight, including direct oversight of cargo inspections; and a working group involving—at a minimum—Egypt, Israel, the United States, and potentially European and Palestinian officials to set clearly defined protocols and redress any issues that arise.



Source: [France24](#)

## C. The Sinai Peninsula

Deserved policy focus on the Gaza-Egypt border and efforts to craft an ironclad security apparatus there—essential to prevent Hamas and other Gaza-based terror groups from reconstituting—risk coming at the expense of focus on another critical component: the broader Sinai situation. Regardless of who controls the border and the Rafah Crossing, Egypt’s security establishment will need to rein in any rogue elements within Egypt’s BGF, GIS, and Interior Ministry, and proactively work to prevent Bedouin tribal militias from reestablishing their smuggling shadow economy.

Measures to bolster the Philadelphi Corridor should be complemented by robust Egyptian efforts—extending beyond empty pledges—to end the tribal smuggling infrastructure in the Sinai. Failure to do so risks a return to the blind-eye-turning and tacit acceptance of cross-border smuggling of years past.

## IV. The New Security Puzzle: Threading Egypt’s Optics Needle

At root, Egypt’s post-10/7 security calculus has largely remained the same as it was prior to the October 7 attack, but with a new strategic paradox: Egypt’s need to balance its interest in forging a compromise with Israel to secure the Gaza-Egypt border over the long-term and its fear of provoking internal unrest due to domestic perceptions the government is too friendly with Israel. This will complicate and, without U.S. assistance, stymie efforts to reach a deal in Gaza that meets Israel’s security requirements concerning the Philadelphi Corridor.

The war in Gaza has forced the Egyptian government to grapple with the prospect of large Palestinian refugee inflows, which it is in Egypt’s strong interest to prevent. An influx of Palestinian refugees would imperil Egypt’s already shaky economy, as occurred in January 2008 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians [breached](#) the border and crossed into Egypt, [causing](#) several days of chaos in the Sinai’s border areas, soaring inflation brought on by the population shock, and food and fuel shortages. Egypt also fears a Hamas resurgence that catalyzes and strengthens Muslim Brotherhood activity within its borders. Palestinian refugees—potentially many Muslim Brotherhood supporters among them—spilling over into Egypt by the thousands could also prove politically problematic to the el-Sisi regime. Motivated by these concerns, Egypt even [fortified](#) its border security infrastructure in the first few months of the war, including [constructing](#) a new border wall and buffer zone on its side of the Gaza border in early 2024.

Simultaneously, though, Egypt’s government fears being seen as a collaborator with Israel and abandoning the Palestinian cause, impinging on its ability to deal freely and openly with Israel. The newly re-elected President el-Sisi, while remaining popular, must contend with an Egyptian public increasingly opposed to Egypt-Israel collaboration—never historically popular among Egyptians—in the wake of October 7 and the war in Gaza. The el-Sisi government failing to depict itself as a strong backer of the Palestinian cause could be tantamount to regime suicide—one poll of Egyptians conducted in November and December 2023 indicated that though the Muslim Brotherhood’s popularity remains low, 97 percent of the Egyptian public [favor](#) Arab countries severing all ties with Israel.

The el-Sisi regime's fear of domestic instability being inflamed by Muslim Brotherhood elements, as took place in 2012, explains bombastic Egyptian [threats](#) to suspend its 1979 peace treaty with Israel and the regime's strident [opposition](#) to Israel remaining along the border. It also explains Cairo's ostensible resistance to a series of Israeli requests over the past year, including:

- Broad [joint monitoring](#) of the Philadelphi Corridor;
- Egypt [installing](#) monitoring equipment along the border to be accessed by both countries; and
- That sensors be installed along the border, with Israel [retaining](#) the right to send surveillance drones into the buffer zone if the sensors are tripped.

It is possible, though, that these media leaks suggesting Egyptian officials' intransigence is purely for domestic consumption, not a true reflection of Egypt's positions. Signaling a willingness to cooperate behind the scenes, Egyptian officials [reportedly](#) privately indicated an openness to work with the United States to construct an underground barrier under a ceasefire deal and reportedly [acquiesced](#), in theory, to the covert installation of sensors along the border.

The dissonance between Egypt's reported private messages on cooperation and public obstinacy—including bellicose Egyptian officials' [statements](#) threatening to sever ties with Israel—may also reflect an internal divergence in how various elements of Egypt's security establishment perceive the best path forward. Elements of Egypt's security apparatus tacitly accepted much of Hamas's buildup by permitting the tribal-led smuggling cross-border industry to blossom in the six years preceding October 7, and those elements have an interest in smuggling resuming in any "Day After" scenario.

To achieve a solution in Gaza that prevents Hamas from rearming and reconstituting itself, the United States and Israel will need to ensure that those elements within Egypt's security apparatus who are prepared to return to the pre-10/7 status quo do not prevail and encourage, by any means necessary, Egyptian cooperation with Israel's security needs, all while finding diplomatic solutions that can allow Cairo to maintain plausible deniability and outwardly distance itself from new security measures along the Gaza-Egypt border.

## V. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Any ceasefire deal, and subsequent arrangements regarding the Gaza Strip, must assuage Israel's legitimate security concerns regarding the Philadelphi Corridor. Steadfast U.S. engagement and involvement, likely including some role on the ground, will be indispensable to ensuring conditions are prohibitive for Hamas to reconstitute itself as it has after past ceasefires.

This will require U.S. policymakers to recognize a series of key principles and policy levers to coax, and, as needed, coerce, Egypt into full compliance with the Gaza-Egypt border security regime that meets Israel's security requirements and precludes Hamas from reconstituting. These include: leveraging military-to-military ties to create conditions conducive to greater candor; an appreciation of Egypt's need to thread a tight, highly consequential needle with domestic audiences in its decision-making; continually re-assessing U.S. foreign aid levels to Egypt; ensuring the full termination of any Egyptian complicity in cross-border smuggling, and; keeping the Philadelphi Corridor front-and-center in both Congress and the incoming administration. U.S. support for Israel's freedom of action will also be a key

bulwark against inevitable mounting international pressure campaigns questioning or downright rejecting Israel’s right to self-defense in the Gaza Strip after any deal has been reached.

## A. Building on Past Foundations

Fortunately, Israel, Egypt, and the United States need not start from a clean slate in adjudicating future border arrangements. Previous Israel-Egypt agreements regarding the Egypt-Gaza border provide a sound basis, in *pro forma* terms if not regarding substance, on which to model future plans.

- The 1979 peace [treaty](#) between the two countries contained, both in Article II of the treaty and in the treaty’s annex, provisions relating to the “Stationing of Forces” which placed limits on quantitative and qualitative (such as brigade, battalion, and artillery restrictions) aspects of Egyptian and Israeli force deployment along the border.
- Israel’s 2005 military withdrawal from Gaza was [accompanied](#) by the Agreed Arrangements Regarding the Deployment of a Designated Force of Border Guards along the Border in the Rafah Area, which mandated Egypt’s assistance in helping securing the border, authorized a fixed number of BGF officers to be deployed, and specified that the BGF was permitted to deploy ground radars and a specified number of sentry posts, watchtowers, and logistics facilities on the Egyptian side.
- During a November 2021 meeting, a follow-on agreement to the 2005 accord was reached in Egypt between Egyptian and Israeli military delegations, the latter of which included the co-author. Though the [details](#) of the agreement announced at the time only referred to Israel “agree[ing] to allow Egypt to increase the presence of its armed forces” on the Egyptian side of the border, the authors can reveal publicly for the first time that the deal enabled Egypt to roughly double the number of towers and personnel along its side of the border.

U.S. efforts should explore the extent of Egyptian implementation of these measures, and the 2005 and 2021 BGF agreements should serve as the umbrella framework for any agreement concerning Egypt’s security measures along the Philadelphi Corridor. However, merely expanding Egypt’s presence, if many of its personnel tacitly accept, or participate in, cross-border smuggling, will prove to be a fool’s errand—requiring robust U.S. and international oversight in any future arrangement.

## B. Crafting a Lasting Solution for the Rafah Crossing and Philadelphi Corridor

A secure Philadelphi Corridor and Rafah Crossing are irreplaceable elements of a demilitarized Gaza and a secure Israel. One critical component of such an arrangement will be ironclad commitments by Egypt, with third-party oversight and compliance verification, regarding the Philadelphi Corridor and the Rafah Crossing to ensure Hamas cannot reconstruct the yearslong oxygen pipeline which enabled its vast military buildup. This must include far more than efforts to interdict weapons, and involve extensive screening of inbound goods and persons to prevent dual-use materials from being smuggled in and used by Hamas to rebuild itself and rise from the rubble.

Without the requisite security implements in place, Hamas’s inevitable efforts to reconstitute itself via renewed arms smuggling could see fruits in the future. Two indispensable elements of a secure Philadelphi Corridor are the implementation of technologically advanced physical measures on the



Egyptian side of the border, below the border, and on the Gazan side of the border—and an agreement between Egypt and the United States, at a minimum, that Egypt will permit Israel to act along the border as necessary to thwart smuggling and secure the border.

### **Physical and Technological Measures**

Guided by Israel’s input (and potentially technology), and American and third-party oversight and involvement, Egypt should be urged—and coerced, if necessary—to install a suite of physical above- and below-ground barriers, sensors, cameras, radars, and other monitoring and detection equipment on its side of the Philadelphi Corridor. Among the technologies it could employ are Israeli-made advanced sensors, used in Israel’s own underground border with Gaza, which use technologies [funded](#) by the United States and which are [capable](#) of detecting digging via soundwaves and soil data.

Though Egypt previously attempted to build an underground barrier in the early 2010s, as JINSA has previously [documented](#) in detail, its efforts were ostensibly thwarted by impenetrable underground rock formations, and smugglers were reportedly easily able to penetrate the parts of the barrier that were constructed using rudimentary blowtorches. A duplicative Egyptian effort to construct an insufficiently sophisticated barrier, both above- and below-ground, risks a reversion to pre-10/7 cross-border smuggling dynamics. As a result, Egypt should be pressured by U.S. policymakers into soliciting external—namely U.S. and Israeli—advice, with U.S. funding helping bridge capability and will deficits where appropriate. Israel must also retain a monitoring role.

Physical above-ground and below-ground barriers should be constructed along the entire corridor, and the barriers should be equipped with advanced technological components. Egypt should also increase the quantity of observation posts and cameras on its side of the border, and its camera feeds should route to a mutual operations center involving the United States. Israel should maintain access to the information amalgamated at this center, but the center can be *de jure* an Egypt-U.S. initiative formally excluding Israel if Egypt insists on keeping this differentiated from any cooperation with Israel. Additionally, this effort may best, to accommodate Egypt’s domestic sensitivities, be structured as a covert effort. This new security arrangement should utilize the most advanced technological solutions and enhanced inspection protocols, potentially under contract to trusted actors with extensive expertise and experience managing customs and border security.

U.S. pressure will be needed to strongarm Egypt into accepting such an arrangement, which, according to evidence reviewed by the co-author, Egypt has refused to acquiesce to in the past. Such external pressure may counterintuitively be useful for Egypt for domestic optic purposes, as its leadership can claim the United States has forced its hand, all while Egypt readily undertakes measures that are in the Egyptian regime’s own interest.

### **Diplomatic Measures and Israel’s Freedom of Action**

Physical and technological measures, no matter how sophisticated, will not suffice to secure the border absent human responsiveness—as the events of October 7 tragically revealed. Israel has learned and re-learned the tragic lessons of the inevitable consequences that follow when it entrusts security to international actors or the vicissitudes of even its friendlier neighbors. No longer can Israel afford to delegate security matters at the Philadelphi Corridor to other actors altogether, with the October 7 massacre serving as a tragic wake-up call to the insufficiency of technological and physical barriers without considerable human safeguards.



Any future security regime for the Philadelphi Corridor must involve Israel in some capacity, regardless of its degree of physical presence. An agreement must make explicit that if the array of radars, cameras, and sensors detect tunnel construction or above-ground smuggling channels, Israel will resume military activity along the border to thwart these smuggling attempts with no questions asked. This agreement should take the form of a covert arrangement, such as a side letter to a broader U.S.- and Egypt-brokered ceasefire agreement (as reportedly [took place](#) in Israel's ceasefire deal with Lebanon) affirming U.S. support for Israel's freedom of action. Such a letter should also secure Egypt's guarantees that it will permit Israel to act as needed along the Gazan side of the border and carve out an Israeli monitoring and detection role vis-à-vis the Philadelphi Corridor.

The agreement must, as discussed, also involve the filtering of information to a joint operations command-and-control room, mutually run by Egypt and the United States with Israeli involvement, including not only the sharing of technical info, i.e., the output of cameras, radars, sensors, but also intelligence sharing and real-time deliberations as smuggling threats arise. Egypt refused to agree to such an initiative in the past, as it does not want its officials to be involved in such an arrangement alongside Israeli counterparts, primarily due—in the judgment of the co-author—to domestic political sensitivities. Even the covert existence of a bilateral initiative, were it to leak, could prove damaging to Egypt and impede or altogether compromise its ability to engage proactively with Israel thereafter. Therefore, this initiative may best be structured as an Egypt-U.S. initiative or Egypt-EU initiative with Israeli engagement occurring exclusively behind the scenes.

To this end, U.S. policymakers should create a working group involving Egypt and the United States, and potentially third-party actors such as the EU, to share intelligence regarding the Philadelphi Corridor. Though Israel's involvement in this group would be an inevitable feature, its involvement may be better suited behind the scenes, with the working group outwardly presented as operating under American auspices.

Drawing on years of experiences as a lead member of Israeli military delegations to Israel, the co-author believes that communication between Israel and Egypt has been most fruitful when conducted through intelligence channels. Typically, the two countries' respective relevant regional commands, the IDF's Southern Command and Egypt's Second Field Army, have been prohibited from direct contact. Therefore, the working group should foster dialogue through reliable and constructive intelligence and military backchannels, including between these two key entities. These efforts are likely to yield the most fruits when tied to the aforementioned joint operations room, which could also serve as an effective but inconspicuous meeting point for representatives from both nations.

### **New Rafah Crossing Terminal**

The United States should pressure Egypt to support an international terminal at the Rafah Crossing supervised by a third party, namely the EU and/or the United States, with Israel playing an intelligence and oversight role behind the scenes to accommodate Egypt's domestic sensitivities. In addition to effective detection and prevention mechanisms to prevent the future construction of cross-border tunnels, such an arrangement should include clearly delineated standard operating procedures for civil administration and security responsibilities concerning control of the Rafah Crossing.

As part of this new security regime, it will be imperative to block, or highly restrict, dual-use materials from entering into Gaza. As JINSA has previously [noted](#), fertilizers that Israel long permitted to enter the West Bank for agricultural purposes are now banned due to repeated instances of terrorists using them to create improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Additionally, other chemical compounds which can

be used to form explosive materials must be restricted from entering Gaza, and clear protocols should be outlined regarding the import of drilling equipment and cement, long used by Hamas to build its vast terror tunnel network.

Egypt's sensitivity to internal dynamics should inform U.S. policymakers' approach to the Rafah Crossing, which has become a highly visible symbol of Egypt's relationship with Gaza both prior to the war and throughout its duration. During peak hostilities in Gaza, Egyptian leaders were guided by an overarching fear of being seen as complicit with Israel. Now, a ceasefire deal may afford Egypt greater latitude in what it feels it can and cannot do with respect to cooperation with Israel. However, Egypt remains leery of outward compliance and the signal it would send to domestic audiences.

As a result, Egypt will almost certainly reject any arrangement for the Rafah Crossing in which Israel is seen as retaining a highly visible presence. In addition, for Egypt to avoid appearing totally complicit with Israel, it may be necessary for negotiators to carve out some role for an outward-facing Palestinian entity. Press reports from early December suggest that the latest ceasefire negotiations push in Gaza have involved an Egyptian [insistence](#) on the Palestinian Authority (PA), at least nominally, controlling the Rafah Crossing.

Fortunately, history provides a blueprint on which to base creative solutions to satisfy both Egypt and Israel's security needs, while still enabling Egypt to plausibly deny direct collaboration with Israel and mitigate domestic backlash. As part of Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza, Egypt, Israel, the United States, and the EU forged an agreement in November 2005 called the Agreed Principles for Rafah Crossing. It created an EU body, the European Union Border Assistance Mission to the Rafah Crossing Point (EUBAM Rafah), which help the PA administer the Rafah Crossing following Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza and prior to Hamas seizing power in early 2007. The [agreement](#) further specified that, among other provisions:

- Operations would be conducted by the PA and Egypt on their respective sides of the border;
- EUBAM Rafah would have the authority to re-inspect any person, vehicle, or item as it wished;
- The PA and Israel would conduct regular intelligence sharing, cooperation, and regular meetings, with Israel vetting the names of all potential workers at the crossing;
- Incoming goods would first be cleared by PA custom officials at the Kerem Shalom Crossing under the supervision of Israeli custom officials;
- Cameras would be installed to monitor the search process, with the video and data feed transmitted to a liaison office overseen by EUBAM Rafah;
- Technology would be heavily utilized to inspect incoming vehicles, including sonic imagery, gamma detection and millimeter wave imagery, as well as bore scope equipment to locate contraband material;
- The PA would notify Israel in advance about the entry into Gaza of non-Palestinian individuals, to be limited to diplomats, foreign investors, and foreign representatives of recognized international organizations; and that
- Egypt, Israel, the PA, and the United States would participate in a security working group to adjudicate issues and refine procedures.

During its short-lived existence, EUBAM Rafah consisted of some 130 monitors who [assisted](#) the PA with running the Gazan side of the Rafah Crossing and facilitated coordination with Israel. Even after it shuttered its Gaza operations in June 2007 amid Hamas’s violent takeover of Gaza, EUBAM Rafah continued to train Palestinian officials in the West Bank to develop techniques to impede weapons smuggling, use X-ray technology, and spot counterfeit documents. Though the presently [understaffed](#) EUBAM Rafah would need to be injected with resources and a clear mandate, its role could help surreptitiously bridge the political and security gaps between Egypt, the United States, and Israel—namely addressing Egypt’s need to not be seen as actively collaborating with Israel. In private meetings with both Egyptian and Israeli officials, and representatives from EUBAM Rafah itself, U.S. officials have reportedly [raised](#) the prospect of again tasking EUBAM Rafah with overseeing the Rafah Crossing.

### C. Key Principles for U.S. Policy towards Egypt

Egypt’s role as a strategic pillar for Israel’s security and the U.S. role in the region and beyond must not be overlooked by either the United States or Israel. The consequences for doing so would be devastating both for the regional arena and for Israel’s medium- and long-term security needs. In the near term, proactive U.S. leadership in setting the diplomatic groundwork for a future security arrangement for the Gaza-Egypt border and the Rafah Crossing is urgently needed, but must build on a set of sound principles:

#### **Leverage Military-to-Military Ties**

U.S. military engagement should be leveraged to generate, where possible, alternative avenues for more candid discussions with Egyptian officials. Military dialogue is likely to yield more transparent and productive conversations than political or diplomatic ones, with a greater focus on practical steps to advance security in the Sinai, particularly along Egypt’s Gaza border. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which now [includes](#) Israel in its area of responsibility, provides a good conduit for communicating U.S. and Israeli security concerns to Egypt. CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla has already [traveled](#) to Egypt [twice](#) in 2024. He also has a solid foundation in working on issues related to securing the Gaza border having, during a 2022 visit, previously [discussed](#) “methods to improve border security, opportunities to enhance partnered training for counterterrorism operations, and opportunities to strengthen the U.S.-Egypt military partnership.”

#### **Factor in Egyptian Domestic Sensitivities**

Due to Egypt’s aversion to public-facing measures that could be perceived as aiding Israel, all efforts should be taken to provide the Egyptian regime with the plausible deniability it seeks to save face. One way to accomplish this would be for the United States to publicly “strongarm” Egypt, demanding that it undertake measures that the Egyptian regime would otherwise seek to enact itself. Doing so would help enable Egypt to rebut claims it has abandoned the Palestinian cause and ditched its principles for expediency’s sake.

#### **Engage Credible Third Parties at Rafah Crossing**

In order to dispel Hamas of any hopes that it can recuperate and again threaten Israel with terror attacks, effective control—by actors other than exclusive Egypt or any Palestinian entity—of the Rafah Crossing’s operations will be vital. A robust oversight and monitoring regime involving outside parties, such as initiatives modeled on EUBAM Rafah, will require responsible, competent oversight of inspections and the use of advanced detection and monitoring technology. EUBAM Rafah’s short-lived

success provides a historic blueprint for the sort of capable entity that will be required to secure Rafah Crossing from inevitable cross-border smuggling efforts.

### **Continually Re-Assess U.S. Foreign Aid Levels**

A key U.S. policy lever is foreign military aid to Egypt. Egypt is among the world's top recipients of U.S. foreign military financing—[receiving](#) roughly \$1.3 billion in U.S. military aid in 2024. In the co-author's estimation, based on dozens of meetings with Egyptian military counterparts, withholding most or all U.S. funding would put Egypt's military on too precarious a footing. However, some portion of this funding can and should be conditioned on proactive Egyptian cooperation with Israel and the United States in the "Day After" in Gaza, primarily with respect to the Philadelphi Corridor. Conversely, U.S. pledges to increase economic aid could stimulate greater Egyptian cooperation with Israel regarding the Egypt-Gaza border.

### **Work to Terminate Any Egyptian Complicity in Smuggling Networks**

As part of any deal, the United States should make clear to Egypt that continued U.S. assistance will be conditional on Egyptian cooperation in securing the Gaza border. The Egyptian regime, uncomfortable as it may be, must be convinced to hold accountable the various self-interested, and oftentimes rogue, elements in the multifaceted and incongruous Egyptian security establishment, including senior, mid, and low-level officials in the BGF, GIS, and Interior Ministry. If it fails to do so, and Egyptian officials are again complicit in reinvigorating the Sinai-Gaza smuggling trade, the United States must be prepared to take action against Egypt, including withholding funds and instantiating other punitive measures.

Egypt and Israel, with U.S. mediation, have successfully resolved thorny, sensitive security issues in the past—including in the wake of the 1979 peace treaty. U.S. policymakers should seek to calibrate a more effective [role](#) for the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) task force, a peacekeeping instrument created two years after the 1979 treaty to ensure Egypt and Israel's compliance with the deal's terms—including with overflights and reconnaissance patrols throughout the eastern Sinai, and manned observation posts—but which should be repurposed to verify Egyptian complicity with future arrangements regarding the border and smuggling activity. The United States must help ensure the full implementation of the military annex to the 1979 treaty and proactively work to prevent, and punish, violations of any kind throughout the Sinai region. U.S. success in this regard will represent a crucial element of maintaining stability in the Sinai and keeping Israel secure. U.S. troops and funding already provide critical foundations for the MFO, including in the form of the U.S. military's Task Force Sinai contingent, and should be leveraged.

### **Keep U.S. Policymakers' Attention on the Philadelphi Corridor**

Once a deal is reached for a ceasefire in Gaza, even a temporary one, policymakers are likely to divert attention elsewhere—a natural tendency but significant mistake. To help streamline the process of establishing a responsible security regime on the border, Congress should hold hearings examining Egypt's future role in Gaza-Egypt border security, assessing the various dynamics, agencies, and players which influence Egypt's security decision-making, and exploring specific policy measures to guarantee Egypt's compliance. Congress also should utilize recently passed [legislation](#) requiring the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to submit a report to Congress overviewing steps that Israel, Egypt, and the United States can undertake to enhance security measures along the border. This report, which should serve as the springboard for relevant congressional hearings and briefings,

should also include regular reporting requirements on the degree of Egypt's cooperation with Israel and efforts to prevent smuggling.

#### D. Developing Egypt's Role in the Emerging Regional Architecture

Sound U.S. policy towards Egypt will require American policymakers to have a more fulsome appreciation of the complex dynamics governing Egypt's security establishment and the Egyptian strategic calculus. U.S. policymakers should assess Egypt's strategy through a wider lens, including Egypt's ambitions to regain its historically dominant role in the Middle East as *Um al-Dunya* (Mother of the World), its growing security challenges, and its deteriorating demographic and economic situation, all of which require greater U.S. policy understanding and attention.

Egypt should be engaged where possible in the emergent U.S.-led regional security architecture, which will require the incoming administration to take on a more active role in the region and engage Arab partners to defend against and confront the Iranian threat axis. These efforts could include a greater Egyptian role in countering Houthi attacks on maritime shipping, a direct strategic interest for the el-Sisi regime given that it collects significant revenues from the Suez Canal—which commercial ships are increasingly avoiding, along with the entire Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, to steer clear of the past year's numerous Houthi projectile strikes targeting commercial vessels. Other promising endeavors include expanding Israel-Egypt energy trade and exploration, including building on existing cooperation in natural gas endeavors. The United States has a strong [strategic interest](#) in promoting a prosperous and secure Eastern Mediterranean, which Egypt can play a key [role](#) in.

More immediately, though, U.S. leaders must prioritize working with Israel and Egypt to craft a suitable long-term security arrangement for the Philadelphi Corridor and the Rafah Crossing. Failure to do so risks undermining Israel's tactical achievements to date, as well as convergent U.S., Israeli, and Egyptian national interests in restoring stability and security to both sides of the border axis and the Israeli homeland.



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