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**Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
at the Israel Intelligence Heritage
& Commemoration Center (IICC)**

Crowds of Gazans streamed into Egypt after the border fence was breached. It was part of a Hamas pressure campaign to open the Rafah Crossing in contravention of agreements Egypt is a party to. The open border enables the terrorist organizations to smuggle operatives and weapons into the Gaza Strip.



Crowds crossing the border into Egyptian territory through one of the breaches in the fence (Suhib Salem for Reuters, January 23).

Overview

1. The escalation in the fighting between Hamas and Israel and the lack of fuel and supplies resulting from the closing of the crossings into the Gaza Strip were exploited by Hamas to exert pressure on Egypt. In our assessment, Hamas's goal is to cause the Rafah Crossing to be opened and to force the Egyptians to renege on its participation in the Crossings Agreement of August 2005.

2. To achieve its aim Hamas, as usual, has brought the Gaza Strip population into play to protest and demonstrate against Egypt at the Rafah Crossing. At the same time, the terrorist organizations created a fait accompli by tearing down the border fence between the Gaza Strip and Egypt in a number of places, which let an **uncontrolled mass** of hundreds of thousands of Gazans stream into Egyptian territory.

3. The Egyptian regime sent police reinforcements to the area to no avail, and could not find an effective response to Hamas's tactics. The uncontrolled movement of crowds of Gazans in and out of Egypt means that **Hamas can now smuggle terrorist operatives and weapons into the Gaza Strip with almost no interference.**



Crowds of Gazans breaking through the Rafah Crossing (Palestine-info Website, January 23).

Background

4. Israel's closing of the crossings into the Gaza Strip after a massive rocket attack and the lack of fuel and supplies that followed were exploited by Hamas and other terrorist organizations to exert pressure on Egypt. In our assessment, their goals are **the unilateral opening of the Rafah Crossing and the creation of new regime at the Gaza-Egypt**

border to replace those Egypt is committed to by the Crossings Agreement.¹ Some of the terrorist organizations even threatened that if Egypt did not accede to their request they would use **force** to open the crossing (Radio Sawt al-Quds, January 20). Even Israel's January 22 decision to renew the supply of fuel and humanitarian aid did not change Hamas's position, claiming that the aid reaching the Gaza Strip was not enough and **calling for continued pressure to be exerted on Egypt** (Al-Aqsa TV, January 22).

5. Hamas government prime minister **Ismail Haniya** suggested that a formal delegation be sent to Egypt to discuss arrangements for bringing aid into the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing (Palestine-info Website, January 21). **Khaled Mashal**, chairman of Hamas's political bureau in Damascus, said that he was putting pressure on Egypt to bring about the opening of the crossing. He said that he had appealed to Omar Suleiman, head of Egyptian intelligence, and Ahmed Abu al-Ghait, Egyptian foreign minister, to give a message from him to Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak (Al-Jazeera TV, January 21).²

6. Concurrently with its public appeals, Hamas organized protest marches near the Rafah Crossing attended by many civilians:

1) On **January 22** about 200 women belonging to a Hamas women's organization led a demonstration of thousands of Gazans to demand that Egypt open the crossing and allow Palestinians to leave the Gaza Strip. They shouted slogans defaming President Mubarak. In the heat of the demonstration the Palestinians broke through to the Egyptian terminal where a confrontation developed between them and the Egyptian security forces stationed at the crossing. The Egyptian forces used force to disperse the demonstrators, employing water cannons, night sticks and dogs, and according to reports, live ammunition as well (Al-Jazeera TV, January 22).³ During the confrontation a number of demonstrators were detained. At least 20 Palestinian demonstrators were slightly injured, as were a number of Egyptian soldiers.

2) On **January 21** there was a demonstration attended by hundreds of Palestinians near the Rafah Crossing. Among the demonstrators were doctors, patients and wounded Palestinians as well as Hamas members of the Legislative Council. They held a press conference and called for the immediate opening of the crossing (Al-Aqsa TV, January 22).

¹ The Rafah Crossing is operated as part of the Crossings Agreement signed after the disengagement in August 2005. The agreement mandates **coordination** between Israel, representatives of the Palestinian Authority and the Europeans relating to the movement of Gazans through the Crossing.

² To soften the appeal to Egypt, Hamas said that this time they were requesting that the crossings be opened for humanitarian reasons and not to bring weapons or money into the Gaza Strip (Palestine-info Website, January 20).

³ Following the events of the past week the Egyptians reinforced the forces at the crossing with 300 additional policemen specializing in riot control.

7. Alongside the demonstrations, **a fait accompli was achieved on the ground** when on the night of January 22 armed Palestinians detonated charges at a number of points along the concrete fence running through Rafah (Al-Arabiya TV, January 23). As a result, the fence was breached in eight locations and thousands of Gazans broke through the crossing to the Egyptian side. That forced the Egyptian regime, which could not withstand the pressure, to open the border crossing (January 23). The Palestinian and Israeli media reported that since the breaching of the fence, thousands of Palestinians have streamed into Egyptian territory (according to media estimations, between 150,000 and 300,000 so far).⁴ Many of them have bought supplies or asked for medical treatment and have returned to their homes. In addition, hundreds of Gazans who had been stuck at the terminal used the opportunity to return home.



One of the sites where the fence between the Gaza Strip and Egypt was torn down by armed Palestinians. Crowds of Gazans can be seen passing back and forth. (Ma'an News Agency, January 23).

8. At the same time as the protests in Gaza, there was a Muslim Brotherhood protest march in Cairo. It left from the People's Assembly and made its way to the headquarters of the Arab League (Muslim Brotherhood Website, January 21).

Reactions

9. **Israel security sources** regard the events as a security threat. In their assessment, a free passage of Palestinians into and out of Egypt **poses a security threat by enabling them to smuggle weapons and terrorist operatives** into the Gaza Strip with almost no interference (Ynet, January 23). The Israeli foreign ministry has officially announced that

⁴ In our assessment, the figures were exaggerated and tens of thousands, not hundreds of thousands of Gazans crossed into Egypt.

Egyptians are deployed along the border between the Egypt and the Gaza Strip and that it expects **Egypt** to solve the problem. According to the announcement, **Egypt is responsible to ensure a properly-operating border crossing in accordance with the agreements signed between the two countries.**

10. **A spokesman for the Egyptian foreign ministry** expressed regret at the events at the Rafah Crossing and said that Egypt was investing maximum efforts in finding a solution for the grave situation in the Gaza Strip. He said that the Egyptians had sent 40 trucks with supplies into the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom Crossing.⁵ He appealed to “those in control of the Gaza Strip” (by implication, the Hamas government) to prevent a recurrence of such events (Middle East News Agency, January 22).

11. **“Palestinian sources” condemned the Egyptian security force dispersal of the demonstrations. In a television interview, Musheir al-Masri**, a Hamas member of the Legislative Council, called upon the Egyptian leadership to open the Rafah Crossing to lift the burden from the shoulders of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (Ramattan News Agency, January 22).

12. **Palestinian presidential spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina** said that what happened at the Rafah Crossing was the result of the “unacceptable blockade” of the Gaza Strip. He said that Abu Mazen had demanded a number of times that the blockade be lifted and the crossings be placed under PA control (Wafa News Agency, January 23).

⁵ According to reports from an Israeli security source, on January 20 and 21 the Kerem Shalom Crossing was closed. On January 22, 13 trucks passed through.