

## Rafah opening boosts Hamas as Egypt adjusts

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by Samer al-Atrush, Agence France-Presse Posted at 05/27/2011 3:38 PM |

CAIRO, Egypt - Egypt's decision to permanently open its border crossing with Hamas-ruled Gaza starting on Saturday signals an adjustment in its foreign policy that will boost the Islamists despite Israeli objections.

The decision was first announced in April after Hamas signed a deal with its rival Fatah led by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in the West Bank, ending a four-year rift that led to Egypt's closure of the Rafah crossing in 2007.

The crossing, where the Egyptians have eased passage since a deadly Israeli raid on a ship carrying aid to Gaza last May, will as of Saturday allow passage both ways between 0700 GMT and 1500 GMT every day except Fridays.

People under 18 or older than 40 will require only a visa to pass, but those between 18 and 40 will still need security clearance, crossing officials say.

Commercial traffic will continue to have to pass through border points with Israel.

A Hamas official on a visit to Egypt referred to outstanding issues, such as the passage of people placed on a blacklist by a Palestinian Authority security apparatus loyal to Abbas.

Egypt's decision to keep the border closed after Hamas ousted Fatah in 2007 following a week of deadly violence had been controversial in the most populated Arab nation.

Cairo's success in helping reconcile Fatah and Hamas after the February ouster of president Hosni Mubarak and its subsequent decision to reopen the Rafah crossing signal a different approach to Egypt's neighbors.

Mubarak and his foreign minister insisted they were obliged to keep Rafah closed to passage because of a 2005 deal that regulated the crossing, although Egypt was not a party to the US-brokered agreement.

The decision to keep it closed during the December 2008-January 2009 war as Israel blitzed and then invaded Gaza invited acerbic criticism of Mubarak, whose antipathy towards Hamas he scarcely concealed.

The border crossing had been regulated according to a US and EU-brokered treaty that required the presence of members of Abbas's presidential guard at the crossing along with EU monitors.

Mubarak's government at the time accused Hamas of seeking to use the war, which killed 1,400 Palestinians, as leverage to reopen the crossing to add to its legitimacy as Gaza's rightful rulers.

It was not immediately clear if and when members of Fatah's Force 17, the presidential guard, would return to the border, but the EU welcomed the decision and said there were consultations on the return of its monitors.

Israel says it is "worried" by the decision to reopen the crossing, which it says will facilitate arms smuggling to Hamas, although the militants acquire their arms by sea or through a network of tunnels with Egypt.

It has also rejected the unity deal and says there could be no negotiations with Hamas as long as it refuses to recognize the Jewish state and uses violence.

Israel, which eased the blockade after the aid ship incident, is likely to keep the siege in place as long as Hamas continues to hold an Israeli soldier abducted in 2006.

Gilad Shalit's capture in a cross-border raid from Gaza instigated Israel's blockade on the densely populated coastal enclave, which is home to about 1.5 million Palestinians.

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