

Egypt: From Palestine to Tahrir Square

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WHAT EGYPTIANS OWE PALESTINIANS

Since the start of Israel's latest assault on Gaza, the Egyptian regime has once again come into the spotlight. Many are wondering why Cairo is effectively supporting Israel's genocidal war by shutting down the Rafah Crossing.

The regime's position is understandable if one takes into consideration how the powers in Cairo perceive the Palestinians: as a source of threat, instability, and inspiration for Egyptians to revolt. The Palestinian cause has always been a radicalizing factor for the Egyptian public. Most, if not all, turning points in the history of dissent of the most populous Arab nation were, either directly or indirectly, the product of a chain reaction triggered by Palestinian resistance and popular mobilization.

FROM 1968 TO THE 1977 BREAD UPRISING

Most of the literature that discusses 1968, the year of global revolt, tends to focus on the French May and the rise of social movements in Europe and the US. However, the Arab world had its own 1968, which is seldom discussed.

Disillusioned with the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser following the 1967 military defeat at the hands of Israel, Egyptian school students and workers – particularly in Helwan, south of Cairo, one of the historical hotbeds of industrial militancy – joined university students in mass protests that took to the streets in February 1968 demanding accountability for the army's top brass and for Nasser himself. This rebellion was put down with repression, but also with promises of democratic reforms, which Nasser declared in his so-called 30 March Manifesto.

Another wave of anti-regime protests broke out in November of the same year in Alexandria, stronger than the one in February, turning the coastal city streets into a battle zone with the security forces. Army helicopters were called in, flying at low altitude to terrorize the students. Newspapers were quick to denounce the protesters as "Israeli agents."

Those two waves of protests were among the primary factors that pushed Nasser to declare the "War of Attrition" against the Israeli occupation troops in Sinai. But they also marked the start of the "[Third Wave of Egyptian Communism](#)." New dissident organizations began to coalesce and played a central role in the student rebellions of 1971-73, which pressured Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, into launching a limited war to liberate parts of the Sinai Peninsula.

The war provided Sadat with some clout to temporarily pose as a national liberator, but soon the social question came to the forefront. In 1974, Sadat embarked on the regime's first attempt at neoliberal transition, dubbed the "Open Door Policy" or *Infitah*. The following year, the labor movement began fighting back, with mass strikes in Helwan, Shubra, and Mahalla.

The strike wave and student protests continued to pave the road to the [1977](#) "Bread Intifada," which

saw a national strike and two days of street battles with the police across the country, triggered by austerity measures. Sadat had to annul his neoliberal decrees and send in the army to put down the uprising.

Palestine was always present in the background as a revolutionizing factor. The March 1968 *Karameh* battle that saw the Fedayeen defeat an Israeli force on the east bank of the Jordan River provided a source of inspiration for the newly rising social movement in Egypt. Student protesters drew comparisons between the heroic resistance of the Palestinians and the dismal performance of the conventional Egyptian and Arab armies in 1967. Such comparisons were regularly brought up in the following years, as students took on Sadat denouncing his procrastination to fight a war of liberation. The message was: if the Palestinians could do it, why not us too?

The social movement—which was born out of these events and caused the chain reaction that eventually led to the 1977 uprising—was spearheaded by alumni of left-wing student groups dubbed the “Supporters of the Palestinian Revolution Societies.”

After crushing the uprising, Sadat rushed to hold a peace treaty with Israel, desperate for US support to maintain his regime. He was assassinated in [1981](#). Hardly anyone showed up for [his funeral](#), and his assassins cited his treason and selling out the Palestinians as their main motive.

FROM THE 1987 FIRST PALESTINIAN INTIFADA TO THE 1992 FIRST EGYPTIAN “WAR ON TERROR”

The defeat of the 1977 uprising was in effect the demise of the Third Communist Wave, though its official end is usually marked with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist block in 1991.

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The 1980s in Egypt were stagnant years, not just in relation to the economy, but also when it came to social struggles. Spontaneous outbursts of anti-regime protests occurred, mostly on university campuses, triggered by the Palestinian cause.

With the outbreak of the First Palestinian Intifada, however, political dissent revived. [Protests](#) engulfed Egyptian campuses and the professional syndicates in solidarity with Palestinians, soon clashing with the regime’s security forces. These clashes generated anger and demands for democracy, the dismantling of the security apparatus, and the severing of ties with Israel, which had established a diplomatic mission in Giza, walking distance from Cairo University.

The protests were so strong that Hosni Mubarak’s Minister of Information, Safwat el-Sharif, issued directives to the State TV to limit the coverage of Palestine-related news. The regime also used Yasser Arafat’s support of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to smear and demonize the Palestinians.

The US-led 1991 Gulf War and the ensuing Pax Americana dealt a crushing blow to the Palestinian intifada and emboldened the US proxies in the region, including Mubarak.

We cannot separate the containment of the first Palestinian Intifada from the start of the Oslo Process and the empowerment of the local Arab regimes. It is not a coincidence that Egypt’s first War on Terror was launched in 1992, in the same year that the regime embarked on its neoliberal transition under the sponsorship of the IMF and the World Bank. Though the declared goal was

fighting an Islamist insurgency by the Gamaa Islamiya and the Islamic Jihad, the regime targeted all shades of dissent.

My undergraduate university years started in 1995, at the height of the counterinsurgency. Cairo was under police occupation around the clock—checkpoints, random searches, assassinations, mass arrests. Opposition political parties were under siege. Industrial actions plummeted. Professional syndicates were brought under state control. Dissidents were tried in kangaroo courts. And no one could whisper Mubarak's name, either in a protest chant, a newspaper article, or a phone conversation.

How did we get from such a situation to an uprising that overthrew Mubarak and his family a decade later, in 2011? Once again, it was Palestine.

FROM THE 2000 SECOND PALESTINIAN INTIFADA TO THE 2011 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

The outbreak of the Second Intifada, on September 28, 2000, sent shockwaves through the region, including Egypt. Arabs saw their regimes either as helpless to stop Israel's aggression or, more accurately, as complicit in the subjugation of the Palestinians.

Through the rising satellite TV stations like Al-Jazeera, millions of Egyptians watched live images of the Israeli atrocities and of Palestinian children taking on tanks right in their own homes. People immediately began drawing parallels between the oppression of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli apartheid regime and the repression Egyptians were facing under Mubarak's rule. They concluded that if those kids can take on the mighty Israeli army tanks, we can take on Mubarak's police armored vehicles.

Mass solidarity protests broke out across Egyptian university campuses during the first week of October 2000. Even high school students and kindergarteners took to the streets waving Palestinian flags. The professional syndicates, which had been dormant in previous years, saw a revival of activism. But this resurgence of street politics was met with brute repression. The police cracked down on the protests and conducted mass arrests of student organizers. This was my first experience being detained and tortured by the State Security Police.

The protests died down temporarily, only to reignite in April 2002 as Ariel Sharon sent his tanks into the West Bank, leaving a trail of blood and carnage in Jenin and other cities. For two days, Egyptian students fought the police in running street battles in Giza, in what was dubbed the "Cairo University Intifada." This was my first time hearing thousands chanting against Mubarak: "Hosni Mubarak is just like Sharon. He's the same figure! He's the same color!"

The protest wave was put down again by force, but something was already changing in the public mood. The wall of fear Mubarak had erected in the previous two decades was slowly crumbling. Activist organizations on campuses and beyond were also growing, linking the regional (Palestine and Iraq) to the local.

With the invasion of Iraq, tens of thousands took to the streets in the capital and the provinces, in what amounted to be the biggest protests witnessed by Egypt since the 1977 uprising. Again, two days of running battles with the security forces in downtown Cairo saw protesters burning Mubarak's posters, tearing down banners of his ruling National Democratic Party, and fighting the riot troops with rocks just like the Palestinians. Tahrir Square was captured for two days, in what was to be a dress rehearsal for the uprising a decade later.

A new generation of activists has been born in Egypt, who have a long road ahead of

them to fully revive the revolutionary movement. And once again, we owe it to Palestine.

For three successive years, these mobilizations around Palestine and Iraq created for Egyptian activists a margin where they could organize and hold street actions, which were once redlines. It is no coincidence that the anti-Mubarak *Kefaya* (Arabic for “Enough”) movement launched on the heels of such mobilizations, in [December 2004](#), by the same organizers who led the pro-Palestine and anti-Iraq war movements. The regional was becoming the local.

Kefaya organized street actions, attracting students, middle-class professionals and intellectuals, but hardly generating roots among the Egyptian working class. However, the movement adopted a conscious strategy of spreading the visuals of dissent, through the mainstream media and the internet to the widest audience possible at the time, to instigate a [domino effect](#). Such visuals of dozens (and sometimes hundreds) chanting against Mubarak and burning his posters electrified the country. They destroyed Mubarak’s taboo once and for all and were a message to the public that one could take on those in authority, whether in government or in the workplace.

It is in that context that 3000 female garment workers went on strike in Mahalla, in the heart of the Nile Delta, in December 2006, over economic demands. They encouraged their male colleagues to act, and soon the entire textile mill went on strike. Their victory after three days triggered the biggest and most sustained [strike action](#) witnessed in Egypt since 1946.

These strikes escalated into two provincial uprisings in 2008, in [Mahalla](#) and [Borollos](#), where protesters brought down Mubarak’s posters. The strikers quickly transcended the realm of [economics into the political](#). Industrial organizers were also regularly taking part in [Palestine solidarity actions](#).

This was the social movement that paved the way to the January 2011 uprising that finally toppled Hosni Mubarak. In Tahrir, Palestinian flags were present in almost every mobilization, while Israeli leaders mourned the loss of Mubarak and watched with fear how the Egyptian revolution unfolded. That same year, the Israeli embassy in Cairo was stormed twice by revolutionaries, who demanded the end of diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv.

THE 2013 COUNTERREVOLUTION

The military coup, led by then-Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, sought to put an end to the revolution, and to any cause adopted by the revolutionaries. On top of the list naturally came Palestine, the principal radicalizing factor for Egyptian youth.

As Sisi embarked on his counterrevolutionary [massacres](#) in the second half of 2013, he also tightened the siege of Gaza, demonized Hamas in the media, and effectively [collaborated](#) with Israeli in its 2014 war on Gaza.

Tel Aviv met the news of Sisi’s coup with enthusiasm, struck close political and economic friendship with the new regime, and [marketed](#) Sisi in the US and the West as the only hope to save Egypt from “the terrorists.” In return, Sisi allowed the Israeli air force to operate in Sinai, conducting hundreds of [strikes](#) against alleged terror targets.

Hamas, however, proved resilient, despite the Egyptian-Israeli siege. Facing heavy casualties in his [counterinsurgency campaign](#) in the Sinai Peninsula against ISIS, Sisi had to turn to Hamas by 2017 to help him police the border, and to cut the flow of Gazan Salafis—who hate Hamas—into Egypt to take part in the insurgency against the Egyptian military.

Despite this rapprochement and the relative easing of the siege, the humanitarian situation remained dismal in Gaza. Sisi meanwhile tried to present himself as a credible mediator to the newly elected US President Joe Biden, capable of brokering truces or peace settlements between Israel and the Palestinians, in an attempt to regain some of Egypt's lost regional clout.

The outbreak of the war last October saw Sisi shutting down the Rafah Crossing once again, and only allowing a fraction of those injured in Gaza to leave for Egypt to seek medical treatment, and only after Israel's approval of the list of names. The minimal aid supplies trickling into Gaza are first searched by Israeli troops before the caravans are allowed into Gaza. Cairo is in effect part of Israel's war effort.

But among Egyptians, overwhelming support for the Palestinians remains. [Palestinian flags](#) are seen on cars, shops, and merchandise. Boycott campaigns targeting [international brands](#) which support Israel are still expanding. Abu Obaida, the Qassam Brigades' spokesperson, has become [a sensation](#) among the Egyptian public.

To the horror of the regime, the Israeli assault on Gaza is slowly reviving political activism, which Sisi had [killed](#) over the past decade. During the first week of the assault in October, spontaneous street protests broke out in Cairo and the provinces which surprised the security forces. The university campuses, where dissent had been squashed for years, saw demonstrations by students who had never protested before.

The regime tried to hijack the protest wave and called for state-sponsored protests, on 20 October, to support Sisi's diplomatic efforts, depicting him as a national security defender. It backfired. For the [first time](#) in roughly a decade, Egyptians flocked en masse to Tahrir Square, repeating the chants of the January 2011 revolution. After they were dispersed by the riot troops, protesters tore down Sisi's posters in downtown Cairo and brief street battles ensued with the security forces.

The protests have subsided, for now at least. But a rock has already been thrown in the still waters. A [new generation of activists](#) has been born in Egypt, who have a long road ahead of them to fully revive the revolutionary movement. And once again, we owe it to Palestine.

Hossam el-Hamalawy

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