

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #415

Egypt's Tightrope: The Secret Strategy of Gaza Mediation

Published February 01, 2026 • Runtime: 24:52

<https://myweirdprompts.com/episode/egypt-gaza-mediation-strategy/>

EPISODE SYNOPSIS

While headlines often focus on Qatar, Egypt remains the silent, indispensable force managing the ground reality between Israel and Hamas. In this episode, Herman and Corn peel back the layers of Cairo's strategic interests, from securing the Sinai Peninsula to maintaining a billion-dollar relationship with Washington. They dive into the mechanics of "shuttle diplomacy" handled by generals rather than diplomats, the ideological friction between President el-Sisi and Hamas, and the critical importance of the Philadelphi Corridor. It's a deep dive into why Egypt views the Gaza conflict not just as a foreign policy challenge, but as a matter of domestic survival and regional leverage.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

Following your discussion on Qatar's position as both a Western ally and a host to Hamas, I'm curious about Egypt's longstanding role as a mediator between Israel and Hamas. Given Egypt's proximity to the Gaza Strip and their interest in preventing terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula, why and how did they take on this role? What is actually involved in these negotiations, and how do they facilitate communication between parties that don't meet face-to-face?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am here in Jerusalem with my brother.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, ready for another deep dive. And we have got a really substantive one today. Our housemate Daniel sent us a message earlier. He was listening to our last episode about Qatar and Hamas, and he wanted to shift the focus slightly to Egypt.

Corn

Right, because while Qatar gets a lot of the headlines for hosting the political office, Egypt is often the one actually doing the heavy lifting on the ground when things get really tense. Daniel was asking why and how Egypt ended up in this permanent role as the mediator between Israel and Hamas.

Herman

It is a great question because it is a role they have held for decades, and it is incredibly complex. It is not just about being a good neighbor. It is about national security, regional influence, and some very complicated historical baggage.

Corn

It reminds me of that famous quote people often attribute to various leaders, including Charles de Gaulle, that nations do not have friends, they only have interests.

Herman

Actually, that one is usually traced back to Lord Palmerston, the British statesman in the nineteenth century. He said, we have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow. And if you want to understand Egypt's role in Gaza, you have to look at it through that lens of eternal interests.

Corn

So let us start there. Why Egypt? Geographically it is obvious, they share a border at Rafah. But what are the deeper strategic reasons that make them the indispensable mediator?

Herman

You really have to go back to the geography, but not just the Gaza border. You have to look at the Sinai Peninsula. For Egypt, Gaza isn't just a foreign policy issue, it is a domestic security issue. The Sinai has been a flashpoint for decades, especially with the insurgency from groups like the Islamic State in the Sinai. Egypt's biggest fear has always been a spillover effect. If Gaza is unstable, the Sinai becomes harder to control.

Corn

So it is about containment. If they can manage the conflict in Gaza, they can protect their own territory in the Sinai.

Herman

Exactly. And there is a historical dimension too. People sometimes forget that Egypt actually administered the Gaza Strip from nineteen forty-eight until the Six-Day War in nineteen sixty-seven. So there are deep institutional, social, and intelligence ties that never really went away. Even after the nineteen seventy-nine peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, the Egyptians remained the primary point of contact for anything happening in Gaza.

Corn

And that peace treaty is key, right? Because it makes Egypt the only player that is both a formal ally of the United States and the first Arab nation to sign peace with Israel, while also having a direct, functional relationship with the Palestinian factions.

Herman

Precisely. They are the only ones who can talk to everyone. Israel trusts the Egyptian intelligence services to a degree that they don't trust almost anyone else in the region. And Hamas, despite the friction, knows that Egypt is their only physical gateway to the world. The Rafah crossing is essentially the lung of Gaza. If Egypt closes it, Gaza suffocates. That gives Cairo enormous leverage.

Corn

You mentioned the friction between Egypt and Hamas. I think that is a point of confusion for a lot of people. They see Egypt as this mediator and assume there is a friendly relationship, but it is actually quite the opposite in many ways.

Herman

Oh, it is incredibly tense. You have to remember that Hamas was founded in December nineteen eighty-seven as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Now, who is the primary domestic enemy of the current Egyptian government under President el-Sisi? The Muslim Brotherhood.

Corn

Right, so the Egyptian leadership sees Hamas as the Palestinian wing of a group they have spent the last decade trying to dismantle at home.

Herman

Exactly. So there is this inherent ideological hostility. But Egypt is pragmatic. They know they can't make Hamas disappear, so they manage them. They use the General Intelligence Service, the Mukhabarat, to handle the relationship. This is a crucial detail for Daniel's question about how they do it. This isn't handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or diplomats in suits. It is handled by spies and generals.

Corn

That is fascinating. Why keep it in the hands of the intelligence services rather than traditional diplomats?

Herman

A few reasons. First, Hamas is a non-state actor and a designated terrorist organization by Israel, the United States, and the European Union. Formal diplomatic channels would be a nightmare to navigate. But intelligence agencies have what we call deniability and flexibility. They can talk to people the government officially doesn't recognize.

Corn

And second, I imagine it is because the issues are primarily about security. Cross-border tunnels, weapons smuggling, prisoner swaps. These aren't really diplomatic topics, they are operational ones.

Herman

Exactly. And the Egyptian General Intelligence Service has been the lead on this for a long time. For years, the face of this was Major General Abbas Kamel, who was a very close confidant of President el-Sisi. But we saw a significant shift recently. In October twenty twenty-four, President el-Sisi appointed a new head of the General Intelligence Service, Major General Hassan Mahmoud Rashad.

Corn

I remember that. Rashad was Kamel's deputy, right? So it was a move toward continuity, but it also signaled a fresh pair of eyes on some very stagnant negotiations.

Herman

Right. Rashad is a career intelligence officer, very low profile, but he stepped into the role right as the situation was reaching a critical point. By late twenty twenty-four and into twenty twenty-five, the pressure to reach some kind of long-term arrangement was immense.

Corn

So let us get into the mechanics of how these negotiations actually happen. Daniel was curious about the face-to-face aspect, or lack thereof. How do they actually move the needle when the two sides won't even sit in the same room?

Herman

It is a process often called shuttle diplomacy, but it is done within a single building, usually a high-end hotel in Cairo or an intelligence headquarters. Imagine you have the Israeli delegation, usually led by the heads of the Shin Bet and the Mossad, in one wing or on one floor. Then you have the Hamas delegation on another floor.

Corn

And the Egyptians are the ones literally walking between them?

Herman

Literally. The Egyptian intelligence officers act as the bridge. They will take a proposal from the Israelis, walk it down to the Hamas room, listen to the objections, translate the nuances, and then walk back. But it is more than just being a messenger. They are active editors. They will tell the Israelis, look, they will never accept this wording, but if you change it to this, we might have a chance. And they do the same with Hamas.

Corn

So they are almost like a filter. They strip away the inflammatory rhetoric and try to find the technical points where an agreement can actually live.

Herman

Exactly. And this can go on for eighteen, twenty hours a day during a crisis. There is a lot of coffee, a lot of cigarettes, and a lot of very blunt language. The Egyptians aren't always polite. They will tell Hamas, you are being delusional about your leverage. And they will tell the Israelis, if you don't offer some kind of humanitarian relief, this whole thing collapses.

Corn

It sounds exhausting. And I suppose that is why the role of the individual intelligence chief is so important. They have to build a personal rapport with both sides.

Herman

They do. They have to be trusted by both. Israel needs to know that when the Egyptians say Hamas is ready to move, it is true. And Hamas needs to know that Egypt isn't just acting as an Israeli puppet. That is a very narrow tightrope to walk.

Corn

One of the biggest points of contention we have seen over the last couple of years is the Philadelphi Corridor. For those who don't know the specifics, could you explain why that fourteen-kilometer strip of land is such a massive hurdle in these talks?

Herman

The Philadelphi Corridor is the buffer zone that runs the entire length of the border between Gaza and Egypt. Under the nineteen seventy-nine peace treaty, it was supposed to be a demilitarized zone. When Israel withdrew from Gaza in two thousand five, they handed control of the border to Egypt and the Palestinian Authority. But after Hamas took over in two thousand seven, it became a sieve.

Corn

That is where the tunnels were.

Herman

Hundreds of them. That was the oxygen line for Hamas. Everything from cars and fuel to advanced weaponry came through those tunnels. Egypt eventually realized that these tunnels were also being used by militants in the Sinai, so they started a massive campaign to destroy them. They even created a buffer zone on their own side, demolishing thousands of homes in Rafah on the Egyptian side to build a massive trench and wall.

Corn

But the dynamic changed again in May twenty twenty-four.

Herman

Right. On May twenty-ninth, twenty twenty-four, the Israeli military announced they had taken full operational control of the Philadelphi Corridor. This was a huge turning point. For the first time since two thousand five, the Israeli army was physically standing on the border between Egypt and Gaza.

Corn

And that created a major diplomatic crisis with Cairo, didn't it? Because the Egyptians saw it as a violation of the peace treaty.

Herman

It was a very delicate moment. Officially, Egypt condemned it. They said it threatened the foundations of the peace treaty. But behind the scenes, the intelligence channels remained open. The negotiations then shifted toward: how do we get the Israelis out of there while ensuring the tunnels never come back?

Corn

And that is where the talks stand even now, in early twenty twenty-six. The question of who monitors that border is essentially the lynchpin for any long-term stability.

Herman

It is. Israel wants a high-tech underground wall with sensors that they can monitor. Egypt wants to be the one in control, perhaps with some international oversight, but they don't want Israeli boots on their border permanently. It is a question of sovereignty versus security.

Corn

I want to go back to something Daniel asked about the motivation. We talked about security in the Sinai, but there is also a regional status element, isn't there? Egypt has always seen itself as the leader of the Arab world.

Herman

Absolutely. Being the indispensable mediator is a way for Egypt to maintain its relevance on the global stage. When the United States needs to talk to Hamas, they call Cairo. When the Europeans want to de-escalate a war, they go to Cairo. It gives Egypt a level of diplomatic cover and leverage that they wouldn't have otherwise.

Corn

It also helps them with their relationship with Washington.

Herman

Huge. Egypt receives over one billion dollars in military aid from the United States every year. Whenever there is talk in Congress about cutting that aid because of human rights concerns in Egypt, the argument for keeping it is always: look at the role they play in Gaza. Without Egypt, the whole region goes up in flames. It makes them too big to fail.

Corn

So it is a very cynical but very effective cycle. They manage a conflict that they don't necessarily want to solve completely, because the act of managing it is what gives them their value.

Herman

That might be a bit too cynical, but there is some truth to it. I think Egypt genuinely wants stability. They don't want a permanent war on their border. But they also know that a total victory for either side isn't necessarily in their interest.

Corn

Why not?

Herman

Well, if Israel were to completely re-occupy Gaza, Egypt would be worried about millions of refugees being pushed into the Sinai. That is their absolute nightmare scenario. They have been very clear that any displacement of Palestinians into Egyptian territory is a red line. They see it as an attempt to liquidate the Palestinian cause and make it Egypt's problem.

Corn

And on the other hand, they don't want a fully empowered Hamas state on their border either, because of that Muslim Brotherhood connection.

Herman

Exactly. So the sweet spot for Egypt is a contained, manageable Hamas that is dependent on Cairo for survival. That gives Egypt the most leverage.

Corn

Let us talk about some of the misconceptions. One thing I often hear is that Egypt could just open the border and solve the humanitarian crisis if they wanted to. Why is that not as simple as it sounds?

Herman

It is a common misconception that the Rafah crossing is just like any other border. In reality, it is governed by a complex set of international agreements. Before the current war, there was the two thousand five Agreement on Movement and Access, which involved European Union monitors and the Palestinian Authority.

Corn

And Israel has a say in what goes through, even if they aren't physically there?

Herman

They do. Because under the blockade, everything that goes into Gaza is supposed to be inspected to make sure it doesn't have a dual-use purpose for the military. If Egypt were to just open the border unilaterally and let thousands of trucks in without inspection, Israel would likely view that as a breach of their security and potentially even the peace treaty.

Corn

So Egypt is in this position where they are blamed by the Arab world for not doing enough for the Palestinians, but they are also under intense pressure from Israel and the US to keep the border tight.

Herman

They are stuck in the middle. And they are very sensitive about it. Remember back in mid-twenty twenty-four, there was that report that Egypt had supposedly changed the terms of a ceasefire proposal without telling the other mediators?

Corn

Yeah, I remember that. It caused a huge row with the CIA and Qatar.

Herman

Right. Egypt was so offended by those reports that they threatened to withdraw from the mediation entirely. Now, they didn't actually withdraw, because they can't afford to, but it showed how much pressure they are under. They have to look like they are helping the Palestinians while actually serving the security interests of the region.

Corn

Let us talk about the specific figures involved again. We mentioned Major General Hassan Mahmoud Rashad. Since he took over in October twenty twenty-four, how has the dynamic changed?

Herman

It is interesting. Rashad came in after the death of Yahya Sinwar, who was the leader of Hamas in Gaza. Sinwar was killed in October twenty twenty-four, right around the time Rashad was taking over. That was a massive shift because Sinwar was seen as the hardest of the hardliners.

Corn

So Rashad was dealing with a Hamas leadership that was suddenly much more decentralized and potentially more desperate.

Herman

Yes. And he has had to navigate the transition of Hamas leadership to figures like Khalil al-Hayya, who is based in Qatar but spends a lot of time in Cairo. Rashad's style seems to be even more focused on the technical security details. He has been pushing for a phased approach: small wins, humanitarian pauses, limited prisoner releases, to build enough trust for a larger deal.

Corn

And how does he interact with the Israelis?

Herman

It is the same counterparts. David Barnea from the Mossad and Ronen Bar from the Shin Bet. They are in Cairo constantly. The relationship between the heads of intelligence is often described as the most important bilateral link in the Middle East. They might disagree on the politics, but they speak the same language of security.

Corn

I think it is important to mention that this isn't just a three-way talk. You have the Americans and the Qataris in the room too. How does Egypt's role differ from Qatar's in these five-way negotiations?

Herman

That is a great distinction. Qatar is the bank and the host. They have the money for reconstruction and they provide the physical space for the political leaders to live. But Egypt is the neighbor and the enforcer. Qatar can't control the border. Qatar can't stop a tunnel from being dug. Only Egypt can do that.

Corn

So Qatar provides the carrot, and Egypt provides the stick?

Herman

In a way, yes. If Hamas doesn't play ball, Egypt can make life very difficult for them at the border. If Israel doesn't play ball, Egypt can slow down the security cooperation that Israel relies on. They have the most practical, real-world leverage.

Corn

We are talking about this as a very professional, cold-blooded exercise. But what about the humanitarian side? Does Egypt feel a genuine responsibility toward the people in Gaza?

Herman

I think there is a genuine feeling of solidarity among the Egyptian public. If you walk the streets of Cairo, the support for the Palestinian cause is overwhelming. And the government has to be responsive to that. They have sent thousands of tons of aid, they have treated thousands of wounded Gazans in Egyptian hospitals.

Corn

But it is balanced against that fear of instability.

Herman

Always. It is a tragedy of geography. Egypt wants to help, but they don't want to be overwhelmed. They want a Palestinian state, but they don't want a radical one on their doorstep. It is a constant exercise in risk management.

Corn

One of the things Daniel asked about was what is actually involved in these negotiations. We talked about the shuttle diplomacy, but what are the actual documents like? Are we talking about hundreds of pages of legal text?

Herman

Sometimes it is remarkably simple. It might be a one-page list of names for a prisoner exchange. Or a map of where the Israeli tanks will pull back to. But every single word is debated. For example, will the ceasefire be permanent or sustainable? That one word can take three weeks to resolve.

Corn

Because permanent implies a commitment that Israel isn't ready to make, while sustainable gives them more wiggle room?

Herman

Exactly. And the Egyptians are the ones who have to find the synonym that both sides can live with. They are essentially high-stakes lexicographers.

Corn

It is also about the second-order effects. If Egypt successfully mediates a deal, what does that mean for their economy?

Herman

It is huge for them. Stability in Gaza means the Suez Canal is safer. It means tourism in the Red Sea resorts like Sharm el-Sheikh is less likely to be affected by rocket fire or regional escalation. Egypt's economy has been struggling with high inflation and debt, so anything that prevents a regional war is a direct benefit to their bottom line.

Corn

So to sum it up for Daniel, Egypt took on this role because they had to. It wasn't a choice, it was a geographic and historical necessity.

Herman

Right. And they do it through their intelligence services because it is the only way to maintain the necessary secrecy and flexibility. They facilitate communication by being the trusted intermediary who can translate the needs of one side into the language of the other.

Corn

And looking forward into the rest of twenty twenty-six, do you see this role changing? Or is Egypt destined to be the permanent manager of this conflict?

Herman

I think as long as there is no two-state solution and as long as Gaza is a separate entity, Egypt will be the indispensable player. There is no one else who can replace them. No one else has the border, the intelligence ties, and the peace treaty with Israel. They are the anchor of the whole system, for better or worse.

Corn

It is a heavy burden. And I think it is one that the new intelligence chief, Hassan Mahmoud Rashad, is finding out is more complex than ever, especially with the shifts in the Israeli government and the internal dynamics of Hamas.

Herman

Definitely. It is a game of chess where the board is constantly shaking.

Corn

Well, I think we have covered a lot of ground here. Daniel, I hope that gives you a better sense of why our neighbors to the south are so central to everything we see happening in the news.

Herman

It is a fascinating study in power and pragmatism. And if you want to dive deeper into the history of the General Intelligence Service or the specifics of the Philadelphi Corridor, we have some older episodes in the archive that touch on the broader history of the region.

Corn

Yes, you can head over to myweirdprompts.com and search our archive. We have over four hundred episodes now, so there is plenty to explore if you are interested in the historical context of the Middle East.

Herman

And hey, before we sign off, if you have been enjoying the show and our deep dives into these complex topics, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other people find the show and helps us keep this collaboration going.

Corn

It really does. We read all the feedback and it helps us figure out what topics you guys want to hear about next. You can also get in touch with us through the contact form on our website if you have a prompt you want us to tackle.

Herman

Just like Daniel did. We love getting these questions from people who are paying attention to the nuances.

Corn

Alright, that is all for today's episode of My Weird Prompts. I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

Thanks for listening, and we will catch you in the next one.

Herman

Stay curious, everyone. Bye for now.