

Egypt joins Israel in blockade of Gaza

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18 January 2010

Egypt has intervened forcibly to prevent international aid reaching Gaza, and has implemented new measures aimed at further tightening Israel's illegal and inhumane blockade.

Israel stopped all but the most essential food and medicine entering Gaza in June 2007. Hamas, the Islamist party which won the parliamentary elections against Fatah in January 2006, took control of Gaza in order to pre-empt a Fatah coup backed by Israel, the US, Jordan and Egypt. Israel has also banned virtually all exports from Gaza.

However, Israel's blockade could not succeed without the help of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. He has played a crucial role by agreeing to police Gaza's southern border at Rafah—the only entry point that does not pass through Israel—restricting the movement of people and goods and enforcing the Israeli blockade. Rafah is open only occasionally, and to people, not goods.

The Israeli-Egyptian siege has created the most appalling levels of poverty, deprivation and misery. Gaza's lifeline is the 400 tunnels under its border with Egypt, which bring in \$1 million of goods a day, as well as cash and weapons for Hamas. Egypt and Israel have resorted to blowing up the tunnels in order to keep Gaza sealed and Hamas, which is closely related to the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition party, isolated.

Now Mubarak has begun the construction of a 14-kilometre-long wall made of super strength steel that extends 18 metres underground. Designed by US army engineers, the wall has been manufactured in the US and tested to ensure it is bomb proof. It is being sunk close to the perimeter wall, with four kilometres already completed north of the Rafah crossing. Many Gazans believe that Egypt plans to flood the area.

The wall is part of a concerted attempt by Egypt to stop all goods and arms entering Gaza. In the past, it

tried to play down its role in enforcing the blockade. Ahmed Abul Gheit, Egypt's foreign minister, claimed that it was a matter of national security. He said, "Egyptian borders are sacred, and no Egyptian allows any violations in one way or another."

But now, Egypt is making a determined effort to reassure Tel Aviv and Washington that it will do anything required to isolate Gaza, no matter how brutal and how potentially destabilising to the Mubarak regime.

In another high profile crackdown a few days ago, Egyptian officials forcefully seized George Galloway, the sole British Member of Parliament for the anti-war Respect Party, and deported him from Egypt. Galloway had organised an international aid convoy to Gaza under the auspices of Viva Palestina, a British registered charity. It was a follow-up to his previous convoys in March and July to mark the first anniversary of Israel's 22-day offensive against Gaza.

Gheit declared Galloway "persona non grata" and banned him from entering the country again, accusing him of incitement against Egypt for criticising Cairo for delaying the aid convoy.

Egypt had done everything possible to prevent the international convoy reaching Gaza and organised a series of provocations. After crossing Europe and Turkey, where the convoy was joined by contingents from Turkey, Malaysia and other countries, and travelling through Syria and Jordan to cross over into Egypt, the Egyptian authorities refused it permission to enter. They insisted that it enter via the Mediterranean port of El Arish. This meant returning through Jordan to Syria for the vehicles to be ferried to El Arish from Latakia and some of the personnel to be flown to El Arish, at an additional cost of \$300,000.

When the convoy reached El Arish, Egypt tried to force the vehicles to enter Gaza before the other volunteers had arrived from Syria. But Viva Palestina

insisted that all the convoy enter Gaza together.

Egypt then refused to allow 59 of the 198 vehicles to enter Gaza via Rafah. Viva Palestina's spokesman, Zaher Berawi, said that Mohamed Heiba, a member of the ruling National Democratic Party, told the convoy's leaders that "Egypt's sovereignty dictates that these vehicles cross through Israel's Ouja crossing, which was unacceptable."

When the organisers refused, since Israel would never allow the goods to reach Gaza, Heiba walked out of the meeting. Shortly after, 2,000 riot police surrounded the port and used batons to break up the sit-in staged by the volunteers. Angry clashes broke out and 25 VP volunteers were injured, some of whom required hospital treatment. The scenes of police hitting the activists with batons aired on Turkish TV prompted thousands to take to the streets of Istanbul.

The following day, Hamas called a demonstration at the Rafah crossing to protest the steel wall and Egyptian restrictions on the international convoy. Hundreds of angry Palestinians began throwing stones across the border at Egyptian security forces who fired back at the protesters. Hamas police fired into the air to disperse the crowd, and an Egyptian soldier was killed. At least eight Palestinians were hurt in the clashes, including three who were seriously wounded. Arrest warrants were issued for seven members of the convoy for "inciting riots" in El Arish.

Egypt has since announced that all international aid convoys to Gaza are unwelcome. This was a response to Galloway's announcement that a fourth Viva Palestina convoy is planned in which Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez will participate.

In future, aid destined for Gaza must be sent to the port of El Arish and handed over to the Egyptian Red Crescent, which in turn will pass it on to the Palestinian Red Crescent.

In the run up to the convoy's entry into Egypt, more than 1,400 international activists organised in the Gaza Freedom March had gathered in Cairo in the hope of being allowed into Gaza. They were refused entry because of what Egyptian officials called the "sensitive situation" in the Palestinian territory. The authorities called in the riot police to remove the protestors, leading to angry scuffles and some injuries. Some 50 US citizens were seized and thrown into a detention cell at the US embassy.

Without the complicity of the entire Arab bourgeoisie, Israel would never be able to perpetrate its oppression of the Palestinian people. There has been a deafening silence from the Arab regimes as to the assault on the protestors. All of them are lining up behind Tel Aviv, Cairo and Washington. Syria too is mending its fences with Washington's client states in the region, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

Egypt, the first Arab state to recognise Israel, has played a leading role for the last 30 years to this end—supporting Israel's wars against Lebanon and Gaza, brokering talks aimed at suppressing all militant opposition by the Palestinians, and policing Egypt's border with Gaza. Now it is playing a key role in tightening Israel's noose around the Palestinians. While Mubarak cracks down on supplies going in to Gaza, the Israeli press are speaking openly about a military attack on the territory aimed at forcing Hamas and the Palestinians to surrender and restoring the Palestinian Authority's control.

The *Jerusalem Post* carried an article claiming that in a future conflict with Hamas, Israel would take over the Philadelphi corridor along Gaza's southern border with Egypt, while Major General Yom Tov Samia said Israel would take over "specific territory."

"We are facing another round in Gaza. I am very sceptical about the chance that Hamas will suddenly surrender or change its way without first suffering a far more serious blow than it did during Cast Lead [Israel's military assault on Gaza a year ago]," he added. The blow, he said, would be "more focused with long-range results including the conquering of territory that Hamas will understand it lost as a result of its provocations. We need to create a situation which reduces its oxygen supply."



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