

Gaza's Hopes Dashed by Morsi and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

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Ever since the toppling of the [Mubarak](#) regime in [Egypt](#), Palestinians in Gaza have hoped that they would see an end to the punishing restrictions on their movement through the Rafah crossing with Egypt, their only gateway to the outside world.

I know first-hand about the hardships these restrictions cause, not only because as a reporter I have covered them for years, but because [my family has borne them personally](#) as we have had to go back and forth from our home in Gaza to Egypt for my wife's medical treatment.

But though there was a loosening of the restrictions since the fall of Egypt's Mubarak regime, 1.6 million residents in Gaza now face the return of the tight closure imposed on their movement since 2007, as Israel, the occupying power, works with Egypt to impose a tight [siege](#) on the area.

Punishing Palestinians for electing Hamas

Israel claimed that the siege was necessary because [Hamas](#), in power in Gaza, represented a threat; meanwhile Egypt bowed to international pressure by shutting down Gaza's main gateway to the outside world. The goal was in fact the same — to tighten the siege on Gaza to make Hamas' rule unviable, even though it had won an election in 2006.

Egypt then contended that the Rafah crossing terminal should operate according to the terms of the 2005 "Agreement on Movement and Access" brokered by the United States. This agreement required the presence of European Union "observers" who acted as Israel's eyes, ears and hands, and the forces of the [Palestinian Authority](#) in Ramallah.

However, Hamas' election victory has changed the rules of the political game, and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who need to be able to move in and out of Gaza have been the victims.

Instead of welcoming one of the rare democratic exercises in in the Arab world, years before the [Arab uprisings](#) that have, so far, led to the fall of long-time rulers in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt itself, the so-called international community imposed a boycott on the Palestinians to punish them for the result.

A year and a half after Hamas won legislative elections in both Gaza and the West Bank — declared free and fair by international monitors — Hamas and the western-backed [Fatah](#) faction of Palestinian president [Mahmoud Abbas](#), architect of the [Oslo Agreement](#) between Israel and the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#), engaged in a brief civil

war.

Abbas' forces aimed to prevent Hamas from gaining hegemony despite their election victory, while Hamas wanted to consolidate its control and prevent what it saw as a coup against its legitimate authority.

In June 2007, the conflict reached a climax, and Hamas ousted the forces loyal to Abbas and established sole control in the interior of Gaza. This only led Israel and its international allies to tighten the siege and closure.

In 2008, Israel declared Gaza — of which it is still legally the occupying power — a “hostile entity” that is dedicated to the destruction of the state of Israel.

Gaza — a hostile entity? Half of the population are children and more than a million are registered refugees with [UNRWA](#), the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, and are dependent on regular food aid.

Taking back their Dignity

The civilian population of Gaza were “stripped of their dignity” and plunged into a “struggle to survive,” [in the words of former UNRWA chief John Ging](#).

Just months before Ging uttered those words, Palestinians blew up the border wall with Egypt and [hundreds of thousands of Gazans burst through it](#) seeking basic supplies, to rejoin family members, to seek urgent medical treatment, and to take back their stolen dignity.

For a few days, the Arab Republic of Egypt — under its president and main US ally, Hosni Mubarak — had no choice but to allow the people of Gaza to cross the border into nearby Egyptian towns.

Mubarak apparently did not understand the message delivered by the Palestinian crowds, and reimposed the closure of the border with Gaza. Palestinians invented their own means of breaking the siege — digging underground tunnels that became, until now, the mainstay of the economy.

Mubarak's Overthrow Offered Hope

Meanwhile, the Rafah crossing terminal remained closed until just after February 2011, when Mubarak was toppled by a great popular uprising.

In May 2011, Palestinians from Gaza, including patients, students and men over the age of 40 and those with residency permits in Egypt or in some other Arab countries began to move in and out of Gaza through Rafah as restrictions were eased. Since then, tens of thousands of Gazans have enjoyed the fruits of the Egyptian Spring, and some of their dignity appears to have been restored.

In June, Egyptians elected [Mohammad Morsi](#) of the Muslim Brotherhood party as president. Morsi spoke of further easing restrictions and supplying more desperately-needed electricity to Gaza. In July, the new Egyptian president met Gaza's Prime Minister [Ismail Haniyeh](#) of Hamas, the highest-level meeting for Gaza's rulers since their election, which was made possible only by the uprising of the Egyptian people.

Haniyeh returned to the Gaza Strip from Cairo through the Rafah crossing, filled with hope and expectation to the extent that some Hamas leaders in Gaza hinted at the possibility of establishing a free trade zone on the Gaza-Egypt border line, which would eliminate the need for the current tunnel economy.

Hopes Dashed by Sinai Attack

All these hopes — shared by Gaza's population — were swiftly dashed in the aftermath of [the 5 August attack during Ramadan by unknown gunmen](#) that killed 16 Egyptian soldiers in the northern Sinai near the border with Gaza.

Despite no evidence that the attackers came from Gaza, no history of such attacks by Palestinians against Egyptians, and widespread condemnation from the Palestinian people, leaders and political factions in reaction to this attack, Egyptian media and some authorities began quickly pointing the finger at Gaza. Egypt shut down the Rafah crossing and moved to shut down the underground tunnels that have been a lifeline.

Many Egyptian media outlets and officials said to be affiliated with the Egyptian regime launched an anti-Hamas campaign, accusing elements from the Gaza Strip of involvement in the terrorist attack.

Until the findings of ongoing investigations into the attack are revealed, the people of Gaza, especially patients in need of medical care, will again lose their dignity that has been stolen for more than five years. Some may lose their lives.

New Restrictions?

Media reports from Gaza suggest that more than 40,000 registered travelers, including patients, students and those with residency permits in Arab countries, are unable to get out of the tiny coastal enclave after Egypt ordered new restrictions on travel for their Palestinian brothers and sisters. From now on, Rafah will be open for no more than 1,000 travelers each working day.

Other media reports suggested that more than 10,000 Israelis and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship recently managed to cross into the Sinai peninsula through the Taba crossing at the Egyptian-Israeli border — into the same Sinai desert area where the attacks happened — to enjoy the weekend and Eid holidays at Red Sea resorts.

Meanwhile, Palestinians in Gaza watch and continue to ask: who is hijacking our dignity?

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