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The Security Ghost of the January 25th Revolution in al-Sisi Regime's Policy toward Gaza

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Executive Summary

This study argues that al-Sisi regime has been haunted by the January 25 uprisings as a potential recurrent threat to the state survival during the formulation of national and foreign politics. In the aim of boosting its international legitimacy before Western allies, especially the US, the regime has capitalized on political instabilities in Gaza as a means to ensure its security grip on power without incurring foreign allies' critics for human rights violations. How did al-Sisi regime mobilize Gaza as a means for bolstering its international credibility before Western bailers and shunning off the January 25 security ghost? In answering this question, this study refers to haunted politics in foreign policy-making as an informative perspective about the impact of traumatic events on ruling regimes' interpretation of incidents, convocation of memories, recreation of meanings, and subjugation of citizens. Unlike Mubarak's limited support for the Palestinian cause and Morsi's exclusive ties with Hamas, al-Sisi adopted a balanced approach toward Gaza in the aim of counterbalancing the US reservations over the regime's human rights violations since 2013.

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Introduction

While the Palestinian cause is a significant issue that touches upon the Egyptian public's feelings and religious affinities, Gaza has always occupied a special status for decision-makers since the eruption of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000. In light of its geographical proximity to Egypt, demographic density, deprivation of life essentials, and domination by Hamas, an Islamic resistance movement and an off-spring of the Muslim Brotherhood - the largest opposition in Egypt - Gaza has always been a major preoccupation for the Egyptian regime's security.

Since the conclusion of the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel in 1979, the Egyptian leadership has oriented Egypt's military effort toward large-scale economic and business investments while delegating the decision-making process with regard to the Palestinian issue, in particular Gaza, to the security establishment. Encompassing the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the Military Security Services, and the President of the Republic, the security establishment monopolized both the formulation and implementation processes of security priorities, including the Palestinian issue, on the national and regional levels. The management of the Peace Process in the Middle East became an integral part of the Egyptian-American relations in terms of preserving regional stability through mediation among Palestinian factions and Israel.

Following former President Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981)'s assassination and succession by former President Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) in October 1981, the security establishment gained an expansive role in the decision-making process regarding the Palestinian question. Being the second largest beneficiary of the US military aid that covered for major structural economic deficiencies, Mubarak has inscribed Egypt's regional policy into a visible alignment with the US regional priorities in terms of managing negotiations within the Peace Process and facilitating inter-Palestinian talks. The establishment's domination over the decision-making process coupled with a diminishing role of the state bureaucrats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the public opinion including political parties, social movements' activists, and intellectuals. Yet, during the January 25 uprising in 2011, protesters questioned Egypt's alignment with the US and Mubarak's limited support for Palestinian rights. This turning point compelled the Muslim Brotherhood regime under former President Mohamed Morsi (2012-2013) to express an explicit solidarity toward Palestinians while delegating the management of official ties with Israel and alliance with the US to the security establishment.

The 2011 momentum presented a real challenge for the state's security establishment, especially the Egyptian Military Intelligence that was previously headed by al-Sisi. From July 2013 onwards, following

the ousting of President Morsi, the security establishment has maintained its role in determining and shaping Egypt's policy towards Gaza. Yet, haunted by the potential recurrence of a sweeping public uprising against the regime, the security apparatus has been keen on eliminating political opponents, securing Western support, and ensuring political control over national subjects and territory. Al-Sisi regime's policy towards Gaza is a manifestation of this. Hamas's persistence in power since the 2006 elections prompted a compulsory tight security coordination between the Egyptian security establishment and the Israeli authorities. Hamas was widely depicted as a Muslim Brotherhood's associate in instigating national security threats. The control of goods and people's movement across borders, the destruction of secret tunnels used for smuggling weapons between Sinai and Gaza, and the coordination of security forces in Sinai became dominant factors in the establishment's mindset. In this vein, al-Sisi banned opposition groups, encompassing social movements' activists and civil society, on the grounds of being terrorist and illegal groups, and substituted civil society-based humanitarian aid for Palestinians with military and state-sponsored agencies. Building on its active security involvement in Gaza, the regime has revived the Israeli-Palestinian and inter-Palestinian mediation efforts in emphasis of its pivotal role for Western powers in the aim of securing an international support that overlooks human rights violations on the national level.

This study examines President Abdelfattah al-Sisi's policy towards Gaza from 2014 until 2021 as a means for legitimizing his rule on the international level. Doing so, this study dwells on the notion of security ghosts in foreign policy and how they impact ruling regimes' policies. The Egyptian regime's conception of the January 25 uprising as a potentially recurrent threat to the survival of the state reveals to what extent President al-Sisi's Gaza policy has been informed by the security fear of the reproduction of a destabilizing uprising against his rule. It argues that al-Sisi regime's perception of the pre-2013 period as a chaotic order where the vacuum of power resulting from the January 2011 Revolution was filled by Islamists has dominated the establishment's mindset and shaped the Gaza policy. The study is based on the content analysis of President al-Sisi speeches, and 10 open-ended and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted by the author with retired Egyptian diplomats and social movements' activists from 2014 until 2021 in Cairo.

Haunted Politics in Foreign Policy-Making

Extensive literature has addressed hauntology in shaping statecraft and regimes' decision-making (Salem, 2021; Steele and Acuff, 2012; Holsti, 2006). While Foreign Policy Analysis's poliheuristic approach emphasizing decision-makers' idiosyncratic factors, such as their ideological predispositions, cognitive map, psychological environment, and personality traits in reaction to national constraints (Oppermann, 2020; Redd et al., 2017; Mintz, 2004), haunted politics would be mobilized as an additional lens for interpreting ruling regimes' policies. Scholars referred to haunted politics as the byproduct of historical moments and events that mark the ruling elite's memory and compel them to follow a particular trajectory of action. In this vein, Salem (2021) evoked how the Nasser regime's anticolonial project introduced a historical momentum in Egyptian national history and constituted a political benchmark for the following regimes in pursuing a similar pattern of governance that rallies state coercion and public consent. Similarly, Auchter (2017) elaborated on the impact of the memory of events involving genocides and death stories on states' post-conflict narratives in international politics. In line with this argument, Steele and Acuff (2012) explored the notion of generational analysis in global politics by highlighting how regimes have inherited their predecessors' stances and practices toward various issues on the national and international levels. Also, Holsti (2006) examined how the leadership's memorization of the public opinion's reactions toward the US foreign policy has impacted decision-makers in the aftermath of the 9/11 events.

In this respect, this study refers to haunted politics in order to highlight how President al-Sisi's policy toward Gaza is inscribed into a line of security tradition associating Gaza to the leadership's fear of the potential reproduction of public upheavals against the ruling regime. Being haunted by the memory of the January 25 Revolution, the establishment secured the regime's rule by formulating a two-staged policy toward Gaza. This policy consisted of eliminating national opponents in line with the regime's official campaign of fighting terrorism, tightening its security grip over borders with Gaza, ensuring Hamas's dissociation with the Muslim Brotherhood, and consolidating Egypt's mediation role in the peace process.

Although the establishment's security mindset has mainly shaped the Gaza policy as a means for securing the regime's legitimacy since the 1990s, each ruling regime has adapted it to its respective sociopolitical contingency. In this vein, the coming section will show how al-Sisi regime, similarly to its predecessors, has mobilized Gaza policy as a means for securing its longevity while emphasizing how it has differently designed a Gaza policy that is inscribed into the regime's fear of the reproduction of the January 25th Revolution.

The Memory of the January 25 Revolution and the Securitization of Gaza

Since his inauguration as President of Egypt in 2014, President al-Sisi's speeches have repeatedly emphasized, during several public occasions, the establishment's security obsession by the January 25 uprising that ousted Mubarak's 30 years rule. At several state-sponsored public conferences, al-Sisi mentioned that 'what happened during the January 25 events shall never be repeated again [since] it declared the death of the state' (al-Sisi, 2020). The fear of the reproduction of a similar revolt has haunted the memory of Egyptian decision-makers who have incessantly underscored the centrality of the state's national security and survival as the main prerequisites for stability and development.

The regime's legitimacy has been established on al-Sisi's projection as a national savior in light of his extensive war on terrorism. Being the Minister of Defense under the Muslim Brotherhood's rule, al-Sisi led a military coup against Morsi's regime and supplicated the public to support his fight against the Muslim Brotherhood's members and supporters whom he designated as terrorists (al-Sherif, 2014). Following 'Tamarod' *rebellion* campaign's success in gathering public signatures and rallying support among masses asking Morsi to step down, al-Sisi declared an ultimatum that resulted in the army's intervention to topple the Muslim Brotherhood's regime. In confirmation of his commitment to protecting Egypt against terrorism, the army, alongside the state security forces, has violently dispersed the pro-Muslim Brotherhood's sit-ins in Raba'a and al-Nahda squares in August 2013 leaving hundreds of death tolls and casualties (al-Sherif, 2014). Following the declaration of the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in September 2013, the state enacted a series of legislations criminalizing public protests and individual affiliations to the Muslim Brotherhood and grassroots secular opposition groups, such as the April 6 Movement, for being illegal entities. After the massacre of Raba'a and al-Nahda, the regime launched an unprecedented large-scale repressive campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood's members, supporters, and activists who took part in the 2011 public uprising and protests against the regime's clamp down on opponents (Droz, 2020).

Since 2013, a large number of political prisoners has been sentenced to long years of imprisonment and to death for charges of affiliation to terrorist groups and for committing lethal attacks on state officials. Although these sentences were ruled by military courts and a judiciary system that is often accused of being politicized, the state could secure a broad-based popular support through extensive media campaigns. Popular TV presenters in talk shows and celebrities in radio broadcasts, TV series, and large film productions were deployed to denigrate the Muslim Brotherhood and depict its 'destructive agenda' as a 'deviant' fundamentalist religious ideology (YouTube, 2020). This media cam-

paign has also negatively portrayed the January 25 Revolution as a foreign conspiracy where civil society had a considerable role in plotting against Egypt's national security in coordination with political activists.

The regime's actions against members of the Muslim Brotherhood and political activists intertwined with the establishment's extensive fights against extremist groups affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Sinai. Following Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's, an ISIS affiliate based in Northern Sinai, declaration of responsibility for deadly attacks against Egyptian conscripts in 2015, the regime launched military campaigns in towns in Northern Sinai, close to borders with Gaza (CNN Arabic, 2016). These campaigns were mostly coordinated with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and targeted the tunnels that were believed to be used by Hamas for the smuggling of arms and fighters in and out Gaza.

In light of its leadership's ties with Hamas, the non-return to the 2011-2013 period that witnessed the Muslim Brotherhood's rule based on democratic elections following the January 25 Revolution constituted the regime's point of reference in determining its Gaza policy. This move was the outcome of the regime's preoccupation of preserving the national security order established after toppling President Morsi's rule in 2013 through the elimination of any prospects for a strong opposition that would disturb the regime's political control. The President's public speeches during press conferences and international conferences revealed an unconventional, strict, and unaccommodating character toward the Muslim Brotherhood, political opponents, and activists from various ideological backgrounds. In his speeches, al-Sisi (2016, 2018; CNN Arabia 2021) has incessantly confirmed that he would never allow the reproduction of the January 25 uprising that, in his words, constituted a dangerous event prelude to the state's death. Having the support of Arab bailers, especially Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, al-Sisi underlined the return of the state's authority and monopoly over the public sphere against destructive elements.

The establishment perceived Gaza and Hamas as a security risk for the destabilization of the regime in light of Hamas's ideological ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, which prompted the regime to associate Egypt's national interest to the strict control of borders and the substitution of state-led campaigns for civil humanitarian initiatives. With this perspective, developments in Gaza were confined within a tight security prism that often requires coordination with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, Israel, and the US. This security mindset favored the adoption of a rigid decision-making process that has been mainly dominated by the establishment leaving a limited consultative role for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' bureaucrats.

While the establishment's security mindset has dominated the decision-making process of Egypt's Gaza policy under the successive rule of the Mubarak, Morsi, and al-Sisi regimes, each one has manifested variations in its formulation and implementation as will be shown in the next subsections.

a) The US-Egyptian-Israeli Alliance and Mubarak's Passivity toward the Palestinian Question

Former President Mubarak has built his regime's legitimacy on the practice of 'egypticity' in the state's foreign policy, especially toward Gaza. In reference to the primacy of national interests over solidarity with Arab countries, this practice has compelled Mubarak to adopt an inward-looking diplomacy that has been primarily focused on attracting donors for Egypt's rentier-based economy and conforming to the US regional priorities. With this respect, Mubarak turned down Pan-Arabism in official discourses, overlooked the US-Israeli symbiotic ties, and aligned Egypt's regional policy with the US directives in return for an annual aid that sustained the regime's patronage system (Ben-Zvi, 2002; Stephens, 2006).

In the 1990s, Egypt witnessed devastating economic crises, notably a trade balance deficit, the devaluation of its national currency, and the emergence of developmental challenges related to the rapid population growth and the state inability to cope with citizens' needs. Being mostly referred to as a patron-client relationship, the US has supported Egypt with annual economic and military aid packages in return for securing the US interests in the Middle East, maintaining regional stability, hosting permanent US military bases, and guaranteeing oil supply through the Suez Canal (Shama, 2013). Mubarak's regional diplomacy became an adaptation of the US guidelines rather than a genuine political outlook. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Egyptian government was hesitant to condemn the Israeli attacks and aligned with the American position by blaming Palestinians, asking Syria to withdraw from Lebanon, and encouraging the Palestinian Authority to continue negotiations with Israel within the framework of the Camp David Accords. During the 1991 Gulf War, Mubarak mobilized Arab countries to join the US-led Coalition Forces against former Iraqi President, Saddam Hussain, in the aim of drastically reducing Egyptian foreign debts. In reiteration of the US directives, Egypt proposed a Peace Plan for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the 1991 Peace Conference in Madrid and supported the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza and the West Bank during official visits in 1993. Being part of the US-led Greater Middle East Project, Mubarak has reconsidered its policy toward the Palestinian question. He did so through the facilitation of peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the assignment of an Egyptian ambassador in Israel, and the conclusion of the Qualifying Industrial Zone Treaty with the US in which Israel had to be included as a partner (Helal, 2008). In this respect, during and after the 2000 Second Intifada, Egypt prioritized re-

gional stability by maintaining close relations with Israel and carefully opposing its policies against Palestinians in order to avoid antagonizing the US and keep its pivotal position as a broker of the Peace Process. Mubarak's alignment with the US vision has prevented Egypt from promoting the two states solution, bringing it into effect, solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and condemning the 2009 Israeli attacks on Gaza. Also, the Egyptian-American alliance did not result in major political changes in Mubarak's rule. The latter embarked on a tough process of economic privatization within the framework of the Structural Adjustment Programs and adopted cosmetic national political reforms without addressing the socioeconomic deficiencies that spurred public anger during the 2011 Revolution (Haber and Ighani, 2013).

Based on interviews conducted by the author with retired diplomats at the Egyptian Council for Foreign Relations, the security establishment has always dominated the decision-making process toward Gaza under the Mubarak regime from 1981 until 2011. Among the interviewees, five former ambassadors have asserted that a security mentality has been omnipresent under the Mubarak regime where Egypt acted as the 'trusted' security coordinator between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority due to the former's rejection to cooperate with former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. According to one respondent: "Egypt's former President of Security Services, Omar Soliman, coordinated direct talks with Israel alongside the US and Palestinian officials from 2004 until 2011." Respondents have also confirmed that security talks have predominantly focused on inter-Palestinian divisions, developments in the Peace Process, and stability in the Occupied Territories. In line with this assertion, three informants among activists in Kefaya and the April 6 Movement underlined the highly securitized nature of Gaza, which compelled Egyptian authorities to limit civil actors and political activists' role in the provision of humanitarian support for Gazans. In addition to respondents' testimonies, an activist mentioned, "borders were permanently closed from the Egyptian side since Hamas's ascension to power in 2006, which rendered borders crossing an intensely monitored process by security checks and complicated the organization of medical and humanitarian convoys." Being part of the organization of convoys for Gaza, informants from the April 6 Movement underscored the use of secret tunnels. In this vein, they indicated, 'secret tunnels were an alternative to the heavy security checks across borders, which put our activities at risk in light of the establishment's negative perception of tunnels as illegal channels for trafficking weapons.'

b) Morsi's Ideological Ties with Hamas and Prioritization of the Palestinian Cause

Former President Morsi has established his regime's legitimacy on the adoption of a pro-Palestinian position in his policy toward Gaza and the delegation of bilateral relations with Israel to the security

apparatus. In compliance with the Muslim Brotherhood's support for Palestinians' right to self-determination and opposition to Israel's illegal settlement policies and military attacks on Gaza, Morsi relied on public initiatives in the organization of medical caravans to Gaza for moral and political support. Following the January 25 Revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood promoted a state-sponsored public diplomacy that encompassed NGOs and activists affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, secular and Islamist political parties, and social movements in expression of solidarity with Gaza through the organization of visits to martyrs' families, hospitals, and Hamas's leaders. Following the Israeli Defense Column Operation in November 2012, Egyptian security forces facilitated the borders' crossing process for hundreds of activists (Darrag, 2013). While they organized official visits to Gaza and met with Hamas leaders, they were also able to use tunnels connecting Sinai with Gaza in case of borders' closure by the army.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood was careful to maintain good relations with the US and Israel and confirmed their compliance with international agreements, in particular the Camp David Accords, they were unable to act as impartial mediators due to ideological affinities with Hamas. In 2012, two delegations affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party paid official visits to Washington in order to reassure the US about their commitment to rights, freedoms, democratization, and Egypt's constructive role in the Middle East (Daily News Egypt, 2012). Nevertheless, Morsi has deemphasized relations with the US and Israel through the recourse to symbolic measures, such as the declaration of the Israeli ambassador in Cairo a *persona non-grata* and the arrangement of official visits to the US under the auspices of the Egyptian Prime Minister. In this vein, two out of the five interviewed diplomats mentioned that President Morsi, in spite of his active diplomacy, kept Israel to a low profile, avoided its mention in official discourses, and did not pay official visits to Washington, which shed light on a prospective transition from strategic alliance to a 'neither an ally nor an enemy' status. They asserted that Morsi's mandate from 2012 until 2013 witnessed the army's presence in negotiations with Israel over the security management of Sinai and borders with Gaza in spite of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological ties with Hamas. This swift shift in Egypt's policy toward Gaza under President Morsi's mandate has occurred in response to terrorist attacks against military conscripts and checkpoints in Sinai in August 2012. Since then, the Army and the Intelligence Service have become the main actors responsible for establishing official contacts with Israel and the US and coordinating a cleansing operation in the peninsula in line with the dispositions of the Camp David Accords.

Al-Sisi's Two-Staged Policy toward Gaza (2014-2021)

Building on the leadership's security obsession with the potential reproduction of massive anti-regime upheavals, this section investigates how President al-Sisi's two-staged policy toward Gaza is inscribed into the establishment's security line of tradition for boosting the regime's legitimacy. Positioned between the passivity of the Mubarak era toward Palestinians and Morsi's close ideological ties with Hamas, al-Sisi regime has formulated a balanced strategy toward Gaza that underlined the tight association between Gaza and the state survival against potential threats in the elite's mindset. As such, al-Sisi regime's policy ensured a firm security control over borders, co-opted Hamas in its repression campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, and underscored Egypt's mediation role in the peace process, which enabled the evasion of the US critics and the consolidation of an international legitimacy.

Al-Sisi regime's security obsession with the January 25 Revolution and its potential recurrence as an existential threat to the state survival has been manifested through the formulation of a two-staged balanced policy toward Gaza since 2014. By controlling borders, stigmatizing and eliminating the opposition, and co-opting Hamas, the regime's Gaza policy confirmed Egypt's pivotal role in the management of the Palestinian question as a means to evade the US critics over national human rights violations.

Al-Sisi's Gaza policy has been part of the regime's ambition to reassert Egypt's pivotal role in the management of the Peace Process and the fight against terrorism in line with its alliance with Israel and the US. In the tradition of President Mubarak, al-Sisi used foreign policy as a platform to legitimize his rule. Following Morsi's ousting, the national and international public opinion has been divided over the perception of al-Sisi's eviction of the Muslim Brotherhood's regime. While supporting rulers across Arab countries have conceived al-Sisi's intervention as a necessary measure toward the fulfillment of public demands for the Brotherhood's ousting, regional countries and international allies have critically perceived the army's interruption of the rule of the first democratically elected regime (Magued, 2021). Although the US and the EU expressed their reservations over al-Sisi's military intervention, they forewent their concerns over democratic stagnation for security priorities related to al-Sisi's firm control over Egyptian territories, prevention of illegal migration, and contribution to regional stability (al-Shorouk, 2017). In order to secure financial assistance packages from the US and the EU, al-Sisi has been keen on reassuring his Western bailers over national and regional security concerns through the organization of regular conferences that reached out to regional and international audiences (al-Sisi, 2018 and 2019). In this vein, al-Sisi asserted the following, "the evil forces will never win and what happened in January 25 will never be allowed again." During these meetings, he underlined national

development as a primordial goal for which he would never allow the reproduction of the January 25 uprising. This predetermined position justified the launch of extensive campaigns against 'destructive' and terrorist elements and the sacrifice of individual rights and freedoms to national stability. In this regard, al-Sisi blamed the EU for prioritizing human rights over the decay of national education, health services, and infrastructure in Egypt. In this respect, he mentioned, 'Egypt has no good education nor a proper healthcare system, why do you only address human rights' conditions in Egypt? Egyptians cannot hang out or have fun during holidays because they do not have proper salaries. I would let them protest instead of working, provided you allocate more financial resources for the country in order to ensure the necessary provisions for subsistence.'

While al-Sisi regime looked forward to developing a cooperative partnership with the Biden administration, it rejected the latter's critics of human rights' violations in Egypt. This position has further evolved in light of the US limited support for Egypt's water rights and territorial security vis-à-vis the Ethiopian project and ISIS's threatening presence in Sinai. In response, al-Sisi reached out for alternative allies such as Russia for extracting military and strategic support (Reuters, 2021). The regime has also consolidated its strategic and military cooperation with Israel in pursuit of Islamist militants in Northern Sinai and tightened its relations with Arab and African neighbours. In this perspective, al-Sisi restored Egypt's seat at the African Union Organization in 2019, assumed its presidency in 2020, and initiated rapprochement with Morocco and Eritrea in an attempt to gain political support vis-à-vis the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam that is expected to significantly reduce Egypt's water share (State Information Service, 2020). Upon its nomination as President of the organization, Egypt became an active member in representing African nations on international and regional instances, promoting intra-African trade, and attracting new investment opportunities. Unlike Morsi who cut ties with al-Assad regime and supported the suspension of Syria's membership in the Arab League, al-Sisi regime advocated for the return of its membership and the consolidation of al-Assad rule. Egypt suggested the creation of a multilateral regional energy hub encompassing East Mediterranean countries and international observers that produce, import, and act as a transit point for natural gas transfer in October 2018 (Reuters, 2020; State Information Service, 2019).

In addition to the recourse to regional alternatives to the US support, al-Sisi addressed Gaza as a security predicament that would prompt the Biden administration to forego national human rights' violations. Following the ban of social movements and the restriction of the state's unsponsored humanitarian initiatives, the regime initiated a state-led development campaign in order to control the Gaza strip. In this vein, al-Sisi was keen on boosting his regime's legitimacy vis-à-vis the US through the assertion of a pivotal role in Gaza's security management and the launch of a two-staged policy toward

Gaza. From 2014 until 2016, Hamas was largely demonized by the regime's inflamed rhetoric perceiving it as a plotting agent for the destruction of the Egyptian state and the eviction of al-Sisi rule. Egypt's anti-Hamas position translated into an intensive security maneuver in Gaza in 2014 through the imposition of a blockage on the strip and the destruction of Hamas's supply chains for humanitarian subsistence through the flooding of 1370 tunnels under Rafah (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Being a bordering town with Gaza, Rafah witnessed the destruction of 3255 buildings and hundreds of acres of cultivated lands in the aim of establishing a buffer zone, a state-led operation that mounted to the level of a war crime for some international human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2015). While the regime attempted to resume its mediation role between Israel and Hamas following the former's attack on Gaza in 2014 resulting in huge death tolls on the Palestinian side, this move was often rejected by Hamas who, in light of Egyptian officials' condemnation of its resistance status, perceived it as a cover for Israeli military operations against Gazans (Abu Zaid, 2021). Egypt's mediation role was mitigated by al-Sisi's support of the US Deal of the Century, encouragement of the Palestinian Authority to accept it as an economic settlement plan for Palestinians, and abstention from condemning the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem in recognition of Trump's supportive stance toward the regime.

Nevertheless, al-Sisi regime's short-term offensive in Gaza has swiftly shifted into a pragmatic security cooperation with regard to the Palestinian issue. Starting from 2016, Egypt has decreased its aggressive tone toward Hamas in preparation for a bilateral rapprochement on the security level. Yet, this shift was accelerated by the ascension of a critical US administration to power in 2021 that has closely followed developments in Egyptian politics on the national and regional levels without prior guarantees for support. Biden's warnings against deplorable political prisoners' conditions coupled with Israel's rapprochement with four Arab countries and emerging divides within the Emirati-Egyptian partnership in inciting al-Sisi regime to emphasize Egypt's pivotal role in the Peace Process as a fair mediator.

An exchange of official visits between Cairo and Gaza by the head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Services, Abbas Kamel, to Gaza was followed by Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh's visit to Cairo (Saleh, 2021). In return for abandoning its harsh position toward Hamas, the latter pledged to comply with the Egyptian security conditions by declaring its dissociation with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2017 (al-Shorouk, 2017). Following the rise of tension between Hamas and ISIS sympathizers in Gaza, the former has closely monitored borders, deployed fighters, arrested jihadists who were illegally crossing borders. It has also participated in the regime's security cleansing campaign in Sinai, the creation of a

buffer zone, and the construction of a border wall. This bilateral security cooperation reached a paramount level with Egypt's decision to indefinitely open borders with Gaza at the beginning of 2021, a measure that paved the way for a better crystallization of an Egyptian support for Gazans through the maintenance of goods' inflows and mediation on Hamas's side.

Following the Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2021 on the grounds of Hamas's strikes in response to Israel's illegal confiscation of Palestinian houses in Jerusalem, Egypt changed its passive tone toward Palestinians. Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, has publicly condemned Israel's takeover of Palestinian houses in Sheikh Jarrah in preparation of their ownership by Israeli settlers during an urgent Arab League meeting (al-Masry al-Youm, 2021b). Also, for the first time since the 1990s, Egyptian state-owned newspapers have depicted Hamas as a legitimate resistance movement against an Israeli aggression, a stance that was reflected by the adoption of supporting statements such as the 'rockets of the Palestinian resistance' against 'Israeli occupation' (al-Masry al-Youm, 2021a).

In this respect, instead of asking Hamas not to fire rockets on Israel in reference to a shared official belief of an illegitimate act, Egypt adopted a critical tone against Israel. Accounting for the increase of global sympathy toward Gazans, the Egyptian regime underlined the efficiency of its role in bolstering a cease-fire toward an effective management of the Palestinian issue. Instead of developing exclusive security ties with Israel and aligning its official positions to those of its Israeli counterparts, Egypt was no longer considering Israel as an ally for which it would sacrifice its role as being an impartial broker. Toward this end, Egypt orchestrated the 2021 cease-fire in Gaza in coordination with new regional partners, Qatar and Turkey, in order to gain their support during peace negotiations (Reuters, 2021). In line with this move, Egypt initiated the Munich Quartet, a diplomatic platform for discussing the Palestinian issue and reaching a long-term and unconditional agreement between Israel and Hamas, in cooperation with Jordan, France, and Germany, which was lately joined by the US.

During his meetings with the Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, al-Sisi underscored Egypt's willingness to promote initiatives for peace, establish confidence-building measures, and launch an intra-Palestinian reconciliation in accordance with international resolutions (Abu Zaid, 2021). Al-Sisi brokered Hamas's release of two Israeli war prisoners and the return of the remnants of two others in exchange for peace in Gaza. He has also promised to facilitate the Palestinian Authority's return to Gaza and the unification of Palestinian factions under the auspices of the Head of Egyptian Intelligence Abbas Kamel. Relying on an army-backed industrial consortium, al-Sisi regime consolidated Egypt's grip on Gaza by declaring his support for a fair and permanent resolution between Palestinians and Israelis. Egypt brokered a ceasefire that ended the Israeli armed attack on Gaza and promised to rebuild 2,200

and 37,000 homes that were either destroyed or damaged by the Israeli authorities. It has also dispatched more than 120 trucks sponsored by the state-owned fund *Tahya Misr* (long live Egypt) that carried medical aid and subsistence materials shortly after the declaration of the ceasefire (Daily News Egypt, 2021). In spite of Hamas's close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood for which its leaders were convicted of betrayal and condemned to capital punishment, al-Sisi regime, instead of closing borders with Gaza following Israel's military raids in 2021, declared its willingness to rebuild the strip with a budget of 500 million dollars (Reuters, 2021).

Following the success of Egypt's mediation between Hamas and Israel, the Egyptian President confirmed his initiation of a brokerage role in the Palestinian question in return for the non-US involvement into Egyptian national affairs. This tacit agreement was asserted during Biden's contacts with al-Sisi where the former underscored the importance of Egypt's mediation role, especially following the US decision of non-military engagement in the region (Haaretz, 2021). Although, the Biden administration has been critical of the new regime's repressive policy, Egypt's capitalization on its security involvement in Gaza underlined its irreversible pivotal role for the US. Breaking with his silence, Biden contacted al-Sisi to congratulate him for his success in taking control over security conditions in Gaza and aborting Hamas's support for Jihadis in Sinai (Times of Israel, 2021). In spite of Qatari ties with Hamas and the Emirates' recognition of Israel in 2020, Egypt remains the only state that is unanimously acknowledged by the US administration as a reliable and trusted broker between Israelis and Palestinians. Following Egyptian-sponsored meetings with Hamas's leaders and Israeli officials, President Biden praised al-Sisi's brokerage of the cease-fire in Gaza and declared Egypt as a 'real and effective partner' (Times of Israel, 2021). In contrast with Biden's previous confirmation of 'no more blank checks for Trump's favorite dictator,' he agreed not to intervene in Egyptian national affairs and approved a 197 million \$ arms deal with Egypt (Haaretz, 2021).

Conclusion

This study examined al-Sisi regime's policy toward Gaza from 2014 until 2021 by unpacking the regime's security obsession with the potential recurrence of massive anti-regime uprisings similar to the January 25 Revolution. Doing so, it underlined how al-Sisi regime's two-staged balanced Gaza policy is inscribed into the security line of tradition among Egyptian rulers, especially the establishment since the 1980s, associating Gaza to the regime's stability and state survival.

Dwelling on haunted security politics as an additional lenses for a better understanding of ruling regimes' attitudes with regard to foreign policy issues, this study contended that the establishment's

memory has been haunted by the January 25 Revolution as a security ghost that risks to undermine the regime's stability. This memory prompted al-Sisi regime to preserve the post-2013 status quo following the eviction of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule through the projection of a balanced Gaza policy for securing its legitimacy vis-à-vis the US. This study relied on an investigatory research method approach consisting of 10 open-end and semi-structured interviews conducted with retired Egyptian diplomats and former political activists from 2014 until 2021 in Cairo. It asserted that, in line with his predecessors' security tradition of tying Gaza to the regime's stability, al-Sisi's Gaza policy manifested a balancing act between Mubarak's passivity toward Palestinians' rights and Morsi's tight ideological affinities with Hamas. Perceiving the January 25 Revolution as a chaotic disorder and a potentially recurrent eminent threat to the ruling regime, President Al-Sisi formulated a security-oriented Gaza policy that ensured the regime's elimination of opponents, tight control of borders and over national subjects, and cooptation of Hamas. Following the eviction of former President Morsi, the regime launched an extensive arrest campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood's members and supporters in addition to secular activists. This political crackdown coupled with a large-scale national war on terrorism against ISIS affiliate in Sinai that was believed to be supported by Hamas-sponsored weapons and fighters smuggled through underground tunnels. These precarious security conditions compelled the regime to adopt an assertive policy toward Gaza that mounted to the level of a war crime.

Yet, Gaza's geographical proximity to Egypt, population density, and domination by an Islamic resistance movement that self-identifies as an offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood prompted the regime to change its stance toward Hamas. In contrast with Morsi's rapprochement with Hamas and Mubarak's sacrifice of Palestinians' rights to its alliance with Israel and the US, al-Sisi regime confirmed Egypt's role as an effective and irreplaceable mediator between Hamas and Israel in return for a US support that overlooks its human rights violations. Following its success in securing an unconditional and long term cease-fire between Hamas and Israel, the Egyptian regime managed to rally the Biden administration's support in spite of human rights violations in return for an effective mediation role. By adopting a two staged balanced policy toward Gaza, al-Sisi regime ensured the establishment's national security grip on power through the elimination of opponents and the obtention of the US support and annual military aid without being scrutinized for human rights violations.

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