

GAZA

The 1995 agreement also provided for Palestinian elections, which were held in January 1996; Yasser Arafat was voted President by a large majority, and an 88-member Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) was also elected. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other groups boycotted the elections. The council met for the first time in Gaza City in March 1996.

Although it withdrew its troops once again in August and September 2005, Israel retains control of air space, territorial waters, offshore maritime access, the population registry, entry and exit points (regarding both people and goods), and the tax system.

What is the relationship between Egypt and Gaza today?

Egypt is not completely removed from the current situation in Gaza. There exists a sentiment of solidarity with Gaza among the Egyptian public in response to the treatment of its inhabitants by the occupying Israelis, though the actions of the Egyptian government do not always reflect that solidarity. On a more tangible level, Gaza and Egypt share an 11-km-long border. Control of that border was handed over to Egypt in September of 2005, and another agreement was finalized one month later in which Egypt would share the responsibility of patrolling the boundary with the newly created EU Border Assistance Mission in Rafah (see Box).

Rafah Border

The Rafah crossing into Egypt is the only exit from Gaza that does not pass through Israel, and as such represents the Gazans' best hope for access to the wider world. However, in 1993 it came under Israeli military control under the terms of the Oslo Accords; and during the second Intifada the Israeli army demolished thousands of homes in order to clear a "buffer zone" near the border to hamper the smuggling of weapons through tunnels to Egypt. In addition, they erected a fortification system with walls and armored outposts to keep Palestinians imprisoned in the Gaza Strip.

As part of its disengagement from Gaza in September 2005, the Israeli army handed over control and security responsibilities of the Rafah crossing to Egypt, under EU supervision. Since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in June 2007, however, the border has been closed; it was opened only briefly on January 23 2008 with the explosive breach of the six-meter-high border wall in which thousands of desperate Gazans flooded into Egypt to purchase much-needed provisions. Egyptian forces could do little to stem the human traffic from Gaza at first, but they eventually resealed the border on 3 February. It is estimated that Palestinians – with the blessing of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak – spent hundreds of millions of dollars in that span on the essential goods such as food, fuel, and cement that were either unavailable or unaffordable back home in Gaza.

The future of the crossing remains unclear. With EU observers long gone and Egypt acting carefully so as not to challenge Israel, it is likely that the Israelis will continue to exercise significant control over the border. It may be that the January breach of the border which so startled Egypt will lead President Mubarak to adopt a more reasoned strategy towards the crossing and allow some movement of people and goods. For now, however, Israel's voice on the issue remains the loudest, and their call for security and control continues to drown out the legal and humanitarian concerns for those in Gaza.

On the other hand, Egypt has managed to be an intermediary of sorts between the leaderships of Hamas and Israel. Egyptian involvement has been accepted by Prime Minister Olmert and Defense Minister Barak on the Israeli side and by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others on the Palestinian side. In March and May 2008, the Egyptians came to agreements with all Palestinian factions, including Hamas, that allowed them to re-open the Rafah Crossing at brief intervals so as to allow patients into Egypt for medical treatment.

It should be mentioned in this regard that Egypt deals with Hamas in a very different way than it does with a similar group active within its own borders: the Muslim Brotherhood. While it declared the latter illegal and refuses to deal with them, it has been willing to negotiate and create a relationship of reciprocity with Hamas. Their role as a facilitator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – similar to the role played by Turkey in recent Syrian-Israeli negotiations and that of Qatar in the internal Lebanese tensions – seems unlikely to change. While a number of Israeli politicians have hinted at their desire to turn Gaza into an Egyptian problem, especially after the breach of the Rafah crossing, those sentiments have died down, much to the relief of the Egyptians and the Palestinians.



Gazans bring home fuel bought during the Rafah breach in January 2008

DISENGAGEMENT AND LEGAL STATUS

Why did Sharon propose disengagement?

Israel's unilateral "Disengagement Plan" was first announced during Prime Minister Sharon's address to the Fourth Herzliya conference on 18 December 2003 and officially introduced in February 2004, at a time when the overall standing of Israel and its Prime Minister was not at its strongest: in the diplomatic arena, the international criticism of Sharon's separation barrier had peaked, with the International Court of Justice hearings in The Hague just ahead. In addition, Israel's economy had suffered considerably due to the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians,

