

In face of Israeli repression, tens of thousands of Palestinians force their way into Egypt

David Walsh
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Following a series of explosions early Wednesday that blew up major portions of the wall separating the Gaza Strip and Egypt, tens of thousands of Palestinians streamed across the border in search of food, fuel, cement and other supplies. One media report suggested as many as 350,000 people had entered Egypt, a fifth of Gaza's population. Other accounts claimed lower totals, from 60,000 to 100,000.

The impoverished and persecuted Palestinian population in Gaza has faced a particularly grave crisis since the Israeli cabinet voted last week to close all border crossings, cutting off food, medicine and fuel to the 1.5 million residents. The Zionist regime's action forced the shutdown Sunday of Gaza's only power plant.

On Tuesday, Israel allowed limited shipments of fuel, food and medicine into Gaza, but officials of the International Red Cross in Geneva, who called on Tel Aviv to lift the blockade, said the situation remained precarious. A Red Cross spokeswoman said, "There is a risk of crumbling of the infrastructure that is now just holding on by a thread."

The head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in Gaza, John Ging, commented, "We are teetering ... on the brink of a catastrophe." The agency announced Monday that it would have to suspend its food aid to 860,000 Gaza residents by later in the week if the crossings from Israel into the Strip were not unsealed.

Amnesty International pointed out that more than 40 seriously ill patients had died "since the Israeli authorities closed Gaza's borders, so denying them access to hospital treatment abroad, but now the entire Gaza population is being put at risk as electricity and fuel supplies run out."

Tuesday's shipment of industrial diesel will only keep Gaza's power plant going for a few days. The facility's project manager, Rafiq Maliha, asked, "But what do I do next week? I have no reserves, so how can I plan?"

As a result of the shortage of fuel, sewage treatment plants were forced to shut down, pouring raw sewage into streets, fields and homes.

The most recent blockade and the misery it created in Gaza provoked protests Tuesday at the border in the town of Rafah. Palestinians demanding that Egypt open its frontier to supplies clashed with Egyptian riot police, who wielded clubs and fired in the air in an attempt to control the crowd. Dozens of protesters were injured.

Early the next morning, masked gunmen set off more than a dozen bombs, knocking down some two-thirds of the border wall.

Bulldozers moved in to allow access for cars, trucks and carts.

A BBC reporter described the scene: "We have seen people crowding around petrol stations, desperately filling up on fuel. We have seen families with luggage, cases held up high, as people are pouring in both directions across this border, but primarily from Gaza into Egypt. ...

"Essentially what has happened here is that the people of Gaza have forced on Egypt and Israel and the international community what everyone else refused to allow to happen—which was for the border crossing to be opened. They have done it themselves. ...

"Nobody is attempting to stop this. As we walked up to the border area, the final half-kilometre, there was one paltry line of Egyptian riot police. But they are hugely outnumbered here, it's physically impossible to restrain the surge of people coming over primarily from Gaza. ... I think at the moment it is not possible for Hamas [which exercises political authority in the Gaza Strip] nor for the Egyptian authorities to do anything about this."

Palestinians interviewed by the media explained their situation. Fatan Hessin, 45, told a *New York Times* reporter, "We are extremely tired of this life. The closure, the unemployment, the poverty. No one is working in my household."

Bloomberg news service quoted the comment of Mufida Abu Zarqa, 52, as she and her three daughters walked through a hole in the wall: "In addition to visiting my sick sister in Egypt, I want to buy some stuff to bring back to Gaza ... Because of the closure, we lack a lot of things, like food, fuel and cigarettes."

Due to Israeli restrictions on goods and travel, prices for basic commodities have soared in Gaza in recent months. The *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) noted that cigarettes in Gaza are eight times more expensive than those in Egypt, and a bag of cement is three times the price.

The AFP interviewed Jamal, a former officer with the Palestinian security forces, who came with his son and four large cans. "I am going to buy gas here, as you don't find it anymore in Gaza," he said.

Conditions in Gaza were already impossible before the most recent act of collective punishment meted out by the Israeli regime. Approximately 80 percent of the Gazan population lives in poverty, and more than 80 percent are dependent on relief agencies. The official unemployment rate reached 32.3 percent in mid-2007, but many have simply given up looking for work.

Rates of anemia caused in part by a lack of food and adequate nutrition have risen since 2007 in Gaza, with some 70 percent of

infants aged nine months now suffering from the condition. Diarrhea is also on the increase partly due to the lack of clean water and the lack of hygiene. The water supply dropped last year to 75 liters per person per day, about half the international standard of 150 liters per person per day.

The Egyptian regime was clearly caught off-guard by the destruction of the wall Wednesday and the mass influx. Egypt, ironically, is constrained by its agreements with Israel as to the size of the security force it can maintain in the area. Short of mowing hundreds of people down, the riot police and military had no choice but to allow free entry.

In an effort to put the best face on a politically humiliating defeat for his government's policy, Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak—after a conspicuous silence of several hours—claimed he had ordered his troops to allow the Gazans to cross the border because they were starving. "I told them to let them come in and eat and buy food and then return them later as long as they were not carrying weapons," he declared.

A massive and deadly confrontation with the Palestinians was politically impossible for the Mubarak regime. As the *Financial Times* noted, "The Palestinian influx places Egypt in a dilemma because while the Cairo government would like to continue to pressure Hamas, public opinion is deeply sympathetic to the suffering of the Gazans." Along the same lines, the *Guardian* commented, "Mubarak is in a bind: on the one hand he wants to maintain his relationship with Israel. On the other he must avoid the impression that he is abandoning the Palestinians."

According to reports, Egyptian security forces in Cairo Wednesday detained some 500 people—many of them belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood—protesting in support of the Gazan population. Police used tear gas and batons against the demonstration and chased people through the streets. Later, some 3,000 protesters rallied near the lawyers' union offices, chanting slogans against the Israeli blockade of Gaza.

Israeli officials responded to the border breach by angrily blaming the Egyptians and putting pressure on the Mubarak regime to reseal the frontier. Arye Merkel, Israel's foreign minister, told the media, "Basically we have no presence in that area. It is the Egyptian forces that are deployed alongside the border between Gaza and Egypt," he declared. "So therefore it's the responsibility of Egypt to ensure that the border operates properly according to the signed agreement. In other words we expect the Egyptians to solve the problem."

The US government—which has given its full support to the Israeli blockade and systematically blocked any UN Security Council condemnation of Tel Aviv's actions—expressed its unease over the destruction of the border wall. State Department spokesman Tom Casey told the press, "We are concerned about that situation and frankly I know the Egyptians are as well."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in keeping with Washington's policy, equated the mass suffering in Gaza and the Occupied Territories with the largely ineffective rocket and mortar attacks that are launched by Palestinian forces against Israeli towns. In Zurich on Wednesday in transit to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Rice told a press conference, "We are very concerned ... that both the security concerns of Israel and the

humanitarian concerns of the Gazans be met."

The day before the large-scale breakthrough in Rafah, Rice blandly told reporters, "Nobody wants innocent Gazans to suffer, and so we have spoken to the Israelis about the importance of not allowing a humanitarian crisis to unfold there."

White House spokeswoman Dana Perino was the bluntest and most ignorant of any of the American officials, absolving the Israelis entirely for the situation in Gaza. She claimed, "The Palestinians living in Gaza are living under chaos because of Hamas. The blame has to be placed fully at their feet."

For its part, Hamas voiced support for the blowing up of the wall, although the Islamic group failed to take credit for the action. It declared that the destruction of the barrier was "a reflection of the ... catastrophic situation which the Palestinian people in Gaza are living through due to the blockade."

At the same time, Hamas officials took the opportunity of the Palestinian flight into Egypt to cast their organization as a responsible negotiating partner. The group called on Egypt and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah, to join "urgent" talks about formally reopening the crossing between Gaza and Egypt. Hamas leader Ismail Haniya, in an emailed statement, appealed for talks aimed at setting up a means of jointly controlling the frontier. An Abbas representative promptly rejected the overture.

The scenes Wednesday morning in Rafah must have been unsettling and disturbing for every regime in the region—not only Cairo—and all the great powers. Relentless Israeli pressure on the Gaza population, aimed at stamping out resistance, with the assistance of the Mubarak regime, produced an explosion and the chain of repression broke at its weakest link, the Egyptian border.

In its own fashion, the mass outpouring of humanity across the frontier points to the irrationality of the existing state forms in the Middle East and emphasizes the unsustainability of the entire political set-up in the region.



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