

Gaza: And the Wall Came Tumbling Down

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In a well-planned operation, Hamas broke through the wall between the Gaza Strip and Egypt on the night of January 22-23. The pictures published in the global media of masses of Palestinians streaming to the Egyptian side in order to buy goods and enjoy a taste of freedom, and the voluminous commentaries about the event have created an impression that a dramatic episode with far-reaching consequences, at least as significant as the fall of the Berlin Wall, has taken place.

In Israel, responses varied. Some regarded the event as a crushing Hamas victory over the Israeli government's siege policy. Others voiced deep concern about the security consequences of the breach in the wall, while there were those who expressed the hope that Israel now had an opportunity to rid itself of responsibility for the Gaza Strip. The question is whether this event has any far-reaching ramifications for relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the long run, Egypt cannot afford a situation in which the border between it and the Gaza Strip is wide open. From its perspective, the bedlam could well spread from the Gaza Strip to Sinai, where the Egyptian authorities are already having difficulty in maintaining stable control. Egypt has therefore taken substantive measures to close the border. This does not mean a hermetic seal; it can be assumed that smuggling of both weapons and goods, which in any event was rife before the wall was breached, will continue.


Does the breach in the wall mean that the blockade of Gaza has been broken, and that distress in the Gaza Strip

is over? Certainly not. The fundamental hardship in Gaza is a result of shrunken local incomes, because goods from Gaza cannot reach the Israeli market or the Ashdod port en route to other destinations. In addition, Gaza does not receive its share of international aid as long as sanctions against the Hamas government continue. The unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip is very high, and most of the population receives aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other humanitarian organizations. Breaching the wall eased some of the immediate pressure caused by the cut in fuel supplies and consumer goods from Israel resulting from the escalation with Hamas in the preceding weeks. It could have been assumed that given the relative calm in security on the Gaza front (fewer rockets were launched) Israel would renew the supply of basic commodities.

Can Israel wash its hands of Gaza and abandon responsibility for it, following the opening of an exit door from Gaza to Egypt? Several conditions must be fulfilled in order for that to happen. First of all, Egypt must be willing to fill this role. Second, Egypt must be capable of performing this function. Third, the international community must accept a situation in which the possibility of entering and exiting Gaza from Egypt absolves Israel of responsibility for events in Gaza. It is highly doubtful whether these three conditions exist. Egypt has no interest in replacing Israel as the responsible party for Gaza. It wants no connection with the heavily armed Muslim extremists in the Gaza Strip. Egypt will therefore do only what is absolutely necessary to avoid the appearance of abandoning its Palestinian brothers.

In many respects, Egypt is incapable of taking Israel's

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place. It can serve as a conduit for transporting goods to Gaza, but it cannot provide a market for goods from Gaza, because the Egyptian and Gazan economies compete with rather than complement one another, and because it is more expensive to export by way of Egypt (Egyptian ports are further away and are inefficient). Hamas has indeed declared that it wishes to disengage from Israel and use Egypt as a substitute, and Egypt, which has no wish to appear as a collaborator in the Israeli siege of Gaza, is debating Hamas's request. This does not mean, however, that this policy reflects any economic logic for Gaza. If there is no possibility of importing goods from Israel because of the measures that Israel has taken and goods can be imported from Egypt, then obviously any government in Gaza will do so. This does not, however, entail a basis for building the Gazan economy.

Finally, it is doubtful whether the international community will be willing to accept the fact that Israel has completely disengaged from Gaza and is absolved entirely of its responsibility while it continues to control Palestinian territory. Even if Israel has no permanent presence in Gaza, it continues to influence events there through its control of Gaza's airspace and marine areas, and prevents the opening of airports and seaports for Gaza. The world is not willing to accept what is convenient for Israel – separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This is certainly the case while military friction continues and Israeli forces are entering and exiting Gaza. The question of whether there is an exit from Gaza in the direction of Egypt is completely irrelevant to Israel's security problem with the Gaza Strip and the difficulty in finding a comprehensive solution to rockets launched from Gaza. The belief that Israel now has an opportunity to push Gaza in the direction of Egypt, thereby ridding itself of this burden, may provide emotional satisfaction for Israelis frustrated by the situation in Gaza, but no real solution exists along these lines.

Has the siege policy, aimed at pressuring Hamas, failed? In fact, the question is whether there was ever any chance that this policy would succeed. It is possible

to hope that the measures will yield the desired results – if Hamas is offered a viable alternative that it can accept in exchange for relieving the pressure. Two possibilities have been offered to Hamas. One is to disappear and abandon its rule in Gaza in favor of the government of Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas's political rival. The other is to stop being Hamas, i.e., to completely change its political doctrine and accept the Quartet's conditions. There was no chance that Hamas would accept these alternatives, and it was therefore predictable that it would shatter whatever stability there was by an escalation of violence or through a dramatic action like breaching the wall. The Hamas government has stated for some time that it is willing to make a deal on a ceasefire with Israel in order to stabilize the situation. The crux, then, is if Israel intends to offer the Hamas government a more feasible alternative than what was previously suggested. In other words, the Israeli government must decide whether a continuation of the pressure in the unfounded hope that the Hamas government in Gaza will collapse is preferable to a limited deal with Hamas.

The events in Gaza have once again highlighted the split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and have also stressed the absolute lack of influence by Mahmoud Abbas and his government on events in Gaza. The latter are trying to remain an involved actor that can regain control over Gaza's linkage with the external world, i.e., its border crossings with Israel and Egypt. Hamas, however, will be unwilling to accept this, especially after it has succeeded in establishing that it is Egypt's partner for dialogue in all matters pertaining to the Gazan-Egyptian frontier.

It is possible that the events on the border with Egypt have generated a new opportunity for reconsidering the international community's function at the Gaza border crossings. A renewal and even expansion of the international presence there may provide a good solution to all the interested parties. This is also unlikely, however, without Hamas's involvement as a partner to the understandings authorizing such international activity.