

Egypt-Gaza Tunnels: The Lifeline Under Threat

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After the Arab-Israeli war in 1948-1949, the Gaza Strip was left under Egyptian military rule until Israel occupied it during the June 1967 "SixDay War". When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel in 1979, the border city of Rafah was divided; part went to the Gaza Strip and the rest stayed with Egypt. With a border zone patrolled by the Israeli army, Palestinian families began digging tunnels under their homes in order to keep in touch with friends and relatives on the Egyptian side. Israel discovered the first tunnel in 1983.

After signing the Oslo Accords which saw the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1993, Israel constructed a high barrier around Gaza and monitored those entering the Gaza Strip through the various border crossings. These were closed with the outbreak of the second, "Al-Aqsa", Intifada in 2000. The Israelis also bombed Gaza's only airport and sea port, effectively driving the Palestinians to find alternative ways and means to communicate with the outside world. The old tunnels were revived and used to import necessary goods to compensate for the shortages created by Israel's strict control over what, and who, could and could not enter the occupied territory.

The Israeli army then started to demolish houses which had tunnels, and later expanded their demolition operations to form a buffer zone between the border and Rafah City. According to Human Rights Watch, between 2000 and 2004 about 1,700 homes were demolished to create a 100 metre-wide zone along the border between Gaza and Egypt (known as the Philadelphi Route). In addition to this, when implementing its unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israel constructed a wall 8 metres high on the border.

When, in January 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, Israel imposed a siege on the Gaza Strip and closed the Erez crossing to Gaza workers with permits to work in Israel (which constituted 70 per cent of the workforce in the Gaza Strip). The occupying power also proceeded to close the Karni crossing, which is Gaza's main crossing used to transport goods, in addition to banning the use of the Rafah crossing into Egypt for pedestrian traffic. Such Israeli restrictions on trade and the movement of people in and out of the Gaza Strip, as well as the constant military incursions, prompted the Palestinians to dig longer and deeper tunnels and improve their infrastructure.

Many estimates from security and economic experts suggest that the number of tunnels between Sinai and Gaza is unprecedented in the history of the area, with as many as 1,200 in operation. According to an Israeli reporter in the Palestinian territories, Avi Sakharov, though, there are only around 500 tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Sinai, each costing around \$75,000 to construct. Disregarding these estimates, an Egyptian military source has claimed that there are just 225 tunnels under the Rafah border. If they consider that each

tunnel has several exits, some of which are in Egyptian homes and are difficult to detect, then there could be 550 tunnel exits.

Since late 2009, the tunnels have been expanded and enlarged, rivalling those in developed countries in their design and sophistication. Some are made of concrete and are large enough to allow trucks filled with goods and fuel to pass through with ease.

It appears from a report prepared by Israeli intelligence, parts of which were leaked to the media, that the Gaza Strip has experienced a “tunnel-making boom” requiring 20-25,000 workers on both sides of the Egyptian-Palestinian border.

Attempts by the Israeli and Egyptian authorities to demolish tunnels

Israel realised the threat posed by the tunnels to its blockade on Gaza, so its aircraft periodically bomb the tunnels in an attempt to hinder their operation. Israeli army officers have struggled to come up with a viable security, military or technological answer to the tunnel issue and have admitted that they do not have a magic solution to the problem.

In the same context, a report prepared by an American intelligence website noted that Egypt’s Corps of Engineers began working on uncovering the Gaza tunnels in 2007, and that the Minister of Defence during Hosni Mubarak’s rule, General Mohammed Tantawi, began a tunnel detection programme with US support. He requested a team of engineers specialising in the detection and destruction of tunnels to inspect the border area between Egypt and Gaza. Their report, revealed by leaked documents published by the “Wikileaks” website on November 21, 2007, was very pessimistic about their chances of mapping the tunnels; they said that it was difficult to pinpoint them precisely due to their small size and the absence of pumps or power cables, which would make them easier to detect.

Despite this, since 2008, the US has supplied the Egyptian army with tunnel detection equipment worth \$23 million, including sensors, remote control cars, drilling machines and infrared cameras. The anti-tunnel programme, supervised by the US, lasted from 2008 to 2010 and achieved some results. According to the diplomatic telegram published by “Wikileaks” on December 22, 2009, up to 3 tunnels were discovered every day. Despite this, the programme was stopped temporarily in 2010 due to the lack of security in Sinai and the overthrow of Mubarak a year later. The programme was resumed immediately after the coup which overthrew President Morsi.

The leaked report also revealed that the US Army Corps of Engineers awarded a contract estimated at \$10 million to Raytheon Technologies on August 28th to help detect underground tunnels between Sinai and the Gaza Strip.

Among the means used to destroy the tunnels is flooding them with sewage. This is a method used by the Egyptian army and it resorts to this method when the tunnel is near a residential area and they fear that blowing it up will lead to landslips that may affect Sinai homes. There are 12 machines working on this in various residential areas in Rafah.

Destruction of most tunnels and Gaza’s fear of establishing a security buffer zone

During its campaign to destroy the tunnels, the Egyptian army is raiding homes in its side of Rafah. If they find a tunnel in a house, they use dynamite to destroy it. Eyewitnesses, for example, said that at the beginning of September, armoured vehicles accompanied by the

Engineering Task Force raided a house on the Egyptian side of Al-Salam neighbourhood, west of Rafah and, after discovering a tunnel, used dynamite to destroy the building.

An owner of a tunnel used to smuggle desperately needed fuel into Gaza, which was recently bombed by the Egyptian army, explained that the army destroyed his tunnel, along with 3 other houses which also hid tunnels. "In less than a week," he said, "they demolished over 15 homes with tunnels, some of which had tin roofs, in order to implement the buffer zone plan."

Subhi Radwan, the Mayor of Rafah, told AFP that the Egyptian army had destroyed 95 per cent of the underground tunnels spread along the border between Gaza and Egypt in order to establish a security buffer zone. He warned against a "humanitarian catastrophe for 1,750,000 people in the Strip if the buffer zone, which aims to suffocate and intensify the blockade on Gaza, is established."

Radwan added that "the number of tunnels that were operating (until last June) are estimated at about 200-250, almost all of which have now been destroyed."

Robert Serry, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, told the UN Security Council on July 24, that 80 per cent of the tunnels linking Egypt and the Gaza Strip are "no longer fit for use" as a result of the strict measures taken by the Egyptian army. He added that the Gaza Strip suffers from "a significant shortage of fuel and basic construction materials which mainly entered through the tunnels due to the severe restrictions on imports through the official crossings and the high cost of fuel available from the West Bank and Israel." Moreover, the prices of food have risen and the fuel shortage has caused people to wait for hours in queues.

Colonel Ahmed Mohammed Ali, the spokesman for the Egyptian army, said in an interview with Al-Arabiya television, that the United States helped it to demolish the tunnels. Moreover, in response to a question about picking up the pace of the current demolitions taking place in Sinai, he said, "We have been working over the past year with some reservations, but since we started the process in Sinai on August 7th, we have destroyed over 300 tunnels, followed by another 142 tunnels, i.e. about 80 to 90 per cent of the tunnels we have discovered so far. We are continuing to monitor the construction of any new tunnels." He also confirmed that the US had supplied them with tunnel detecting devices in the past (during Mubarak's rule) and they are still using them.

Tunnel functions

A wide variety of goods are transported through the tunnels, from construction materials to food, medicine, clothes, fuel, computers, cattle and cars. The annual value of the goods transported through the tunnels is estimated by the International Crisis Group at between \$500 and \$700 million. The annual cost of the goods smuggled from Egypt to Gaza is \$1 billion.

The tunnels used to meet about 60 per cent of Gaza's needs. According to a study examined by Britain's Guardian newspaper, 65 per cent of the Strip's flour, 98 per cent of its sugar and 52 per cent of its rice comes through the tunnels.

Effects of the tunnel demolition on besieged Gaza

Nabil Abu Muaileq, the Chairman of the Palestinian Contractors' Union, said that the

continuous demolition of the tunnels affected Gaza's construction income, causing it to fall to zero over the past few days. He told "Safa" news that 60 per cent of construction relies on the tunnels, noting that 50 per cent of the projects are stalled and that "Gaza is on the verge of an economic and social crisis because the unemployment rate will increase as a result of the halt in the work of labourers, technicians, companies and factories". He also pointed out that about 40-50,000 Gazans work in the construction, mechanical and factory sector and over half will be affected and will lose their jobs as a result of the crisis. A report by the Euro-Mediterranean Observatory for Human Rights has warned of a sharp economic collapse that threatens to affect life in the Gaza Strip, as the blockade imposed on Gaza has reached unprecedented levels following the Egyptian authorities' demolition of the tunnels.

The report revealed that the losses suffered by Gaza's Palestinians in all economic sectors since the most recent measures taken by the Egyptian authorities is estimated at \$460 million. It predicts that continued closure of the tunnels will lead to a sharp decline in Gaza's GDP growth rate to below 3 per cent by the end of 2013, compared to last June's rate, which was about 15 per cent.

As for the factories, they are in one of their worst-ever phases, as they have completely stopped working after working greatly-reduced hours, over the last 6 years of the Israeli-led blockade. At that time, the factories were only producing 20 per cent of their production capacity. "As for the factories, they have completely stopped their work due to the power outages, fuel shortages and the factories' inability to provide petroleum to run generators which are used as an alternative for electricity, but even this alternative is no longer available."

The report also mentioned that this September the construction sector in Gaza worked at less than 15 per cent of its operational capacity, which means that 30,000 job opportunities were lost in two months. On the other hand, 12,000 citizens are still homeless due to their inability to rebuild their homes destroyed by the last two Israeli wars on Gaza.

According to local estimates, the tunnels were supplying the Strip with 3,500 tons of cement a day; that has declined to less than 1,000 tons a day, at a time when the Strip needs much more than that. This has caused a sharp rise in cement prices, and in light of the Egyptian crisis, the occupation is depriving Gaza from raw materials used in local industries and is preventing materials from entering via the Karem Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) border crossing.

The lack of fuel transported through the tunnels and the insufficient fuel coming through Karem Abu Salem is leading to complete paralysis in all the water and sanitation facilities, in addition to the work of the wells, the wastewater collection and pumping plants and the central water treatment plants. It has also led to the almost permanent outage of electricity, all of which adversely affects the daily life of the people.

The crisis in the health sector, which includes the lack of medicine and medical equipment and supplies, continues. The deficit has reached over 30 per cent, in addition to the difficulties in transferring patients for treatment abroad due to the crossing closures.

The Palestinian economy is suffering from direct economic losses in the production, investment, foreign trade, agriculture, industry and employment sectors, all of which have a negative impact on the Strip's economic performance and its growth rates, and multiplies its economic, social, health and psychological problems. Moreover, all of the economic and

production sectors are on the verge of stopping their work completely, mainly the industrial, agricultural and fishing sectors.

Tunnel victims

There are serious risks that accompany tunnel digging. Many men worked for 12 hours a day for 6 or 7 days a week in tight spaces. Since 2006, gas explosions, electric shocks, tunnel collapses and Israeli airstrikes have killed 235 Palestinians and injured 597 others, according to Al-Mezan Centre for Human Rights.

To confirm the aforementioned information, a report was released at the end of September by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the occupied Palestinian territories, UNOCHA, which stated that Egyptian sources have reported the destruction of at least 300 tunnels under the border with the Gaza Strip at the hands of the Egyptian army over the past three months, noting that the number of operating tunnels is now estimated at 10. The report also cited local sources in Gaza which claimed that during the period from 17 to 23 September, about 20 to 30 trucks transported various goods into the Gaza Strip, which represented just 15 per cent of the number that used to enter before last June. This has led to a significant reduction in goods, including the cheap fuel from Egypt and building materials.

Furthermore, the report noted that 300,000 to 400,000 litres of fuel enters Gaza on a daily basis due to the decreased operation of the tunnels, including the fuel transferred to the Gaza electric plant, compared to the one million litres a day that was received previously. The Palestinian Energy Authority has reported that despite the slight rise in the plant's fuel stock, from zero to 500,000 litres, it continues to work at half its capacity for 12 hours a day and 16 hours in some other areas.

The report also mentioned that construction materials continue to cross the border in limited quantities, with about 200 tons of construction materials, especially cement, in comparison to the daily average of 7,500 tons before June, according to the Palestinian Federation of Industries. This shortage has caused a sharp rise in the price of construction materials, which is leading to a decline in Gaza's construction activity. This has occurred after the announcement on September 17th that Israel had approved 50 trucks of construction materials a day, in addition to the 20 trucks that have been allowed entry into Gaza since December 2012.

Conclusion

It is clear that the tunnels are the economic lifeline for the 1.7 million people living under siege in the Gaza Strip. By closing these tunnels, all aspects of life are affected. The tunnels were established to keep the people of Gaza alive, to provide basic essentials such as food, water and medicines, and to break the blockade imposed by Israel. The Egyptian army's destruction of the tunnels suggests its cooperation with Israel in suffocating the Gaza Strip by means of a military buffer zone.

To resolve this crisis, the international community and international institutions and organisations are required to put pressure on the Israelis and Egyptians so that they open all the border crossings to allow people and goods to pass through. They must also work on lifting the blockade imposed on Gaza and allowing all imports into the sector without specifying the quantity or quality.

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