

The Gaza Blockade: Did Egypt Really Open the Rafah Crossing?

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For most Palestinians, leaving Gaza through Egypt is as exasperating a process as entering it. Governed by political and cultural sensitivities, most Palestinian officials and public figures refrain from criticizing the way Palestinians are treated at the Rafah border. However, there is really no diplomatic language to describe the relationship between desperate Palestinians – some literally fighting for their lives – and Egyptian officials at the crossing which separates Gaza from Egypt.

“Gazans are treated like animals at the border,” a friend of mine told me. She was afraid that her fiancé would not be allowed to leave Gaza, despite the fact that his papers were in order. Having crossed the border myself just a few days ago, I could not disagree with her statement.

The New York Times reported on June 8: “After days of acrimony between Hamas and Egypt over limitations on who could pass through the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, Hamas said Egypt had agreed to allow 550 people a day to leave Gaza and to lengthen the operating hours of the crossing.”

And so the saga continues.

A few weeks after an official Egyptian announcement to ‘permanently’ open the border – thus extending a lifeline for trapped Palestinians under siege in Gaza – the Rafah border was opened for two days of conditional operation in late May, and then closed again for four days. Now it has once more ‘reopened’.

All the announcements are proving to be no more than rhetoric. The latest ‘permanent’ reopening has come with its own conditions and limitations, involving such factors as gender, age, purpose of visit, and so on.

“Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country,” states Article 13 (2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This universal principle, however, continues to evade most Palestinians in Gaza.

I was one of the very first Palestinians who stood at Rafah following the announcement of a ‘permanent’ opening. Our bus waited at the gate for a long time. I watched a father repeatedly try to reassure his crying six-year-old child, who displayed obvious signs of a terrible bone disease.

“Get the children out or they will die,” shouted an older passenger as he gasped for air. The

heat in the bus, combined with the smell of trapped sweat was unbearable.

Passengers took it upon themselves to leave the bus and stand outside, enduring disapproving looks from the Egyptian officials. Our next task was finding clean water and a shady spot in the arid zone separating the Egypt and Palestinian sides. There were no restrooms.

A tangible feeling of despair and humiliation could be read on the faces of the Gaza passengers.

No one seemed to be in the mood to speak of the Egyptian revolution, a favorite topic of conversation among most Palestinians. This zone is governed by an odd relationship, one that goes back many years - well before Egypt, under Hosni Mubarak, decided to shut down the border in 2006 in order to aid in the political demise of Hamas.

The issue actually has nothing to do with gender, age or logistics. All Palestinians are treated very poorly at the Rafah crossing, and they continue to endure even after the toppling of Mubarak, his family and the dismissal of the corrupt security apparatus. The Egyptian revolution is yet to reach Gaza.

When the bus was finally allowed to enter about five hours later, Palestinians dashed into the gate, desperately hoping to be among the lucky ones allowed to go in. The anxiety of the travellers usually makes them vulnerable to workers at the border who promise them help in exchange for negotiated amounts of money. All of this is actually a con, as the decision is made by a single man, referred to as al-Mukhabarat, the 'intelligence'.

Some are sent back while others are allowed entry. Everyone is forced to wait for many hours - sometimes even days - with no clear explanation as to what they are waiting for, or why they are being sent back.

The very ill six-year-old held on his dad's jacket as they walked about, frantically trying to fulfill all the requirements. Both seemed like they were about to collapse.

The Mukhabarat determined that three Gaza students on their way to their universities in Russia were to be sent back. They had jumped through many hoops already to make it so far. Their hearts sank when they heard the verdict. I protested on their behalf, and the decision was as arbitrarily reversed as it was originally made.

Those who are sent back to Gaza are escorted by unsympathetic officers to the same open spot, to wait for the same haggard bus. Some of those who are allowed entry are escorted by security personnel across the Sinai desert, all the way to Cairo International Airport to be 'deported' to their final destinations. They are all treated like common criminals.

"I can't watch my son die in front of my eyes," screamed the father of 11-year-old Mohammed Ali Saleh, according to Mohammed Omer for IPS (June 10). He was addressing Egyptian troops days after the border was supposedly 'permanently' reopened - for the second time in less than a week.

Such compelling needs as medical treatment, education and freedom keep bringing Palestinians back. The Israeli siege has choked Gaza to the point of near complete strangulation. Egypt is Gaza's only hope.

"I beg you to open the crossing...You brothers of Egypt have humiliated us for so long. Isn't it time we had our dignity back?" said Naziha Al-Sebakhi, 63, one of the many distressed faces at the Rafah border, according to Mohammed Omer.

As they crossed into Egypt, some of the passengers seemed euphoric. The three Russian students and I shared a taxi to Cairo. A tape of Umm Kulthum's 'Amal Hyati' - Hope of my Life - played over and over again. Despite everything, the young men seemed to hold no resentment whatsoever towards Egypt.

"I just love Egypt...I don't know why," said Majid pensively, before falling asleep from sheer exhaustion.

I thought of the six-year-old boy and his dad. I wonder if they made it to the hospital on time.

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