

Breaking the rules

Hamas is pushing ahead in Gaza, trying to force an end to the siege while conditions appear favourable, writes **Saleh Al-Naami**

Israeli army commander of the southern region General Yuav Galant was on his way home to attend a family celebration last Friday afternoon when senior officers told him to immediately return to the southern Gaza Strip. There, tens of thousands of Hamas activists were marching towards the Sufa commercial crossing on the Gaza-Israel border in protest of the ongoing siege. The Israeli army's leadership was not taking any risks, dealing with the situation as though the protesters aimed to cross the border. Thousands of soldiers were called up for deployment along the border under cover of Apache helicopters and unmanned drones.

Israeli army leaders confirmed that although Hamas has threatened several times to go to the border and attempt crossing it, they had not expected that Hamas could succeed in organising such a large demonstration only 500 metres from the border in an area considered highly sensitive due to its proximity to several Israeli settlements east of the border. Although the demonstration was broken up, the message was delivered and the Israeli army has begun to deal with Hamas's threats to penetrate the border seriously. Recently, the Hamas leadership has been claiming that since it accepted the Egyptian truce initiative, it has the right to do "anything" to lift the siege from Gaza. Hamas leaders' threats indicate that the movement has not written off penetrating the Egyptian border to break the siege, nor intensifying armed activity against Israel. And yet Hamas prefers at this stage for its threats to contribute to convincing Cairo to place more pressure on Tel Aviv to lift the Gaza siege.

Yehia Moussa, deputy head of the Palestinian Legislative Council's Hamas bloc, believes that in preparing the atmosphere for Hamas's future move towards the border with Egypt, Hamas will come to see Egypt and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as partners in imposing the siege upon the Palestinian people. This will be the case, he says, if they don't work to reopen the Rafah crossing after Hamas and other resistance factions accepted the Egyptian truce initiative. In statements made to *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Moussa said that after Hamas and other Palestinian factions accepted the Egyptian truce initiative for the sake of Palestinian national interests, continuation of the siege means the annihilation of the Palestinian people. Moussa said that Hamas showed the "furthest degrees of flexibility" in accepting the Arab initiative, and that it is their right and duty to work by all means towards breaking the siege imposed on the Palestinian people.

"No one should blame us for taking steps in all directions to break the siege. All options are proposed in our moral, national move to break the siege. No one should expect us to accept the death sentence placed on us without doing anything," he said. Moussa stressed that the Rafah crossing is a Palestinian-Egyptian crossing, as Egypt has acknowledged, and that it can be reopened through agreement between the Egyptian government and President Abbas. Any party that continues to close the crossing after Palestinian factions accepted the Egyptian truce initiative "is colluding and conspiring with Israel to destroy the Palestinian people and obliterate its national cause," Moussa argued.

Moussa holds that it's unreasonable for the Arab nation to remain sat on its hands while the Palestinian people are suffering and destroyed, for they cannot live under present conditions. Other Hamas leaders concur. Moussa says that Egyptian General Intelligence Chief Omar

Suleiman promised Hamas leaders several times that Egypt would unilaterally reopen Rafah if Israel rejected the Egyptian truce initiative.

Mahdi Abdul-Hadi, president of the Palestinian Academy for Policy Studies in Jerusalem, offers an explanation for Hamas's mobilisation. He suggests that Hamas has no choice other than to play all its cards, for it can't lose anything as long as the strangulating siege continues. Yet Abdul-Hadi also says that in its recent mobilisation Hamas was trying to benefit from international, regional and national developments, not only to lift the siege on Gaza but also to secure the greatest amount of recognition possible while doing so. In interview with the *Weekly*, Abdul-Hadi indicated that Hamas has noticed a retreat in American influence on events in the region during the eleventh hour of President Bush's term. At the same time, regional parties have intervened to douse regional flames -- as took place recently in Doha, ending the Lebanese crisis contrary to the declared interests of the US administration -- for fear they will spread.

Abdul-Hadi stresses that several regional developments have indicated to Hamas the extent to which the US role has shrunken. One is Turkey's intervention to mediate between Israel and Syria, even though the Bush administration strongly opposes the idea of Tel Aviv resuming negotiations with Damascus. Hamas has also noticed the beginning of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, found in the agreement to hold a meeting soon between Saudi King Abdullah and Iranian leader Hashimi Rafsanjani. Abdul-Hadi stresses that in its mobilisation, Hamas wants to direct the attention of regional powers, whether allies or those distant, to the fact that they must cooperate in solving the Gaza siege crisis. He says that in stressing its agreement to the truce initiative crafted by Cairo, Hamas wants to deliver the message that the next step Cairo must take is to reopen Rafah.

Abdul-Hadi says that Hamas is also interested in developments taking place in the Israeli arena, which is brimming with contradictions and especially so since the corruption case against Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert surfaced. Numerous indications suggest that his political career is about to end. Abdul-Hadi also says that Hamas has begun to realise that the personal considerations of Israeli leaders -- at this stage in particular -- are among the most important factors in dealing with the Palestinian situation. By stepping up resistance activity against Israel, Hamas wants to suggest to Israeli leaders that it can influence domestic Israeli debate and place Israeli leaders in compromising positions. It wants to warn Israeli leaders against uncertain escalation; that it would be better to accept the Egyptian initiative and lift the siege.

Abdul-Hadi stresses that the Israeli public's strong desire for calm and an end to the firing of missiles forms an additional element of pressure on Israeli leaders to accept the Egyptian initiative and lift the siege. "Hamas noticed with interest the mobilisation within Fatah and the calls by many of its leaders to halt negotiations with Israel and return to dialogue with Hamas," he said.

Yet all such bets are not guaranteed. The Bush administration, and particularly towards the end of its term, may suddenly take steps towards creating a regional atmosphere that makes it difficult for Hamas to reach its goals. At the same time, it is difficult to judge the outcome of Iranian-Saudi rapprochement. Neither is there a guarantee that Hamas's escalation of military operations against Israel won't drive Tel Aviv's decision-makers to increase attacks against Gaza and Hamas in particular.

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