

War on Gaza: Arab Despots' Failure to Stand Up to Israel Could Fuel an Explosion

As the Palestinian death toll mounts, anger is boiling across the region. The rulers of Egypt and the Gulf states should beware

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The world is watching a famine develop in Gaza that could kill many times more than the [24,000 Palestinians](#) who have already perished in [Israel's](#) merciless blitzkrieg.

Last month, more than 90 percent of Gaza's population was [estimated](#) to be facing high levels of acute food insecurity, categorised as Phase 3 or crisis levels. Of those, more than 40 percent were in a state of emergency (Phase 4), and more than 15 percent in a catastrophic situation, the fifth and final phase.

The famine is projected to develop rapidly in the coming weeks. By early February, if nothing changes, the entire population of Gaza is [projected](#) to be in the crisis phase, half in the emergency phase, and more than half a million people in the catastrophic phase, with households experiencing an extreme lack of food, starvation and exhaustion.

These are not the projections of the [Palestinian](#) health ministry, dismissed collectively by western media as " Hamas-run", but of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), drawing on data from [UN agencies](#) and NGOs. Three weeks ago, the IPC [warned](#) that Gaza would have the highest share of people in the world facing acute food insecurity – and so it has [turned out](#) to be.

Unless Israel's western backers consider the World Food Programme, Unicef and the World Health Organization to be " Hamas-run", they will increasingly be obliged to listen to them when they say that the [trucks being allowed](#) into Gaza are only a fraction of what is needed to avert a mass famine.

Of course, the [US](#), [UK](#) and Germany are doing much more than simply watch a humanitarian catastrophe develop in Gaza. They are actively contributing to it by feeding the Israeli military machine with the means to carry on this war indefinitely.

Yediot Ahronoth, an Israeli newspaper with good government sources, reported that since 7 October, the US has sent [230 cargo planes](#) and 20 ships filled with artillery shells, armoured vehicles and combat gear.

‘What Is to be Done?’

This level of arms supply is at odds with American rhetoric, which, by the way, Washington is good at. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken should get an Oscar for his performance at the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland.

Asked by New York Times columnist [Thomas Friedman](#) whether Muslim and Christian lives were worth less than Jewish lives, Blinken responded in a voice cracked with emotion:

“No. Period. For me, I think for so many of us, what we’re seeing every single day in Gaza is gut-wrenching. And the suffering we’re seeing among innocent men, women and children breaks my heart. The question is, what is to be done?”

How about calling for an immediate ceasefire? How about stopping the supply of US shells and bombs? How about backing the South African claim that [this is genocide](#), or at the very least war crimes?

Many flights carrying US weapons and equipment have gone through the British base of Akrotiri in Cyprus, according to UK investigative site [Declassified](#), following a Haaretz [report](#) that more than 40 US and 20 British transport aircraft, along with seven heavy-lift helicopters, have flown into RAF Akrotiri, a 40-minute flight from Tel Aviv. Germany is reportedly considering the delivery of [10,000 rounds of 120mm](#) precision ammunition to Israel, a request to which it has already agreed in principle.

In terms of saying one thing and doing another, [Turkey](#) is just as bad in failing to halt its burgeoning trade with Israel. It’s [not enough to say](#) that even at the time of the Mavi Marmara incident, when a Turkish flotilla was stormed by Israeli commandos on the high seas, trade continued.

Nor is it sufficient to say that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s ire is directed against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally and not against Israel as a whole. Opposition leader Benny Gantz shares as much of the blame for the carnage in Gaza as Netanyahu does.

Like [Russia’s assault on Ukraine](#), Israel’s bombing of Gaza has been so intense that it is perpetually on the verge of running out of ammunition. Israel has dropped almost 30,000 bombs and shells on Gaza in 100 days, [eight times](#) more than the US dropped on [Iraq](#) in six years of war.

Stopping Israel from getting away with the mass murder of innocent men, women and children is no longer a question of left or right in western politics. By the only measure that counts for Palestinians, US President Joe Biden is a fully paid-up member of the Party of War, like many of his predecessors and contemporaries in both the US and UK.

Egypt's Ringside Seat

But none of these countries have borders with Israel. One nation that does have a ringside seat to the famine unfolding inches from its border is [Egypt](#).

Its responsibility for the current siege of Gaza, which is far more brutal than during any period over the last 16 years, is direct. Journalists staging an impromptu demonstration outside the headquarters of the Journalists Syndicate in Cairo were correct when they said "Egypt is a partner in the siege."

"The Zionists are in control of us ... For as long as Arab blood is cheap, down, down with any president. [Nelson] Mandela's grandchildren did it. And we are in cowardice, shame and humiliation. We want the [Rafah] crossing open," the journalists [chanted](#).

The same message is being delivered by children [taunting](#) Egyptian troops on the border fence:

"They say Egypt is the mother of the world. Have you ever seen a mother leaving her children alone? ... They are all gone. God is enough for us," one said.

In the meantime, Egyptian officials appear to think nothing of giving contradictory figures. Khaled Abdel Ghaffar, the Egyptian minister of health, said late last month that Egypt had received [20,000 injured Palestinians](#) in around two dozen hospitals. Just two weeks later, Diaa Rashwan, the head of the State Information Service, said Egypt had received [1,210 injured Palestinians](#).

More than [60,000 Palestinians](#) in Gaza have been wounded, and some are dying in ambulances as they wait to get out. Sometimes permission to leave arrives after the patient has died.

Israel has no qualms about throwing its regional allies under the bus. When defending itself last week against the charge of genocide at the World Court in the Hague, Israel's defence team accused Cairo of being responsible for preventing the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. This embarrassed Egypt, and Rashwan issued a statement saying [Rafah was under Israeli control](#).

He said, truthfully, that Israeli top officials had confirmed many times since the start of the war "that they will not allow aid to enter the Gaza Strip, particularly fuel, because this is a part of the war that their state is waging against the Strip".

Egypt's official position is that it can only control its own side of the border. In fact, co-operation with Israel goes much deeper than that.

Chequered History

Over the course of history, Egypt's relationship with Gaza and the Palestinian cause has been complex. At a time when the Arab world's most populous country still held geopolitical weight, former President Gamal Abdel Nasser's support for the revolution in [Algeria](#) was a key factor in its success.

Former President Hosni Mubarak played a complicated role in Gaza. He helped build the siege after Hamas's victory in the [2006 elections](#), and under Mubarak, Egypt accepted that

nothing could pass into Gaza without Israel's prior permission. At the same time, however, trade continued [through tunnels](#). Above ground, Egypt under Mubarak tightened the pressure on Gaza; below ground, the tunnels became a release valve.

But when the pressure became too much and fighting broke out, as happened in 2008, Tzipi Livni, then Israel's foreign minister, stood alongside her Egyptian counterpart, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, who is today secretary general of the Arab League, to say Israel [would attack Gaza](#). Egypt's support for that war was one of the [factors](#) behind the revolution that would oust Mubarak three years later.

After the war, however, Mubarak's government ducked and weaved again, saying the tunnels were a consequence of the siege, and [rejecting](#) an embargo on weapons to Gaza.

Gaza enjoyed its best times under [Mohamed Morsi](#), the Muslim Brotherhood president who kept the border at Rafah open and [stopped](#) a subsequent war. His overthrow, and the rise to power of his defence minister, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, brought the darkest times for Gaza.

Sisi did everything in his power to harden the siege by [flooding the tunnels](#), along with forcibly [displacing](#) the Egyptian population of Rafah to create a buffer zone at the border. Under Sisi, the importance of the Israeli [border crossings](#) grew as the primary means of keeping Gaza on life support with food, water and diesel.

There are two factors governing this very chequered history. The first is the geopolitical decline of Egypt under Sisi. Egypt is no longer relevant to its biggest neighbours. Amid the civil war in [Sudan](#), the tiny Gulf state of the [United Arab Emirates](#) plays a [greater role](#). Egypt is also irrelevant to the fate of [Libya](#).

The second is Sisi's visceral fear of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#), and its inherent and enduring claim to legitimacy in Egypt – a fear that is intimately connected with the brutal suppression of the [Arab Spring](#).

If Sisi was true to his word about not allowing Israel to ethnically cleanse Gaza, he is duty bound to help Palestinians survive on their shattered lands. Egypt has to secure Gaza's basic needs for food, water and medicine, either through the crossing, or by sea.

It can even invite other countries from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to join in an air drop of the sort the Allies did to break the Berlin Blockade in 1948. Such an airlift would challenge the hypocrisy of the West and the crocodile tears it sheds for the famine in Gaza. It will not happen of course because a dictatorship like Sisi's cares about only one thing – its survival.

However, the bond between the fight for Palestinian rights and the domestic battle for democracy in Egypt is unbreakable, and Sisi knows this only too well. One inspires the other, which is why beyond a handful of [staged rallies](#), the Egyptian state has cracked down on any public displays of solidarity with Palestinians.

Of course, Egypt plays a diplomatic role in trying to end the war, but its latest [three-stage proposal](#) was weighted towards the release of hostages. It must also be acknowledged that Egypt has stopped Israel from forcing a mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza into Sinai. But they also have much in common: like Israel, Sisi wants a demilitarised Gaza and the demise of Hamas.

In terms of what Egypt is doing on the ground to maintain the bottleneck of humanitarian aid at Rafah, versus what the government is saying, Sisi is giving Blinken a good run for his money as a would-be thespian.

Palestine as a Global Cause

But something else is happening that is just as important: Palestine is being officially defended by the Global South. South Africa has taken the lead by launching the [case for genocide](#) at the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

Palestine, at the same time, is reemerging as a global cause, just as was the case in the fight against [apartheid](#) in South Africa. The composition of South Africa's team of lawyers says it all: multi-ethnic, male, female, Irish, British, South African. There was no Palestinian officially with them in the group. And yet, a day after the hearing ended, there were massive [demonstrations in 45 countries](#) – but not in Egypt, [Saudi Arabia](#) or even Algeria.

The despots of Egypt and the Gulf, however, should not draw a straw of comfort from this. In a recent [survey](#) from the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, polling 8,000 Arabs in 16 countries, 92 percent of respondents said the Palestinian cause was an issue of concern for all Arabs.

Nearly 90 percent of Arab respondents said they considered the 7 October attack by Hamas, which is proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the UK and other countries, to be a “legitimate resistance operation” or a “somewhat flawed but legitimate resistance operation”.

Eighty-nine percent of respondents rejected recognising Israel, the [highest](#) figure in the centre's polling history. Only 13 percent of surveyed Arabs said they believed that peace with Israel remains possible.

Anger is boiling in the hearts of Saudis, Egyptians, [Jordanians](#) and Iraqis – and this will eventually come to the surface and explode. Farouk I, Egypt's penultimate king who abdicated and appointed his baby son Foud whose rule continued for a few months before the monarchy was abolished, paid the price for supporting the Nakba (catastrophe) in 1948. It is one of the reasons Egyptians allowed the army to take over in a coup several years later.

Today, the degree of anger is exponentially greater.

The despots should beware what they wish for. Their profound reluctance to stand up to Israel could explode in their faces.

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Featured image: Rafah crossing. Reuters

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