



The *Mavi Marmara* Incident, Rafah, and Egypt's Steel Wall

By Tally Helfont

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The Gaza Strip has represented a potentially strategic threat on both the local and regional levels for the past several years. During this time, various steps have been taken by Israel, Egypt, the United States, and the European Union to try to mitigate the considerable challenge posed by Gaza, though with very limited success. However, one recent measure initiated by the Egyptian government -- the building of a steel wall underneath the Egyptian-Gazan border -- stands a chance of making a decisive change on the ground. Cairo began constructing an underground border barrier in December 2009 in order to halt the smuggling of illegal weapons and other contraband via the Hamas-run underground tunnel network. This wall, however, is also emblematic of a new fault line that has emerged between competing sides in the Middle East, pitting the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States against Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, Iran, and in certain instances, Turkey. (For more on this, see Tally Helfont, "Egypt's Wall with Gaza and the Emergence of a New Middle East Alignment," *Orbis*, Vol. 54, No. 3, (Summer 2010), available at: <http://www.fpri.org/orbis/5403/helfont.egyptandgaza.pdf>)

This fault-line was further illustrated by the recent Gaza-bound flotilla incident. On May 30th, a six-ship flotilla carrying 700 activists from 38 countries and 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid attempted to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. After the flotilla refused to unload its cargo at the port of Ashdod for inspection prior to delivery, Israeli navy boats intercepted the flotilla approximately 80 to 100 miles from the Israeli coast on May 31st. Naval commandos attempted to take peaceful control of the ships, but were unsuccessful in the case of the *MV Mavi Marmara*, a vessel owned and operated by a Turkish NGO. This particular confrontation ended in bloodshed with nine activists killed and several Israeli commandos badly injured.¹ While the details, surveillance footage, and accounts of this raid are highly disputed, international pressure and attention have focused on Israeli policy. But what about Egypt?

The flotilla's impact on Cairo must be measured along three lines: a) the Rafah border crossing, b) the status of the underground steel wall that Egypt has continued constructing under this border, and c) Egypt's position vis-à-vis Turkey's actions and Israel's response.

1) The Rafah crossing. As far as the first item is concerned, it should be noted that, more than anything else, the flotilla incident has focused the world's attention on the untenable situation in Gaza in a way that Hamas and Fatah combined have been unable to do in the past few years.

¹ Carol Migdalovitz, "Israel's Blockade of Gaza and the *Mavi Marmara* Incident," *CRS Report for Congress*, June 5, 2010.

International calls have been made on every level to lift the blockade on Gaza, some of which point the finger only at Israel and others which point to both Israel and Egypt. In response, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak gave instructions “to open the Rafah terminal to bring humanitarian and necessary medical aid to the Gaza Strip, and receive wounded and sick humanitarian cases that require crossing into Egyptian territory.” Sources in the government explained that the decision was “within the framework of Egypt's move to lift the suffering of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip” and that the crossing would remain open “indefinitely.”² However, Egypt has yet to fully permit free passage of Palestinians into its territory. Likewise, convoys of supplies and aid that were dispatched from all over Egypt, in part to test whether Mubarak’s words were accompanied by actual changes on the ground, experienced significant difficulties in getting their supplies to Gaza. According to several accounts in the Egyptian press, while medical aid was able to get to its intended recipients with what can be considered a normal amount of scrutiny and delay, construction materials and food have been unable to get through Egyptian checkpoints. Organizers of some of these convoys have said in the Egyptian press that they attempted to test the seriousness of the decision to open the Rafah border crossing but “... know now that the border is closed.”³ Taking into consideration that Egypt allowed select humanitarian aid to enter Gaza even before the flotilla incident, the situation on the ground remains largely the same.

- 2) **The steel wall.** The construction began in early December 2009 and, while it was originally slated to be completed sometime in 2011, recent statements by Egyptian government officials have moved the date to summer’s end -- a significant advance. Stressing that the opening of the Rafah crossing would not halt the construction of the wall, an Egyptian official, who asked not to be named during a meeting with a group of journalists, emphasized, “It is our project, we will pass goods to them over the surface of the earth (and not from underneath) and this must happen before our eyes.”⁴ In short, for the Egyptians, the smuggling tunnels continue to pose a threat to its national security on several fronts. Cairo, therefore, intends to continue its chosen policy in this regard, independent of other decisions relating to the actual border crossing.
- 3) **Egypt’s position on Turkey and Israel.** Egypt and Turkey seem to have situated themselves on opposite sides of this new regional divide on a host of critical issues. From this perspective, Egypt is likely to see Turkey’s championing of the Palestinian cause as part of Ankara’s growing regional ambition including its increased cooperation with Iran. Accordingly, the Egyptian press has been unrelenting in its criticism of recent Turkish foreign policy choices, not because it disagreed with the flotilla’s intention or its outcome, but rather for usurping Cairo’s natural role as the caretaker of the Palestinian issue and for advancing the Iranian agenda. Of course, these grievances are never fully addressed in the press. Instead, frustration most often manifests in the form of accusing Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of crowning himself the new sultan of the Middle East, and working to restore Ottomanesque Turkish leadership over the region.

By contrast, Egypt’s reaction to the Israeli raid has been largely muted and it seems as if it is leaving the most inflammatory, anti-Israel rhetoric and threats to the Turks and the Iranians. In response to intense international pressure, Israel announced that it will work to ease its blockade of Gaza. It is unclear how much change this will bring to daily life in Gaza since the most critical need in the territory presently is rebuilding the infrastructure; as of yet, construction materials are still

² “President Mubarak Ordered the Rafah Crossing to Open for an Indefinite Period,” *Al Masry Al Youm*, June 1, 2010, <www.almasryalyoum.com>.

³ For examples, see: Amira Howeidy, “Destination Rafah,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, No. 1002, June 10 – 16, 2010, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>; Amira Howeidy, “Testing the Border,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, No. 1003, June 17 – 23, 2010, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>;

⁴ “Egyptian Official: Steel Wall between Egypt and Gaza will be Completed at the End of Summer,” *Al-Dostor*, June 7, 2010, <<http://dostor.org>>.

prohibited. Cairo's greatest fear is that Israel will push Gaza towards Egypt. There have been reports in the press of an Israeli proposal to disengage from Gaza entirely, which would leave the Strip totally dependent on Egypt for goods and access. Mubarak's government strongly rejected this proposal. A spokesperson for the foreign ministry said on June 15th, "This kind of talk confirms what we have been saying for years, which is that there is official Israeli thought which aims to evade responsibility for the Gaza Strip and dump it on Egypt."⁵

Nevertheless, as the situation continues to develop, it will become more apparent whether this incident was enough of a catalyst to a) make a lasting change in Gaza and in the Gaza policies of Egypt and Israel, and b) revive the floundering Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In terms of the Middle East alignment, it looks as if Turkey is moving toward one side and Egypt remains firmly grounded on the other. While the extent to which the Erdogan government is willing to assist the likes of Iran and Hamas remains ambiguous, Turkey's recent moves are nearly as alarming to Egypt as they are to Israel. Cairo has made clear, at least, that its attitude towards Gaza, and its basic regional alignment, are not about to change. As the Egyptians (and Israelis) have more control over the land, air and sea around Gaza, Hamas' new found friend in Turkey may be less helpful than initially thought.

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⁵ "Egypt: Israel Wants to 'Dump' Gaza on Us," *Haaretz*, June 15, 2010, <www.haaretz.com>