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Egypt Working to Contain Gaza

By Ehud Yaari

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Egypt has been scrambling to formulate a new policy toward the Gaza Strip this week after being challenged by Hamas, which opened more than eleven crossings along the Israeli-constructed wall that serves as the Egypt-Gaza border. Up to 750,000 Palestinians have flooded the northeastern corner of the Sinai Peninsula since January 23, spending approximately \$130 million in local markets, while tens of thousands of Egyptians took advantage of the lack of immigration, customs, and security controls to cross into Gaza. This massive movement of people caught many by surprise and may have serious ramifications for Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinians.

The 'Invasion'

Huge crowds of Palestinians have been on a wild shopping spree in Egypt, cleaning out all the available merchandise, gas, and fuel at considerably cheaper prices than in Gaza. This flurry of activity has driven prices up amid growing resentment from the local population. It has also sparked numerous violent incidents, including Hamas gunmen firing at Egyptian border police in Rafah and skirmishes between Palestinians and local Bedouin tribesmen who became increasingly concerned about the "invasion" and hoped to chase the visitors away.

Among the masses flocking to Egypt were hundreds if not thousands of armed militiamen from Hamas and other factions, whose penetration into central and southern Sinai has led to a terrorism alert in the Israeli Negev. In addition, Egyptian security forces have detained 3,000 Palestinians for trying to reach the Suez Canal in order to cross into mainland Egypt. At the same time, Egyptian political activists -- mainly leaders and cadres of the Muslim Brotherhood -- hurried to Gaza to demonstrate their solidarity with Hamas while staging more than seventy rallies across Egypt protesting any reclosure of the border.

Egypt's Tactics

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak initially ordered his troops to give way to the immense numbers of Palestinians crossing the border in order to prevent a bloodbath. Egyptian commanders were even instructed not to shoot back when thirty Egyptian soldiers were injured, some severely, by Hamas fire. The strategy later evolved into a phased containment, with the aim of forcing all of the Palestinians out, under threat of arrest, by February 2.

In phase one of this plan, Egyptian reinforcements sealed all the Suez Canal crossings -- including al-Salam Bridge, the Hamdi Tunnel, and ferry shuttle services -- to stop Palestinians from reaching the Delta Valley. This included Palestinians with valid visas and travel permits. Next, the Egyptians shut down the city of al-Arish, the capital of the North Sinai governorate, which had absorbed the early shockwaves of Palestinian crowds. After all the exits to al-Arish were blocked, security forces employed the same tactics in the town of Sheikh Zuwaid, attempting to lock the visitors into a small enclave near the Egyptian side of Rafah. Finally, by drastically cutting the number of supply trucks permitted to reach these areas, Egyptian authorities managed to keep the markets depleted, leading to a steady reduction in the number of Gazans. Still, it remains

to be seen how many Palestinians will choose to remain in Egypt past the deadline.

From Sympathy to Criticism

Public opinion in Egypt -- at least as reflected in the media -- was quite supportive of Mubarak's decision to avoid bloodshed and allow the Palestinians to break the Israeli siege. Yet, as several attempts to stop the "invasion" proved futile and more violent incidents occurred, bitter criticism of Hamas became widespread. Stories of Palestinian flags being raised over buildings in the Sinai and arrests of Gazans carrying explosives have contributed to a growing sense that Egypt's sovereignty was violated and that Hamas was not respecting Egyptian national pride. As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood was obliged to lower its profile on this issue in the past few days. For many Egyptians, Gaza now appears as a potential threat to the home front, since it can act as a secure base for the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamist groups.

The Rafah Problem

Mubarak has no appetite for an all-out conflict with Hamas. For him, the cost of a confrontation would be too high, in terms of both the domestic front and Egypt's standing in the Arab world. Like Hamas, however, Cairo is also aware that there is no going back to the status quo. Therefore, its preferred course is to reseal the border with Hamas's consent -- as has been happening since January 26 -- and concentrate on an agreement to keep the Rafah terminal open, thus providing Gaza with an outlet that is not under Israeli supervision. Cairo seems to have reached the conclusion that it cannot afford to remain a partner in the siege of Hamas anymore.

A deal over the terminal has been quite elusive, however. For one thing, Hamas insists on being an operational partner at the crossing point, while Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas wants his own presidential guards (Force 17) to have sole authority. Hamas also objects to the continued presence of European Union monitors at the terminal and to any Israeli role in determining passage. Egypt is currently trying to square a circle by advancing ideas for an arrangement that would grant Hamas and Israel a separate "invisible presence" at the facility; unsurprisingly, the plan has not appealed to either side. With Abbas and Hamas leaders Khaled Mashal and Mahmoud Zahhar all negotiating with the Egyptians, there can be little expectation for a speedy resolution. Instead, an extended period of Egyptian-Hamas management of the crossing is likely.

Future Direction

In Israel, there are those who believe that Egypt is now compelled to play a larger role in Gaza, perhaps even to take responsibility for the territory simply as a means of self-defense (this sentiment is shared by several analysts in Washington and some Arab quarters). Cairo is not keen to be dragged into the Gaza quagmire, however. The Egyptian security delegation that had been stationed in Gaza left in June 2007 and has not returned. Egypt also refuses to adopt the World Bank proposal that would divert commercial traffic previously going through Israel to a new Rafah trade corridor terminating in the Sinai.

Indeed, it seems that Egypt has decided to stick to its own disengagement from Gaza, a policy implemented following Anwar Sadat's peace treaty with Israel. Since then, Egypt has consistently reduced the scope of its ties with Gaza, refrained from maintaining an active pro-Egyptian political constituency there, cut down Palestinian traffic -- including commerce, pilgrims, and students -- and generally minimized direct involvement. The thrust of this policy has been to scale down Egypt's exposure to Palestinians across the border.

Cairo's current imperative is to contain Hamas and keep it focused on Israel. To achieve this goal, Mubarak wants to first sponsor a new round of dialogue between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. But for this to happen, Abbas would have to drop his preconditions for such negotiations. Second, Egypt seeks a de facto ceasefire, putting an end to Hamas's Qassam rocket attacks and Israel's frequent anti-Hamas operations in Gaza. Unfortunately, this arrangement would allow Hamas to further consolidate its power while maintaining

a steady flow of arms through the Sinai. Only a failure of this game plan -- or perhaps additional provocations by Hamas -- would move Cairo to review its present stance.

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