Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

“Egypt and the War in Gaza: A Conversation with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry”

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FEATURING

H.E. Sameh Shoukry
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Arab Republic of Egypt

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Jon B. Alterman: Good morning, good afternoon. I’m Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Brzezinski chair in global security and geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program here at CSIS.

I’m delighted to welcome an old friend of mine. Sameh Shoukry is Egypt’s foreign minister. He has been Egypt’s foreign minister since 2014. He has a long diplomatic career. We met when he was ambassador to Washington from 2008 until 2012. He was also Egypt’s ambassador to the United Nations organizations in Geneva from 2005 to 2008. Minister Shoukry has a remarkable diplomatic career, and Egypt plays a remarkable role as we think about resolving the crisis in Gaza. And we’re going to talk about it now. Minister Sameh Shoukry, welcome to CSIS, and thank you for joining us.

His Excellency Sameh Shoukry: Thank you, Jon. It’s delightful to be with you.

Dr. Alterman: Egypt surprised Israel on October 6th, 1973, crossing the Suez Canal, something that Israelis at the time thought was unthinkable. How did Hamas’ surprise attack 50 years and one day later resonate in Egypt?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, certainly, it was the instigator of the current conflict and its consequences. We have early on indicated our condemnation of any form of targeting of civilians and perpetration of any form of violent activity towards civilians. And this conflict, initiated on October the 7th, and I’m sure we are all aware of the very dire consequences that have resulted. And we continue to deal with those consequences.

From day one we have been actively in coordination with Israel, with the United States, with other regional partners to try to contain this conflict, to deal with the humanitarian aspects related to it, and to see how we can best create the environment that will provide the protection of civilians during the conflict. And, at the same time, look for a political horizon.

Definitely early on, we have been calling for a ceasefire, a humanitarian ceasefire, a humanitarian pause, to deal with the demographics related to Gaza. Gaza is the most densely populated area in the world. The civilians there are – have been secluded, have been under siege for a considerable time. And the conditions have been already detrimental and are becoming catastrophic.

Dr. Alterman: You have given a remarkable list of all the things we’re going to talk about over the next hour. So thank you for that. One of the things that strikes me as I look at the Egyptian media, as I look at Egyptians social media, is Hamas is consistently represented not as a terrorist group
but as a resistance movement. How does the government of Egypt see Hamas? Is it both a resistance movement and a terrorist group? Or is it principally as a terrorist group?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, I think at this stage it’s counterproductive to try to make these distinctions. We have had ongoing contacts with Hamas over these last eight, nine years, because of the desire of Israel that there is a(n) interlocutor that can intervene in terms of the conflicts that have erupted between Israel and Hamas over this period. That this is not the first – it’s certainly the most serious conflict that erupts between Hamas and Israel. We have already dealt with the five previous conflicts, have been interlocutor to both sides, conveying messages, reaching agreements of tranquility between them. And that has been the basis upon which our relationship to Hamas. Of course, the situation of the continuation of the occupation provides this definition of what constitutes legal resistance towards the occupation and what might be activities that go beyond the stipulations and the inherent right enshrined in the charter of the United Nations for people under occupation to resist. I think at this stage it is more important to concentrate on actually what is happening and the impact and the dangers associated with the situation.

Dr. Alterman: I want to talk about both what’s happening and what might happen, but there’s a history piece of this. Hamas historically grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood movement; the Muslim Brotherhood movement was founded in Egypt in 1928. It has generally, except for a brief time when it controlled the government, been in opposition to the government. It has often been illegal. Israel is very sympathetic to the traditional Egyptian view of the Muslim Brotherhood. Many Muslim Brotherhood leaders have been in jail in Egypt. Israel has sought to imprison people who are engaged with Hamas. Does that similarity of viewpoint about the illegitimacy of armed groups that embrace political Islam color in any way the way Egypt and Israel think about Hamas as an organization?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, we certainly, I think, need to make the distinction between the Muslim Brotherhood, who we have designated as a terrorist organization, who has been implicated over its history in violent actions, in assassinations and in promoting radical ideology, and not only promoting that ideology but undertaking activity that is unlawful and utilizing force and arms against the authority of the state. And I think early on we also indicated that there should be no confusion, that all terrorist radical ideologies, whether they be the Muslim Brotherhood or any other organizations, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, ISIS, Daesh, should all be considered the same entity and should be addressed in the same manner. Unfortunately, as you know, many of
our Western partners have tried to make distinctions between what constitutes terrorist organizations and what constitutes this end or political movements. And I think that in doing so they have emboldened some organizations, which they subsequently have considered as terrorist organizations, once their activities had impacted them directly.

I think it’s necessary that we are consistent in how we deal with radical extremist ideologies that at one time might pose themselves as political entities but their underlying logic and objectives are always to circumvent the law, to utilize terrorist means when it is necessary to suit their purposes, and that we should not be at any stage seduced by contentions that they are willing to play by the rulebooks, by the law, but rather that their worldview is for domination and for the promotion of their aims through what constitutes a religious radical ideology that is not supported by the principles of state sovereignty.

Dr. Alterman: This is exactly why Israel argues long and hard that Hamas can play absolutely no role in the future of Gaza and Hamas can play no role in the governance of Gaza. As an Egyptian official, given what you just said, how do you think about the importance that Hamas be barred from having any political role in the future of Gaza, as the Israelis have insisted is the case after violence stops?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, I think we all know the circumstances under which Hamas established governance and control over Gaza. It was utilizing violent means to do so to depose the Palestinian Authority without sufficient due process or referral to the Palestinian people in general.

I don't want to complicate this discussion by categorizing what is to happen and who has the authority to make decisions pertaining to the governance of Gaza. This is a matter that should be addressed by the Palestinian people.

As far as we’re concerned the Palestinian Authority is – and the PLO are the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people and should be accorded the ability to govern both the West Bank and Gaza.

Dr. Alterman: I will get to that in a second. But let me just ask, the Israelis have said long and hard that if the fighting stops before Hamas is seriously weakened Hamas will come back bigger and stronger.

The Arab governments have said there needs to be an immediate ceasefire. Is there an Arab strategy for an immediate ceasefire which would not lead to the Israeli nightmare of Hamas coming back bigger
and stronger?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, the Israeli government has been coexisting with Hamas for over the last 15 years. So at this stage and, of course, recognizing the development and the situation instigated by the events of October the 7th has changed the dynamics of that relationship.

But having said that I believe that, again, it’s a little premature for us to consider what and how Gaza will be governed since we are uncertain of the end result of this military activity and to what degree there will be achieving the strategic objectives that Israel has set out.

For that I think we have to wait and see what is the consequences of this military operation and the conditions that exist in Gaza and then proceed to address the political relationships.

Again, it’s somewhat confusing that this might be the first conflict that the international community deals with from a perspective of resistance to the prospect of a cessation of hostilities.

The international world order has been based on cessation of hostilities and resort to political means to resolve conflicts and this is a complicated situation, again, because of the nature of the territories involved which are under occupation.

There is a state of occupied territories; long rights of the Palestinian people that have not been adequately taken into account; you know, the two-state solution, which is the consensus of an end of the conflict that has not been implemented. So all of these various components do create complexities that I think we have to deal with from a practical perspective.

Dr. Alterman: It almost feels like you’re acknowledging that there won’t be an immediate ceasefire, that a ceasefire soon is desirable but what I hear is a sort of sense of we’ll see what happens and we’ll deal with that later.

H.E. Shoukry: As far as I’m concerned I would have liked to have seen a ceasefire yesterday and actually 60 days ago rather than in any way giving any perception that we are willing to live with an additional period of conflict and military activity.

I’m just addressing the practicalities. There doesn’t seem to be any active efforts or determination on the part of Israel unilaterally to end the military operation or on the part of the international community to effectively call and insist and implement a ceasefire.
Dr. Alterman: So let me ask you about the Arab role, and you talked about the importance of the Palestinian Authority as legitimate ruler of both Gaza and the West Bank, the importance of giving the Palestinian Authority legitimacy and responsibility.

What is the Arab role, both on the legitimacy side of extending Palestinian Authority rule to Gaza, but also on the capacity side? How should Arab governments think about empowering the Palestinian Authority which, as you know, is widely seen as ineffective in the West Bank alone, where it has been ruling?

H.E. Shoukry: Again, I don't want to categorize the Palestinian Authority. And certainly there have been, on the part of the activities of the Israeli government and policies in the West Bank, a contribution to the erosion of the ability of the Palestinian Authority to undertake its responsibilities. But that doesn’t discount that it is present. It does have a governance structure. And that it does have the authority by the support, and of course that has to be gauged of – and its representative abilities to represent the Palestinian people.

All of the Arab countries recognize the Palestinian Authority and recognize a Palestinian Authority that represents a Palestinian state and do everything in its power to further empower the Palestinian Authority. But, again, it is the conditions of the occupation that detracts from its ability to undertake its responsibility towards the issues, whether of security or services, to the Palestinian people in the West Bank and, for the duration that it did have authority in Gaza, to do so.

Dr. Alterman: So how can the Arab states strengthen the Palestinian Authority, both in its efforts to govern the West Bank, in its efforts to extend its governance to Gaza, in its efforts to help reconstruct Gaza under the authority of the Palestinian Authority? How can Arab states make that a reality?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, we do everything possible, from a political perspective, to reinforce the authority of the Palestinian Authority. The political recognition of the authority, and its leadership, and its institutions as the governing authority of the occupied territories. Support, of course, financial, is present as well to enable it to provide the services for the Palestinian people. And the advocacy of the Arab states in various international quarters of the need to enhance the credibility of the Palestinian Authority through financial contribution, through political recognition, so that it can continue to be a viable partner in these
efforts to strive to end the conflict.

Dr. Alterman: I was struck a couple of weeks ago, President Sisi met with the Spanish and Belgian prime ministers. And he said that a future Palestinian state could be demilitarized with an international presence. I haven’t seen a lot fleshing out what that idea would look like. How would that work? Has the Egyptian government been doing some follow up on that idea? I’m wondering what it looks like and what the Egyptian role would be.

H.E. Shoukry: This is not the first time that the president has made these statements. And I want to be clear that it’s not a proposal that the Palestinian state should be demilitarized. But this is an issue that has been accepted by the Palestinian Authority in the context of the long-standing negotiating process that it has undertaken with Israel related to the various dynamics and components of the potential agreement to implement the two-state solution.

I think it’s generally understood that that the Palestinian state that would be created would be demilitarized, would not have an armed forces component, but would have a police paramilitary-style force to maintain peace and order in the Palestinian state. And that the potential of some form of presence of an international force, of NATO force, of a combined Arab participation with an international component was all for the purpose of securing the – and maintaining the security of both the Palestinians and Israelis, to elevate the degree of confidence and attraction toward – of Israel towards a two-state solution. But there had been always on the part of consecutive Israeli governments a reluctance and a doubt that the established Palestinian state would be able to guarantee the security of Israel. Thereby, this was a way to provide a higher degree of confidence that the questions related to security for both Palestinians and Israelis could be addressed by the intervention and the presence of an American force, a NATO force, a combined force of American-NATO-regional contribution so as to guarantee security, but all within the context of encouraging Israel to show greater commitment and political will to the implementation of a two-state solution.

Dr. Alterman: How do you think Gazans would respond to Arab forces providing security in Gaza?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, I think we are speaking about two different issues now. The first is related to the creation of a Palestinian state. What you are asking is related to the current conflict in Gaza. So I think the two cannot be reconciled. What could be developed in the case of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state is one thing; what you are
proposing is related to the end of military activity and means of addressing the security concerns in Gaza while it remains occupied territory. This is a totally different issue and one which many have indicated Arab states would not be willing to contribute to.

Dr. Alterman: Ultimately, what would the Egyptian role be in this multilateral, multinational force? I mean, could we imagine an Egyptian role in the post-state phase of this?

H.E. Shoukry: In the post – in the establishment of the Palestinian state? Certainly. We have indicated we will do everything possible to promote the implementation of a two-state solution, the creation of a Palestinian state. If both the Palestinians and the Israelis and the international community all reach a consensus on how best to maintain peace and security of both Palestinians and Israelis by the presence of these forces, Egypt will be always in a position to endorse and to support such a solution.

Dr. Alterman: You’ve had – Egypt’s had a tremendous experience with the Multinational Force and Observers, which had helped maintain peace in Sinai since 1979. What are the key lessons as we think about both the post-conflict situation – because there have sometimes been conflicts in Sinai that the peacekeepers have been involved in – but also as we think about peacekeepers in a settled situation? What are the lessons that Egypt’s learned from the MFO experience – the Multinational Force and Observers – that help inform the way it thinks about an international presence in Gaza?

H.E. Shoukry: I don’t think we can draw any comparisons between what might be established or considered in a – in the case of the establishment of a Palestinian state and whatever security arrangements might be arrived at for elevating the security of both the Palestinian state and the Israeli state. And the comparison to the MFO I don’t think is applicable. The MFO’s mandate is very well-defined within the Camp David Peace Accords. It is a monitoring force to ascertain that both sides, Israel and Egypt, are fulfilling their obligations under the agreement. And contrary to what you just mentioned, it has never been in any way directly involved in any form of conflicts on the Sinai.

Dr. Alterman: It’s been attacked by – it’s been attacked by terrorist groups in Sinai.

H.E. Shoukry: Not – it might have come under unintentional targeting, but I don’t believe that at any stage it was intentionally targeted by any of the terrorist organizations that for a period were operational in the northeast of Sinai. It never was involved in any military activity related to that presence. That was the responsibility of the Egyptian
government. And we undertook it. And we undertook also to provide protection to the MFO since its mandate was not in any way to address any form of threats. But, of course, it did have the right, if it was under direct threat and attack – which, again, I don’t believe was the case at any time – as an intentional confrontation, to respond. And I’m not aware that at any stage it did respond to any perceived threat.

Dr. Alterman: One of the strange aspects of the MFO is most peacekeeping missions are U.N. peacekeeping missions. But there was a sense that it wasn’t possible to have the U.N., because at that time the Soviet Union wouldn’t have been facilitating it. We’re dealing first in a world of increasing great-power competition. And Egypt has warm relations with the United States, warm relations with Russia, warm relations with China.

As you think about the potential U.N. role, you’re in an unusual position because you understand all the great powers who are skirmishing and you understand the U.N., from your experience in government. How do you think about the U.N. as an element of leading toward a solution, a settlement in Gaza, given rising great-power competition and a sense that Russia and China are in a different place than the United States on the terms to end this conflict?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, the U.N. is the international mechanism that we all agreed is the pertinent format that can address issues of these threats to international peace and security. And it was established, of course, after the Second World War. And the dynamics related to the operations of the Security Council and the polarization that has, at times, made it difficult for the organization to undertake its responsibilities I think are well known.

But it is the mechanism that’s available to us. And we should take full advantage of it and should be able to resolve the contradictions that exists. I think the – all members of the international community have a strong vested interest that this mechanism should be effective, should be credible. And it’s up to us to – if we are true to the desire for a rule-based world order – that we empower the mechanisms available to us. Or else we need to go back to the drawing board and devise what we might consider as more effective.

Dr. Alterman: What are the tasks you think the U.N. is especially suited to address in resolving this conflict? And what are the tasks that you think we may have to look for a more MFO-like, outside the U.S. – outside the U.N. solution to?
Again, I think, recognizing the nature of the experience of the MFO – the MFO was established by agreement of the two sides, Egypt and Israel. And its mandate was defined by the two, at that time, conflicting parties to deal with a specific issue, to verify the implementation of the agreement. And that, in itself, can be replicated in other conflicts. But it does depend on the political will of the two parties that are involved, or the multi parties that are involved, and their ability to empower and provide the credibility of monitoring mechanism, peacekeeping mechanism that can be established, and provided the tools to be able to undertake its responsibilities.

These are all issues that depend on the political will of the sides of a conflict, but also on the international community, the great powers, as you mentioned, and their willingness to also provide and empower whatever established mechanisms to play their role and not to be obstructed by any form of veto or constraint on their ability to effectively play their role. But the United Nations has certainly shown its ability to address the humanitarian aspects of this and other conflicts, and we hope that it will be given the opportunity, without any form of manipulation, to undertake what is a very important, fundamental role to play consistent with international law and consistent with the protection and promotion of human rights.

I want to get to the humanitarian piece. But first, to people watching online, if you have a question for Mr. Shoukry, if you’re watching on YouTube, in the comments section there’s a way to ask a question. If you’re watching on the CSIS website, there’s an “ask a question” box. If you ask your question, it will come to me in the studio and we can ask Minister Shoukry the question.

So Egypt has played a profoundly important role in getting humanitarian aid into Gaza. Egypt has been frustrated there’s not been more aid. What needs to happen now, from all the parties, to get Gazans the aid that the U.N. and other humanitarian organizations feel is vital to supply to the people of Gaza?

Well, we have been struggling from early on with a lack of ability to provide greater volumes of assistance to meet the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people in Gaza, and it is because of that inability the procedures that were necessary put in place by Israel, the necessary coordination that had to be undertaken with Israel and with the support of the United Nations. Ambassador David Satterfield has been playing a vital role so that we can guarantee that the entry of assistance will not be in any way targeted militarily and that we can continue a regular flow. And we of course sense and see that the current level of assistance that is available within the procedures that
have been put in place is – inadequate would be an understatement. This is why the Arab League and the summit of Islamic countries have presented a resolution to the Security Council devoid of any of the political dimensions of this conflict, but solely concentrating on the need to enhance the volume of assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza by – and at the same time providing the confidence to the Israelis related to the vetting process of that assistance. That vetting process should be undertaken by the United Nations as an impartial and trusted partner and that will facilitate greater access of humanitarian assistance and goods to the – Gaza.

Dr. Alterman: As you know, there’s been some commentary that the problem is the Rafah gate is simply not built to take the amount of traffic that needs to go in. There’s been talk about opening what’s called Kerem Shalom, Karem Abu Salem, that is just, I guess, over the Egyptian border on the Israel-Gaza border. How important do you think it is to open additional access points into Gaza, and what’s the mechanism to open additional access points?

H.E. Shoukry: We would like to open all of the access points to Gaza and to utilize them for the entry of assistance, but that doesn’t seem to be practical at this stage or that Israel is willing to provide assistance through those crossings under its control. As for Rafah, Rafah has been open from day one, despite the fact that it was inoperational for a couple of days because it came under military bombardment. But as soon as we were – we put in the mechanisms with the assistance of our American partners, it has constantly been open, and we are willing to operate it on a 24-hour basis, so even if it was solely Rafah, I think we can increase substantially the amount of assistance flowing through it. It’s right that the Rafah crossing was not designed initially to be a crossing for commodities. It’s a crossing for individuals. But it has served well over this past period, and as I say, our willingness to open it on a 24-hour basis. Trucks are lined up waiting to enter not because of the inability of the crossing to absorb it, but it is because of the necessary authorizations that have to be addressed.

So from a principled position the current humanitarian situation necessitates that all of the crossings – there are six crossings from Israel – should be utilized, should provide assistance. Before this conflict there were 500 trucks entering Gaza on a daily basis. Under these circumstances and the depletion of whatever stocks were present in Gaza and the very severe conditions that exists the current level of a hundred or 200 is highly insufficient to meet the needs of 2.3 million people.
Dr. Alterman: You mentioned the Israeli unwillingness. There’s a really remarkable warming in Egyptian-Israeli relations over the last 10 years. For many years Israelis talked about the cold peace with Egypt. But this was a relationship which because of seeing eye to eye on security issues, because of a whole range of issues, the governments have spoken a lot.

Can you give us a sense of the Egyptian government’s – the tone of the Egyptian government’s conversations with the Israelis, the level of communication and whether there’s a sense that Egypt has leverage with the Israelis or is being brushed aside by the Israelis who are very focused on what they experienced October 7th and their anger and their desire for retribution?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, we certainly have upheld the Camp David Accords and the relationship with Israel over the last four decades and continue to indicate our commitment to the peace agreement and have had normal relations and have had deep conversations and interactions at various levels of government whether it’s political, economic, or security.

The degree of engagement, of course, differs from time to time in accordance with the interests of both countries but it is based on mutual confidence and a desire to deal with the issues related to the region, especially the Palestinian issue.

We have had always conversations where we give our best opinions or advice to our Israeli friends related to the importance of ending the conflict, of opening doors of regional integration and cooperation, of how the region will change and be in a better position to serve the interests of its people if the conflict and the ensuing negative impact on both Israelis and Palestinians was to be a thing of the past, to try to encourage and to raise the level of confidence in the Israeli government that the two-state solution is viable, is implementable, that Egypt would be with both parties step by step to guarantee their interests because we recognize it as the legitimate rights of the Palestinians to have a state of their own and that the two states can live side by side in peace and security.

So we have maintained a high level of dialogue on this issue and other challenges that are in the region within the context of any normal relationship between two states with – who are neighbors.

Dr. Alterman: So when I talk to U.S. officials they tell me that there is constant
dialogue up and down the chain with the Israelis, often growing frustration that Israelis and Americans aren’t seeing things eye to eye.

Is there that same constant dialogue on the Egyptian side or is it just a different kind of relationship?

**H.E. Shoukry:** No, there is – as I mentioned, there is a dialogue. This is a normal relationship with a dialogue at the political level, at the military level, at the security level, and we continue to advocate.

**Dr. Alterman:** Are you making headway?

**H.E. Shoukry:** We are always hopeful that we are making headway. We are hopeful that our advice might be heeded. I think in all occasions, whether with Israel or other partners, we have always given advice from a perspective of our knowledge and insight in the dynamics of our region. And I believe that in hindsight it should be recognized that much of the advice that we have given has borne to its relevance. And that had it been better received, it might have been to the best interests of our partners in the region and internationally.

**Dr. Alterman:** I’m sure you’ve looked at – you’ve looked very closely at what’s happening in Gaza. You mentioned the degree of destruction that’s taken place. Do you have any estimate, or have you seen any estimate that you trust, on what reconstruction would cost, and who might be persuaded to pay for Gaza reconstruction?

**H.E. Shoukry:** I couldn’t speak to the cost. I believe that the current assessment is that about 60 percent of buildings in Gaza have been destroyed. What sort of cost would be related to such a reconstruction effort, I couldn’t say. Who would undertake this responsibility also is a matter that I think needs further consideration. From a legal perspective, you might say that Israel, as the occupying power, would be responsible under international law to undertake that responsibility. Whether they would do so or not, we would have to ask them. But undoubtably, the current status and the needs of the Palestinian people in the aftermath to provide their basic human rights would necessitate the reconstruction.

And I hope that the international community will rise to the occasion. We have had in 2014, if you remember, after the third conflict between Hamas and Gaza, and the subsequent destruction also at that time of quite a substantial amount of the buildings and the dwellings in Gaza, a pledging conference for the reconstruction of Gaza and the implementation of a – of a monitoring mechanism for the entry of construction materials, so as to ascertain that they are not dual
I hope that the international community will recognize the humanitarian needs and respond to them effectively.

Dr. Alterman: Although, I have to tell you, just last night as I was getting ready to talk to you, I read a report by Heri Zilber for The Washington Institute about five years ago saying that every bag of cement that went into Gaza had to be accounted for to ensure that Gaza wouldn’t use the cement to build tunnels and other kinds of infrastructure. Egypt was, of course involved, along with Israel.

H.E. Shoukry: And the European Union.

Dr. Alterman: In monitoring that. And that monitoring mechanism seemed not to have been effective because the Israelis have talked about just how much cement was diverted to building tunnels in Gaza. So it’s a deep problem.

H.E. Shoukry: Well, again, I would be careful to try to make any conclusions, because I think the mechanisms that were put in place were quite stringent. And at the time, if there was any diversion, I’m sure it would have been monitored by especially Israel, that has a very close monitoring of the strip – the Gaza Strip. You cannot discount that a lot of these materials might have been smuggled, rather than been diverted through the mechanism. And here we’re speaking about a long duration of time where smuggling from various – from the sea, from borders, both Israeli and others, have also existed. But this is all, I think, speculative on both sides.

Dr. Alterman: It does seem to me though, as I think about the reconstruction of Gaza, that Egypt is going to have to play an absolutely central role in terms of logistics, and building up supplies, and stockpiling, and people traveling in. It seems to me that I can’t imagine a reconstruction of Gaza that Egypt isn’t deeply involved in.

H.E. Shoukry: We’ll certainly play a role. We’ll certainly play a role. We have every intention to support the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza. You might recall that after the fifth conflict the president designated half-a-billion dollars of assistance from Egypt to the reconstruction. And there had been quite a substantial effort on our side over the last three years, four years to address the needs – residential needs and development of areas in Gaza. Unfortunately, those have gone to waste by this conflict. So we will do everything in our power, within our capabilities – economic capabilities – to support the people of Gaza, but this is a huge responsibility that Egypt cannot shoulder alone.
Dr. Alterman: Right. But I – I see Egypt playing a sort of keystone role; that I can't imagine it can be successful without the active participation of Egypt.

The similar situation was at the time of the 1991 Gulf War. There was a sense that Egyptian participation – active participation was vital. As a consequence of that, Egypt had about 40 percent of its foreign debt forgiven. Egypt's foreign debt has increased fourfold over the last decade; it's now about $165 billion. Debt repayments next year are about 45 – just under $45 billion. Egypt's been in discussions with the IMF over loans. Do you – are you hoping – and I know you're not the minister of finance, but as a diplomat are you hoping that as the world thinks about Egypt's importance stabilizing Gaza that there's a recognition of the importance of Egypt's role and Egypt's stability, and that there will be debt relief as a consequence of Egypt's role stabilizing Gaza?

H.E. Shoukry: I wouldn't make the connection. I wouldn't make the connection between the two issues. I think our economic situation and our negotiations with the IMF and with our international partners has always been focusing on the structural macro- and microeconomic situation in Egypt. Egypt being the most populous country in the Middle East with 105 million, I think that in itself necessitates a very considered approach to how Egypt is able to meet its economic challenges. So the two issues are not connected in any way.

I think Egypt's role, whether it is related to the current conflict or generally in its contribution to maintaining the peace and security of the region in collaboration with the United States, with Western Europe, with its Arab brethren, has always been recognized. And thereby, maintaining the stability and the ability of Egypt to undertake its responsibilities in this regard does attract for a support for Egypt to meet its economic challenges, and respond to the needs of its people, and maintain its stability and security. What happens as relates to Gaza is that we will undertake also our responsibilities and provide the logistics, the assistance, irrespective of the other issue, which has a different path in terms of its – addressing it.

Dr. Alterman: We have a question from Mothanna Al Saleh, a humanitarian access advisor, who asks: What requirements does Egypt have for the creation of long-term cross-border humanitarian assistance operations in Gaza?

H.E. Shoukry: We have absolutely no requirements whatsoever except that we have to fulfill the needs of the Palestinian people in food, water, medical assistance, provision of shelter, temporary shelter for those who have lost. We have no requirements, no conditions; on the contrary, we
want to see as much humanitarian assistance that can access the Gaza Strip as possible, whether from Rafah and we advocate that other crossings – Israeli crossings – should also contribute to the provision of those humanitarian assistance commodities.

Dr. Alterman: We have a question from somebody named Georgi who neither gave an affiliation or a last name. He asks: Would a post-conflict agreement involve both Gaza and the West Bank? And I guess the other question is, is how do you operationalize linking Gaza, the West Bank, strengthening the Palestinian Authority, leading to a two-state solution, as a diplomatic – all my friends who are diplomats are very good at thinking, OK, here's where you want to be in five years. Here's what you have to do today, and here's what you have to do next month. How do you operationalize that going forward?

H.E. Shoukry: Well, from a – from, I think, a legal perspective, it is important to maintain the cohesiveness between the West Bank and Gaza. They constitute a unified entity. They are both recognized as occupied territories. They are both recognized as the basis upon which a Palestinian state will be created eventually, and thereby whatever structures – governance structures, should apply to both, should be responsive to the needs of the Palestinian people on both territories. There has been an effort to sever that relationship, an intentional effort to sever that relationship over the last 15 years, I think, which has resulted in the current situation that we find ourselves in, and I think proves that it was a misconceived plan.

Dr. Alterman: Would the basis of that be the Arab Peace Initiative that the Saudis initially put forward? Or would that just be a starting point? Does there have to be a new initiative? How do we – how do we get to moving forward on what you're talking about?

H.E. Shoukry: If you're referring to moving forward on ending the conflict, the international consensus is the two-state solution. The negotiating process between – since Oslo – between the Palestinian Authority and Israeli government is extensive. Previous Israeli governments have engaged, and I think there’s a very long and deep context in which many of the final status issues have been addressed.

The Arab Peace Initiative was a unilateral effort, again, to encourage the establishment of a Palestinian state and regional normalization and integration and cooperation as a form of incentive. If there’s any other path towards dealing with the legitimate and inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, certainly. But I think at this stage we need a(n) implementation and the actual creation of the Palestinian state, rather than talking about formats and mechanisms that only extend
the occupation and doesn’t demonstrate the presence of political will to end the conflict.

**Dr. Alterman:** Final question. And you’ve been very patient. You’re here to join a group of Arab and Muslim foreign ministers to meet with Secretary Blinken tomorrow. What’s your message for that meeting? And what do you expect the outcome to be?

**H.E. Shoukry:** This delegation has visited the five permanent members. It was because of scheduling. We would have preferred to have been here much earlier. But because of scheduling conflicts for the secretary and for the delegation, we were unable to come until this stage. But so we recognize the importance of the United States, its ability to influence the situation and to be able to have a deep impact on how this conflict hopefully ends.

So the main message is the importance, especially at this juncture – especially within the catastrophic humanitarian situation that exists. And you must recognize that the secretary-general of the United Nations has taken an unprecedented action by invoking Article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations, and conveying to the Security Council that there is a potential of the collapse of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, that this has an impact on international peace and security, thereby conveying to the Security Council the need to undertake measures to prevent this occurrence.

Of course, the United States is as a permanent member of the United Nations, but it also – its deep relationship to Israel, to the Arab world provides it the opportunity to play a very active and definitive role in ending the conflict and finding the necessary path forward. So the message will be that it’s time to end the military conflict in – even in terms of a humanitarian ceasefire or a humanitarian pause because of the conditions that exist, because of the threats to the collapse of the humanitarian situation, and also because of the need to – that this conflict does not escalate, does not expand regionally or internationally; that the dangers associated for countries of the region and the interests of the United States can better be served by finding a solution to this conflict in Gaza but to the broader conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. So we hope that we will find a positive response and that we will continue, as states that have also a deep relationship with the United States, be able to cooperate, coordinate, and contribute to a more stable, safe, and prosperous region.

**Dr. Alterman:** Your Excellency Sameh Shoukry, foreign minister of the Arab Republic of Egypt, thank you very much for joining us.
H.E. Shoukry: Thank you for having me.

(END.)