



July 16, 2017

## Hamas constructs a buffer zone to secure its border with Egypt in response to a demand from the Egyptian regime.



Left: Yahya al-Sinwar (pink shirt, center) head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip, pays a visit to the Rafah-Egypt border to inspect the construction of the buffer zone (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, July 5, 2017). Right: Carrying out construction on the Palestinian side of the Rafah-Egypt border (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, June 29, 2017).

### Overview

1. At the end of June 2017 the Hamas ministry of the interior and national security in the Gaza Strip **began work on the foundations of a buffer zone between the Gaza Strip and Egypt**. The objective of the zone is to increase Hamas' control over the border area in order to prevent smuggling and keep terrorist operatives from entering and leaving the Gaza Strip. The zone will be 12 kilometers (about 7.5 miles) long and reach from Kerem Shalom to the sea. In most places it will be between 50 and 150 meters (55 and 165 yards) wide. It will have a paved asphalt road and the existing embankment will be renovated and covered with barbed wire. Observation towers will be constructed and the zone will be a system of floodlights and a network of security cameras will be installed.

2. The construction of the buffer zone is apparently **part of Hamas' commitment to Egypt to support the separation of the Gaza Strip from ISIS's Sinai Province, against which the Egyptian security forces have been waging an ongoing struggle**. Egypt apparently conditioned the routine opening of the Rafah crossing for the passage of goods (including fuel for the Gaza Strip power plant) and people on **Hamas' fulfilling a series of security-related demands**. In ITIC assessment, one of those demands was that Hamas' security forces' achieve effective control along the Egyptian border in order to end smuggling and the provision of support for ISIS operatives in the Sinai Peninsula.

3. In the past there was extensive military collaboration between ISIS's Sinai Province and the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing: ISIS operatives helped smuggled weapons into the Gaza Strip, and Hamas helped manufacture weapons and uniforms for ISIS, hospitalized its wounded operatives and provided it with communications equipment. Apparently over the past year the relations between the two organizations cooled off. One reason was **pressure from Egypt, which considers ISIS a threat to its national security**.<sup>1</sup>

4. The buffer zone will increase Hamas' ability to enforce its authority but **will not hermetically seal the Gaza-Egypt border to the passage of terrorist operatives and weapons**. In ITIC assessment, that is because:

A. **Hamas has a strong interest in smuggling weapons and military equipment into the Gaza Strip from the Sinai Peninsula. Therefore it does not have an interest in hermetically sealing their main route into the Gaza Strip**. Thus it is reasonable to assume that even if Hamas does increase the enforcement of its authority along the border, **it will continue its efforts to bring weapons and equipment into the Gaza Strip through the smuggling tunnels, which in all probability will remain after the construction of the buffer zone has been completed**.

B. It is probably that **the jihadist operatives in the Gaza Strip will not cut their ties with ISIS's Sinai Province**, and will circumvent Hamas' security measures. **The participation of three operatives from the Gaza Strip (at least two of whom had been operatives in Hamas' military wing) in the attack on**

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<sup>1</sup> See the March 20, 2016 bulletin, "Hamas as a Supporter of Anti-Egyptian Terrorism: Hamas-Egyptian relations deteriorated following the Egyptian accusation of Hamas involvement in the 2015 assassination of the Egyptian attorney general."

**the Egyptian security forces in el-Barth** (southwest of Rafah), in which 23 soldiers were killed and 33 injured, **clearly illustrates that.**<sup>2</sup>

C. In exceptional circumstances (for example, a deterioration in relations with Israel) **Hamas' interest in smuggling weapons into the Gaza Strip and its relations with ISIS's Sinai Province may become warmer. That may occur even if warming relations with the Sinai Province involves risking Hamas' relations with Egypt.**

## The Buffer Zone

5. The objective of the buffer zone is to **increase Hamas ability to enforce its authority** along the Gaza Strip's border with Egypt and prevent smuggling and the infiltration of operatives into and out of the Gaza Strip. According to **Na'im al-Ghoul, commander of the Hamas-controlled national security forces**, the objective of the zone is to increase the security forces' control along the border and remove obstacles that could limit their view of the landscape (YouTube, June 28, 2017). He added **there would be channels for communication and full cooperation between Palestinian and Egypt security personnel** (alresalah.net, July 5, 2017).

6. The construction of the buffer zone is being financed by the Hamas ministry of the interior. The zone is expected to run from **Kerem Shalom in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, a distance of 12 kilometers (about 7.5 miles)**, and have an average width of between 50 and 150 meters (55 and 165 yards) (depending on the needs of local residents and the local physical conditions). At its western end it will reach a depth of 250 to 300 meters (about 275 to 330 yards). The entire area will be declared **a closed military zone** and **Hamas will increase the deployment of security force operatives** (alresalah.net, July 5, 2017).

7. The buffer zone is planned to include the following (alresalah.net, June 28, 2017):

A. **An asphalt road 25 meters (27 yards) wide from one end of the buffer zone to the other. It will be patrolled by Hamas security force operatives 24/7.**

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<sup>2</sup> The Egyptian press accused Hamas because **the terrorists who carried out the attack in the Sinai Peninsula entered through tunnels from the Gaza Strip**. For example, according to the July 11, 2017 edition of the Egyptian regime-affiliated newspaper al-Youm al-Sabaa, **the attack on the army post south of Rafah exposed Hamas' inability to defend the Gaza Strip**. According to the article, there were two possibilities: either Hamas operatives plotted against Egypt's national security, or Hamas cannot control the Gaza Strip and its border with Egypt. **The article says Hamas therefore bears direct responsibility for the crimes Palestinians from the Gaza Strip carried out on Egyptian territory.**

**B. The existing three-meter (about ten feet) embankment will be repaired and upgraded, and covered with barbed wire, which will have a number of open spaces.**

**C. Observation towers will be constructed along the route of the zone.**



**One of the observation towers erected in the buffer zone (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, June 28, 2017).**



**Left: A Hamas security force operative watches the [so-called] "Philadelphi Route" from the second observation tower erected in the buffer zone (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, June 28, 2017). Right: Yahya al-Sinwar (third from the right), head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip, mounts an observation tower overlooking the Egyptian border (YouTube, July 6, 2017).**

**D. The buffer zone will have a system of floodlights.**

E. **A network of security cameras** will be installed and controlled from **the national security forces' operations room**. It will be under the direct control of the headquarters of the ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip.

8. According to senior Palestinian security sources, construction work on the foundations of the buffer zone includes **leveling the terrain**, which is full of pits because of tunnel collapses; **uprooting fruit trees**; and **repairing the existing embankment**. The sources also reported that **the houses of Palestinians living near the buffer zone will be evacuated** and their owners will be compensated (france24 in Arabic, June 28, 2017). There will also be **increased deployment of security forces along the border and guard and observation posts will be built**. According to **Iyad al-Bazam, spokesman for the Hamas ministry of the interior, the construction work is expected to take about a month** (al-Jazeera, June 28, 2017).

9. According to **Na'im al-Ghoul, commander of Hamas' national security forces, the tunnels endangering the border will be destroyed. All tunnels which are not currently in use** will also be destroyed (alresalah.net, July 5, 2017). (Note: Thus it was not specifically stated that Hamas intended to **destroy all the tunnels**, without exception.)

10. **Yahya al-Sinwar, the head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, and other senior Hamas figures, visited the southern Gaza Strip for a first-hand look at the construction of the buffer zone from east to west. They visited the Palestinian side of the Kerem Shalom crossing, the Rafah crossing and the Hamas security forces' posts situated along the Egyptian border. Their guide was **Tawfiq Abu Na'im, deputy minister of the interior**, who briefed them on the situation in the area (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, July 5, 2017).



## Construction of the Buffer Zone



The route of the buffer zone on the Palestinian side of the Rafah-Egypt border (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, June 29, 2017).



Constructing the buffer zone on the Gazan side of the Rafah-Egypt border (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, June 29, 2017).



Yahya al-Sinwar (holding binoculars) pays a visit to the Rafah-Egypt border for a first-hand look at the construction of the buffer zone (Facebook page of the Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, July 5, 2017).



Tawfiq Abu Na'im, deputy minister of the interior in the Gaza Strip, holds a press conference near the construction site. To his right is Brigadier General Na'im al-Ghoul, commander of Hamas' national security forces in the Gaza Strip (Facebook page of the national security forces, June 28, 2017).

## Egypt's Reactions

11. Egyptian correspondent, commentator and al-Ahram editor Ashraf Abu el-Houl told an interviewer from the Egyptian al-Ghad satellite channel that as far as Egypt was concerned, Hamas' construction of a buffer zone was a "dream" that no one had imagined Hamas would carry out. He said it reflected an improvement in Egypt-Hamas relations following the recent meetings. He said it also meant that Yahya al-Sinwar was making decisions for Hamas from the Gaza

**Strip, and not senior Hamas figures in Doha (Qatar)** (al-Ghad TV, June 28, 2017). Gazan **political commentator Husam al-Dajani** said the construction of the buffer zone was in the joint interests of Egypt and Hamas, **and reflected Egypt's full confidence in Yahya al-Sinwar in the wake of the recent meetings held in Egypt** (Ma'an, June 29, 2017).

12. Egyptian and Palestinian sources reported that Egypt asked Hamas to intensify its security measures along the border because ISIS operatives in the Sinai Peninsula had recently received advanced weapons, among them shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. Such weapons are liable to make the clashes between ISIS operatives and Egyptian security forces more complex and deadly. According to the sources, that was one of the reasons leading Egypt to hasten an improvement in relations with Hamas and hold meetings with Hamas security delegations (al-Araby al-Jadeed, July 7, 2017)