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New Gaza Crossing Raises Questions About Blockade Policies

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Brief Analysis

The items being moved from Egypt through Salah al-Din Gate underline the contradictions and long-term unsustainability of the current stalemate regarding Gaza assistance.

The Gaza Strip has been blockaded for more than a decade now, owing primarily to the violent takeover and continued militant rejectionism of the territory's Hamas rulers. Even after certain restrictions were eased after the 2014 Gaza war, Israel and Egypt maintained tight limits on the entry of goods into the coastal enclave. This policy began to fray in early 2018 as conditions inside Gaza further deteriorated, culminating in the "Great March of Return" border demonstrations and short-lived rounds of escalation between Israel and Hamas.

Indirect negotiations over a long-term truce have since provided some relief, yet the impact of one of the most noteworthy concessions has been under-examined—namely, the opening in 2018 of Salah al-Din Gate, a commercial border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. This crossing puts the lie to the narrative of a "besieged" Gaza, yet also raises questions about Israel's continuing blockade policy and Hamas's pretensions to be a responsible ruling entity.

VIOLENCE AND POLITICS BEGET CLOSURES

For years now, Israel and Egypt have shared the same policy conundrum in Gaza: how to contain Hamas while avoiding humanitarian collapse. Israel had five operational border crossings with Gaza in the past, and they remained open even after the 2007 Hamas coup against the Palestinian Authority, albeit on a limited basis. By 2011,

however, continued attacks against the crossings and the diminished need for multiple transit points had led to the shuttering of all crossings save Erez (for pedestrians) and Kerem Shalom (for commercial traffic).

Erez provides access into and out of Gaza, though Palestinians require entry permits into Israel that are usually limited to humanitarian, medical, or business purposes. Erez is also the gateway for foreign officials, journalists, and Palestinians from Israel and the West Bank. Kerem Shalom is the Strip's commercial lifeline: fuel and other goods from Israel are imported there, while Gaza exports pass through en route to Israel, the West Bank, and (sometimes) overseas markets.

Up until last year, Egypt's sole entry point into Gaza was Rafah, the only crossing not directly controlled by Israel. It is used primarily for the movement of people, though Cairo permitted small-scale deliveries of goods and humanitarian aid in the past. Indeed, Egypt's policy toward the crossing has fluctuated widely. Rafah was effectively closed for several years, but Cairo began easing restrictions there in May 2018, according to figures provided by Israel-based NGO Gisha.

A NEW CROSSING QUIETLY OPENS

In February 2018, without any real publicity, Egypt opened a new commercial border crossing with Gaza called Salah al-Din Gate. Located four kilometers northwest of Rafah, it derives its name from Salah al-Din Road, the main north-south artery running through the Strip. Salah al-Din did exist previously as a humanitarian access point for residents on both sides of the Gaza-Sinai frontier, but not as a commercial crossing.

The timing of the move was likely no coincidence. The Egyptian-mediated reconciliation deal struck between Hamas and Fatah four months prior was already faltering, and PA president Mahmoud Abbas had once again cut subsidies to Gaza, likely angering Cairo. At the same time, Hamas had severed ties with Islamic State elements in Sinai as part of new understandings reached with Egypt, while humanitarian conditions in Gaza had worsened to the point that Israel itself began easing certain restrictions (e.g. allowing Palestinians to import more goods at Kerem Shalom and obtain more exit permits at Erez).

Today, Hamas security personnel are reportedly present at Salah al-Din Gate, and at least one company connected to the group's Qassam Brigades military wing is responsible for administering the Gaza side of the crossing. On the other side, a subsidiary company of the Egyptian military is in charge. The crossing is open ten to fifteen days per month; on average, nearly 1,000 trucks enter Gaza monthly, moving everything from cement, diesel fuel, and cigarettes to diapers, instant noodles, and other household goods.

According to official figures from the Hamas-run Gaza Economy Ministry, in the first half of 2019, nearly 6,000 tons of cement per month and six million liters of diesel fuel per month were imported into Gaza via Salah al-Din. During this same period, Israel's Kan Television reported, sixteen trucks carrying 82,000 cellphones crossed into Gaza, along with twelve trucks carrying 150 tons of ketchup.

Hamas and Egypt reap substantial revenue by taxing this new trade route. Rough estimates cited in the Israeli media put Hamas's earnings at tens of millions of shekels per month, or several hundred million shekels per year. Another estimate had the group reaping \$500 million USD between February 2018 and March 2019. In September, Qatari envoy Mohammed al-Emadi told Al Jazeera that trade between Egypt and Gaza totals \$45 million per month, out of which the Egyptian military and intelligence service takes \$15 million in commissions, and Hamas takes \$12 million in taxes.

CUI BONO?

Although the Salah al-Din Gate almost certainly required Israel's tacit approval before opening, it is unclear if the Egyptian military is providing any real oversight there. To be sure, the amount of trade passing through the

crossing is only 10 percent of that conducted through Kerem Shalom. Yet Salah al-Din's security significance lies less in the quantity of trade than in the type of materials being imported.

For instance, given the many instances in which Hamas and other militant groups have constructed underground tunnel networks into Israel, the import of cement is tightly regulated, with an elaborate UN-led system called the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism put in place to monitor the end-use of every bag. Importers and contractors must apply for permits and declare where the cement will be used and how much is required; their applications are then vetted by Israel and the PA. Once the bags enter Gaza, security cameras and UN inspectors make sure they go to their intended project. Those who violate these rules face complete blacklisting from the program.

Yet the cement being moved from an Egyptian military-owned factory through Salah al-Din Gate and into Gaza has none of these safeguards, according to an August report in Bloomberg. Available data also indicates that other items deemed "dual use" by Israel are being sent through the crossing, including water pumps (potentially used in tunnel construction) and pipes and other metals (potentially used for rocket production). In addition, Kan Television reported that over 25,000 tires were sent into Gaza in the first half of 2019—despite a ban from Israel after burning tires were used to create smokescreens during weekly border clashes.

WIDER SIGNIFICANCE OF SALAH AL-DIN

Aside from the complicated reality that items passing through Salah al-Din Gate may be used to both further the goals of Gaza militants and improve economic conditions for the wider population, the crossing's financial benefits for Hamas cannot be overstated. Even the conservative estimate cited by the Qatari envoy—\$12 million per month—is significant when placed in context.

For example, the latest Qatari relief package for Gaza totals \$30 million per month, but only \$10 million of this is used for cash handouts to needy families, and a further \$10 million is used to pay for fuel imports from Israel for Gaza's power station. Hamas has reportedly demanded increased payments in recent months, including for salaries to its personnel—a highly sensitive issue given growing public criticism of its rule over the Strip. In light of Gaza's continued humanitarian and financial crises, however, the question needs to be asked: what has Hamas been doing with the money and fuel it has received via Salah al-Din Gate since last year?

For Israel, the crossing is intricately tied to the policy question of whether to continue blockading Gaza. Israel has significantly eased restrictions since last year, allowing the transfer of Qatari money while also granting additional exit permits for a few thousand laborers, increasing the amount of goods that can be exported from Gaza, allowing wider infrastructure repairs to go ahead, and reportedly reducing the number of banned dual-use imports by 30 percent. The fact that such dual-use items may be entering Gaza anyway via Salah al-Din further highlights the need for a broader policy reassessment. As things stand now, businesses that adhere to Israeli regulations regarding cement and other items are being undermined by the Egyptian gray-market trade. If nothing else, Washington and other actors should urge Cairo to practice more stringent monitoring at its own border.

Regardless of what happens with Salah al-Din Gate, Gaza's reliance on Israel for basic upkeep and survival will not go away. Rather, the crossing simply accentuates the dilemma that Israeli policymakers have been grappling with for over a decade: how to keep the territory from collapsing without strengthening Hamas and other rejectionist groups militarily. They will need to resolve that policy riddle at some point soon, if only to prevent another Gaza war.

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