



How Did Egypt Get Trapped? Two Opposing Perspectives

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The complex situation which emerged overnight on the border between Egypt and Gaza gave birth to different perspectives on the multifaceted situation facing the Egyptian government. President Mubarak confronted by a *fait accompli*, with a large portion of the 1.5 million Gazans pouring into Egypt, had no choice but to allow those whom Egyptians consider their Palestinian brothers room to breathe and to purchase necessities in the Egyptian town of *Al-Arish*.

PI Online examines two opposing views on the unfolding developments. While many mainstream writers criticized Hamas for breaching the border with Egypt to resolve a crisis Hamas created, the Muslim Brotherhood took a different view of the thorny situation. There are three reasons why the Brotherhood's view is important. First, it sheds light on the implicit (and possibly explicit) coordination between the Brotherhood and Hamas; second, their views reflect the conflicted sentiments of the Arab population; and third, it shows how easily the grand designs of major powers can be foiled by smaller entities in the complex game of the Middle East.

Tariq Al-Hamid, writing in *al-Sahrq Al-Awsat*, echoes many of his colleagues who came out against what they considered the adventurous and disastrous politics of Hamas. In a column entitled "How Did Egypt Get Trapped?" the author considers statements by the Hamas leader, *Khalid Mish'al*, as heading down a dangerous path, creating a conflict with Egypt while relieving Israel from the humanitarian pressure it was starting to feel for its blockade of Gaza. *Al-Hamid* quotes *Mish'al* as saying that management of the border between Egypt and Gaza should be strictly an Egyptian-Palestinian concern irrespective of obligations dictated in previous international agreements, particularly if those obligations are considered unjust.¹ That attitude, *Al-Hamid* contends, puts the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement in jeopardy and creates a stressful situation between the two countries which can lead to an actual confrontation. The author contends that the trap Egypt fell into was not unexpected because the grand design of Islamists is to weaken moderate Arab regimes. The actions by Hamas, like those of Hizbullah in Lebanon, are designed to deliver the message to these regimes that the only way to avoid such problems is to accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology.

It is worth noting that *Mursi 'Atallah*, the CEO of the newspaper *Al-Ahram* who usually represents the Egyptian government position in his daily column, concluded his article today by cautioning against the Hamas – Muslim Brotherhood relationship and warning all entities against jeopardizing the security of Egypt.

Writing in Islam Online, political analyst, *Muhammad Gamal 'Arafa*, presented an opposing point of view. He examined the consequences which could result from the Gaza incident, detailing various possible scenarios and stating his preferences among them. *'Arafa* clearly makes the point that Hamas is here to stay and while he absolves the movement of any wrong doing, he is equally careful not to antagonize the Egyptians. He used as an analogy for his analysis a soccer game Egypt won in the World cup preliminaries this week, titling his article: "The *Rafah*

¹ *Mish'al* was referring to the "Camp David Accords" between Egypt and Israel

[crossing] Problem : Egypt and Hamas 3 - Israel 0". In the article, he portrays Hamas as the big victor in all three rounds of the crisis: 1) their ability to bring back pilgrims from Mecca through Egypt, contrary to Israeli wishes; 2) storming through the Egyptian border; and 3) making it uncomfortable for Arab regimes supporting the Israeli-American initiative to disregard Hamas.

'*Arafa* then attempted to describe the Egyptian impasse in positive terms. Mildly reprimanding the Egyptians for their delayed action in allowing the Palestinians to cross into Egypt, he then essentially lays out the position Egypt should take vis-à-vis the international community to justify letting in the Palestinians. The arguments he suggests are: 1) the action was in response to Israel's total disregard for Mubarak's repeated requests to Olmert and Barak to alleviate the Gaza blockade; 2) to show that Egypt has retaliatory measures that it could use in response to Israeli actions against Egypt, like the pressure by the Jewish Lobby in the U.S. which resulted in Congress withholding \$100 million in US AID to Egypt; and 3) Egypt now has a legitimate reason to request an amendment to the Camp David Accords to expand the limited number of troops that it is presently allowed to have stationed in the Sinai. The author then describes a series of possible scenarios that would follow. In each one, Hamas would have a role to play, either by having a say in how the *Rafah* crossing is managed, with or without reconciliation with Fatah, or by continuously reopening the border by force. He also warns against any attempt by Egypt to re-administer the Gaza territories, a solution he considers remote in view of the problems that Egypt and Israel will inherit by such an action. He maintains that Egypt would still be unable to stop Palestinians from shelling Israeli towns and Israel's ability to respond forcefully without entering into a direct military confrontation with Egypt would be restricted.

'*Arafa* warns the Egyptians that Israel will likely increase pressure on Egypt. He quotes retired Brigadier-General Shalom Harari of the Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel as stating that "the Hamas victory in Gaza would be limited to "PR" but the situation would now put more pressure on Egypt to act -- to Israel's benefit."² He concludes by asking other Arab countries to support the decision to keep the border open between Egypt and Gaza.

PI Online believes that, while Israel blamed Egypt for its lack of early action in the Sinai, there is a greater consensus among analysts that it was Israel's actions that contributed the most to the blow-up. Danny Ayalon, the former Israeli ambassador to Washington called the Israeli blockade "a resounding failure and a public relations disaster." The Israeli blockade basically gave Hamas a justification to take drastic action and for the Egypt not to interfere. It did not help the situation when today Israel's chief Rabi, *Yona Metzger*, called for Gazans to be transferred to the Sinai where they could build a Palestinian state with the help of the United States and the European Union.³

PI Online concludes that the situation in Egypt is dangerous enough to warrant serious coordinated efforts by many parties to avert a disaster. The Saudis must extend a helping hand to Mubarak by pressuring the Islamic elements in Hamas and Israel must make progress in the talks with President Abbas. The Europeans should play an important role by monitoring the Egypt-Gaza border, for now, and continuing to insist privately on improvements in the human rights situation in Egypt while toning down their public rhetoric. The European Parliament resolution condemning Egypt's human rights record [see **PI 534**] did little other than give Islamists ammunition to inflame the masses. The United States should demonstrate continuous resolve toward solving the Palestinian-Israeli problem. More importantly however, the U.S. Congress and Administration should show an appreciation for the role of Mubarak and Egyptian secularism, instead of penalizing the regime for events out of Mubarak's control. The U.S. could start by restoring the \$100 million dollars Congress withheld from the AID package, a decision the Islamists were able to make good use of and which was not in Israel's best interest. If any changes are necessary in aid to Egypt, it should be to replace some military aid with economic aid. It is by building hospitals and schools that the U.S. can help prevent the fanatics from defeating those who advocate a more moderate form of Islam and a secular government. If the Egyptian population, already steaming under economic pressure, becomes the next winnable battleground for Islamists, the problems of Hizbullah and Hamas will pale by comparison.

Source:

1) Al-Sharq Al-Awsat – Author: Tariq Al-Hamiid – Date: 1/28/2008

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSL23835571>

³ <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/948907.html>

<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=456016&issue=10653FirefoxHTMLShell\Open\Command>

2) IslamOnline – Author: Muhammad Gamal ‘Arafa – Date: 1/28/2008

http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1199279971911&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout

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