

The Egyptian Underground

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The roadside bomb that killed four Americans recently had to have been imported into the Gaza Strip from someplace. Odds are, it came from underground tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Countless other weapons used in terrorist attacks against Israelis in recent years have also arrived via those same subterranean routes. So, while Egypt may not be directly responsible for the attacks that take place in Gaza, it has indirectly allowed Gaza's terrorists to arm themselves. In other words, it's time for Cairo to see the light, and put an end to the tunnels.

Over the last ten years, the Israelis have found 70 or more tunnels originating in Egypt and leading to Gaza. Israeli Engineer Corps have destroyed many, but the Palestinians dig them as fast as they are found. Recently, however, Israel received intelligence indicating that there were at least ten more in operation, and that increasingly dangerous weaponry was being smuggled through them. Alarmed by these reports, the Israelis on October 9 launched Operation "Root Canal," their most ambitious operation yet in the Gaza town of Rafah, where the tunnels empty out.

Israel went on the offensive because they know these tunnels are a crucial supply line of weapons for groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The weapons they receive everything from armor piercing weapons and automatic rifles to mines and rocket-propelled grenades come from Egypt, Sudan and Libya. Raw materials necessary to build the increasingly accurate Qassam rockets, as well as high explosives for suicide bombings, may have also passed through the tunnels.

To ensure the steady stream of weapons, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, under the coordination of Palestinian Authority officials, facilitate the building and maintaining of the tunnels, which cost about \$10,000 apiece to build. But these groups do not shoulder the financial burden alone; reports indicate that the tunnels may also be funded in part by the mullahs of Iran.

To protect the subterranean supply lines, the Palestinians (and perhaps Egyptians) burrow their tunnels more than 60 feet beneath the surface to evade Israeli sonar detection equipment. The mouths of the tunnels are equally hard to detect; some actually open up into Palestinians homes in Gaza. According to Israeli sources, there are always three or four tunnels operational at any one time. They are extremely hard to find without good intelligence.

To further protect their investments, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades have been fighting tooth and nail in recent weeks to repel the Israeli operations in Rafah. The Israelis, for their part, actually distributed brochures to the local population, explaining that their operation was only designed to uncover tunnels. Still, the top

Palestinian terror groups have hit the Israelis with everything they can, including grenades, anti-tank missiles and other ordinance.¹ Clearly, the battle over tunnels has become central to the wider conflict.

Operation "Root Canal" has so far yielded the destruction of at least three tunnels. But the Israelis are still very nervous. The September arrest and subsequent interrogation of a Palestinian Authority Security official revealed to Israeli intelligence that the PA had smuggled in eight anti-aircraft missiles through these tunnels. According to the Palestinian suspect, the missiles were designed to counter Israeli attack helicopters. However, such missiles could be used to target commercial airliners, too.

Clearly, these tunnels present one of the gravest threats to regional peace. And equally clear is that these tunnels originate in Egypt, and that Cairo has not done enough to shut them down. To date, Egypt has filled in a handful of tunnels, particularly after sharp complaints from the Israelis. Meanwhile, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher recently remarked that Israeli allegations of Egyptian involvement "are old and silly." But one high-ranking Israeli official reports that "in some cases, Egyptian soldiers are directly involved. They receive bribes or other incentives for keeping the tunnels open." Indeed, he personally witnessed smoke and debris plume out of tunnel entrances that began at Egyptian military guard posts.

As weapons pour into Gaza, leading to more deaths and injuries, Washington should consider a few practical steps. For one, the US embassy in Egypt should undertake its own survey work along the Egypt-Gaza border to determine what assistance would be necessary to close the tunnels. Once that information is ascertained, the issue needs to be raised to the highest levels. Indeed, the next time President Bush meets with his Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak, a serious discussion of this issue could take place. If Egypt still does not see the light, a team of multinational forces and observers should be considered. ❖

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