

EGYPT STRIVES TO CONTAIN CONFLICTS RAGING THROUGHOUT THE REGION

Bottom Line Up Front:

- Facing conflict and instability on virtually all its borders, Egypt is stepping up its diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the Israel-Hamas war.
- Egypt's historic role in Gaza, and Palestinian affairs more broadly, adds significant weight to Cairo's mediation.
- Cairo anticipates that de-escalation in Gaza will end Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, assaults that are damaging Egypt's economy.
- Despite working with regional and international stakeholders, including Russia, Egypt has been unable to settle the internal conflicts in neighboring Sudan and Libya.

Egypt, which maintains close ties to Israel, the United States, other Arab states, as well as some Hamas leaders, is a pivotal [regional stakeholder](#) in the multi-faceted effort to de-escalate and eventually bring about an end to the Israel-Hamas war. As an illustration of the significance of Egypt's ties to all the parties to the war and to other mediators, Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns met with the prime minister of Qatar as well as the heads of Egyptian and Israeli intelligence, Abbas Kamel and David Barnea, respectively, over the weekend. In November, Director Burns' mediation efforts, working with the same counterparts, [helped finalize](#) a limited Israel-Hamas ceasefire and the release of 105 Israeli and third-country hostages captured in its October 7 attack on Israel. Nearly 180 Palestinians were released from Israeli prisons in exchange. The Burns trip will attempt to forge another ceasefire and hostage release, potentially using the deal as a springboard to end the war and [establish a roadmap](#) to a broader Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. Moreover, the trip follows a visit by a top U.S. Middle East envoy, Brett McGurk, to Egypt and Qatar to try to bridge the divides holding up another round of hostage releases.

U.S. and regional leaders are also expected to discuss a post-war peace plan that the government of [Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi](#) has developed to reform Palestinian governance and unite all Palestinian factions. Accomplishing those objectives could pave the way for broader talks on a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The centerpiece of Cairo's proposal envisions Egypt and Qatar working with Hamas political leaders and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) to form a Palestinian government of experts. Under Cairo's plan, the technocratic administration would run the Palestinian territories during a transitional period while Palestinian factions prepare to hold presidential and parliamentary elections. Even though Egypt's plan addresses [Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's](#) stated criticisms of Palestinian governance, the proposal has received a cool reaction from Netanyahu's right-wing government, which sees almost any post-war peace outline as potentially paving the way for the formation of a Palestinian state. Still, Egypt's role as the first Arab state to sign a formal peace treaty with Israel might yet enable the proposal to serve as a basis for further discussion. Egypt's history as governing authority over the Gaza Strip from 1948 to 1967, mentoring the Palestinians broadly, and controlling the [southern Gaza border](#) also gives Egypt leverage over Hamas. In recent weeks, Hamas political leaders have visited Egypt to discuss proposals for another temporary ceasefire and hostage release, as well as Egypt's broader post-war peace plan.

Egypt's leaders hope that their peace plan - or any plan that ends the war - gains traction before the conflict impinges directly on Egyptian territory or irreparably damages Cairo's relations with the Israeli government. Israeli leaders say that to complete their destruction of Hamas, they must eventually

capture Gaza's southernmost town, Rafah, which is on the Egypt-Gaza border. Israel's push on Rafah could send a massive wave of Palestinians fleeing across the border into its Sinai Peninsula – an outcome Cairo has strenuously sought to avoid since the Israel-Hamas war began. To avoid that scenario, Egypt insists that Israel allow Palestinians to return to northern Gaza before any assault on Rafah. Israel also asserts it will need to control a small sliver of border territory that Israel calls the Philadelphi Corridor and Egypt refers to as the Salaheddin Corridor. The tiny buffer zone is required to be demilitarized under the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty. Diah Rashwan, head of Egypt's State Information Service, said on January 21: "Any Israeli move in this direction will lead to a serious threat to Egyptian-Israeli relations." Additional tensions between Egypt and Israel have erupted over claims by Netanyahu that Hamas continues to smuggle weapons under the border – a claim Egypt categorically denies. Netanyahu also has precipitated a backlash from Cairo by blaming it for slowing the flow of [humanitarian assistance](#) to Gaza.

Egypt also sees an end to the Israel-Hamas war as a means of protecting its economy, as well as its territory, from the related attacks by [Yemen's Houthi movement](#). Houthi missile assaults on ships in the Red Sea are compelling international shipping firms to avoid routing through the Red Sea, sharply reducing the revenue Egypt earns from Suez Canal transit fees. Canal authority head Osama Rabie said two weeks ago that dollar revenues from canal traffic are down 40 percent from the beginning of the year compared to 2023. He added that the number of vessels passing through the canal from January 1 – 11 dropped to 544 from 777 in the equivalent period of 2023. In late October, the Houthis apparently were responsible for launching Iran-supplied armed drones toward Israel, but two of them hit facilities in two Egyptian towns on the Red Sea, close to the Israeli port of Eilat. At least six people were injured.

Adding to Egypt's security threat portfolio has been the inability of the country's leaders to resolve the ongoing violent internal conflicts in Sudan as well as Libya. Both civil wars, [particularly in Sudan](#), have caused Egypt to absorb large inflows of refugees fleeing the fighting. In both theaters, Egypt initially sought to bring an end to conflict by favoring one major faction over the other, hoping that battlefield victory would produce a unified political structure and stability, even at the cost of establishing authoritarian, repressive governance. In Libya, Cairo backed eastern Libya strongman Khalifa Haftar's [unsuccessful 2019 offensive](#) to capture Tripoli, oust the UN-backed rival government in western Libya, and unify the country under his leadership. Subsequently, Egypt has adopted a more neutral stance centered on mediating between the contending parties to support a UN-led process to merge government and hold national elections for a president and a parliament. The instability on Egypt's western border remains, as the parties balk at following any political roadmap that could lead them to lose power entirely.

In Sudan, Egypt has backed, including with some air strikes and military advisors, the Sudan Armed Forces in their conflict with the paramilitary [Rapid Support Forces](#). Warfare between the two forces, which broke in [April 2023](#) over disagreements about a transition to civilian leaders and other reforms, continues to drive [significant refugee flows](#) into Egypt. The Sudan civil war also has complicated President El Sisi's effort to work with Sudan toward curbing Ethiopia's unilateral control over water flows from the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam](#). As was the case in Libya, after failing in its effort to help the Sudan armed forces crush the RSF challenge and seeing some of its forces captured by the RSF on the ground in Sudan, Cairo has sought to work with Saudi Arabia and other regional mediators to try to de-escalate the fighting. Mediation has had only modest results to date, producing periodic ceasefires that fail to hold. In both Sudan and Libya, Egypt has also sought to use its ties to Russia to advance Cairo's interests at the risk of offending Washington. Russia's [Wagner Group](#) has been active in both wars: in Libya, it has supported Haftar, and in Sudan, Wagner personnel have reportedly engaged in illicit mining, smuggling, and other revenue-generating activity in partnership with the RSF leadership. President El Sisi continues to highlight his ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin, apparently in the hopes that Russia is willing to help de-escalate the conflicts on Egypt's borders. In late January, he held a summit with Putin via videoconference to inaugurate the start of construction of the fourth and final reactor at Egypt's Dabaa nuclear power plant, which Russia's Rosatom atomic energy conglomerate is building. Yet,

despite Cairo's extensive diplomatic partnership with regional and global powers, Egypt has not yet achieved significant gains in stabilizing, let alone resolving, the conflicts at all of the country's frontiers.
