

THE GAZAN JAIL-BUST AND MIDDLE EAST DYNAMICS

While we were all glued to CSPAN on the FISA fight yesterday, Hamas engineered a massive jail-break, breaking down the wall between Gaza and Egypt so Palestinians who have been under siege could go into Egypt to get food and supplies. The jail-break may have redefined the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics. While the jail-break had obviously been planned for some time, it occurred at a time when Israel was intensifying the Gaza siege, even while Bush had just traipsed around the Middle East claiming he was serious about seeking peace between Israel and Palestine. While it's still early, the jail-break has the potential of dramatically altering dynamics in the Middle East.

As Jonathan Edelstein notes, the siege was really more of a joint Israeli-Egyptian siege.

I'll close by questioning received wisdom, noting a legal paradigm shift, and indulging in some wild speculation.

Questioning received wisdom: I think we've been wrong all along in describing the siege of Gaza as an Israeli siege. In fact, ever since Israel left the Philadelphi route, it's been an Israeli-Egyptian siege, and Egypt has maintained its end for its own reasons. Hamas correctly perceived Egypt as the military and political weak link, and chose to break the siege at the Egyptian border. I've actually wondered why it took so long; there have been partial breaches of the wall before, and I remember thinking at the time that Hamas would gain an advantage by widening them. Maybe it wasn't yet ready, but I think it's now very clear that they and Israel were never the only players.

Adelstein wonders whether this jailbust might lead to increasing influence from Hamas in Egypt, something Egypt can ill afford.

As for Bob Spencer's speculation that Gaza might "become some sort of loosely associated part of Egypt," I wonder if it might end up more the other way. I did some speculating of my own about the Gaza-Sinai relationship in late 2005, at the time the Rafah crossing reopened and before the rocket-closure-raid cycle started developing its own logic. The key points were that Gaza has six times the population of North Sinai governorate, that there was more money in Gaza than in that part of Egypt, that Egyptian security control in that region was tenuous and that the ports of al-Arish and Port Said had the potential to become a key Palestinian import-export route. All these, except possibly the second, remain true, and given that it will be a political impossibility for Mubarak to re-close the border (although he has built walls against his own Bedouin citizens), Sinai al-Shamaliyya might end up becoming a de facto Palestinian economic appendage. Interesting times.

Joel Beinin, writing at Juan Cole's place, explains the threats to Egypt (and Israel and the Palestinian Authority) at more length.

The Egyptian press reported that, several days before the wall was blown up, the General Guide of the Muslim Brothers, the largest opposition force in Egypt, spoke by telephone to Khaled Mash'al, the head of the Political Bureau of Hamas who resides in Damascus. Hamas emerged from the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers; and there is a high likelihood that the actions of the two organizations were coordinated. Following this consultation, the

Brothers began to organize demonstrations throughout Egypt beginning on Friday, Jan. 18. The number of its supporters in the street gradually increased, culminating on Wednesday, Jan. 23. That morning, thousands of Egyptian security forces surrounded Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo and arrested hundreds (according to some reports thousands) of people who were attempting to demonstrate in solidarity with the people of Gaza. The demonstration was supported by both the Muslim Brothers and secular nationalists.

Meanwhile, at Rafah, Egyptian security forces initially tried to stop the Palestinians from streaming across the border. But as the numbers swelled to tens of thousands, the government had no choice but to acquiesce. President Hosni Mubarak told journalists that he had instructed the security forces to: "Let them come in to eat and buy food" and return "as long as they are not carrying weapons."

What are the implications of these developments?

It appears that the Annapolis summit and the sham "peace process" it was supposed to have reinvigorated are dead – killed by tens of thousands of unarmed Palestinians crossing the boarder into Egypt to meet their basic human needs. Shortly before President George W. Bush's visit to the Middle East, Israel began an expanded campaign of pressure on the Gaza Strip, including an escalation in targeted assassinations. Hamas has sent several signals that it was prepared for an informal ceasefire with Israel. But the political perspective articulated at Annapolis and its aftermath requires that Palestinian

Authority President Mahmoud Abbas cooperate with Israel in crushing Hamas rather than try to restore Palestinian national unity. Egypt's task in this drama is to stand silently by.

[snip]

The limited capacity of the Egyptian government to acquiesce to this program has been exposed. The Mubarak regime would like very much to see Hamas crushed, since it is an ally of the Muslim Brothers, its most substantial domestic opposition force. But the Palestinian cause is too popular and emotional an issue in Egypt for Mubarak to appear to be assisting Israel in starving the people of Gaza. Moreover, some of the demonstrations in solidarity with Gaza also raised slogans against the drastic rise in the price of food in recent months and against Husni Mubarak himself. Opposition demonstrations linking the Palestine cause with domestic economic issues and autocracy have the potential to threaten a regime whose legitimacy is already minimal.

Palestine, Israel, and Egypt after the fall of the Gaza wall are more unstable than before. It is desirable, but alas unlikely, that this instability will bring the leaderships to their senses and impel them to negotiate a just peace for the benefit of all. But it is more likely that Olmert, Abbas, and Mubarak – all weak and discredited leaders – will seek to hold onto power by clinging to the United States, which has a long record of opposing Palestinian-Israeli peace. The people of the Gaza Strip have taken their survival into their own hands and have shown that the power of ordinary people is more likely to shape the future than polished diplomatic formulas.

Helena Cobban links to a Haaretz column that further explains how the jailbreak will affect Israel.

While hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are streaming into Egyptian Rafah and Hosni Mubarak is having trouble reestablishing the border, while Hamas has succeeded in ending the siege of Gaza via a well-planned operation and simultaneously won the sympathy of the world, which has forgotten the rain of Qassam rockets on Sderot, Israel is entrenching itself in positions that look outdated. The prime minister speaks about the need to continue the closure on Gaza, and the cabinet voices its “disappointment” with Egypt – as if there were ever any chance that the Egyptians would work to protect Israeli interests along the Philadelphi route [i.e., the 7-mile border between Gaza and Egypt] instead of thinking first of all of their own interests. The failure of the siege of Gaza, which the government declared only a week ago to be “bearing fruit,” and especially the fear that this failure will lead to a conflict with Egypt, requires the government to pull itself together and prove that it has been graced with the ability to solve crises and to lead, not merely to offer endless excuses for its leadership during previous crises.

In short, the Gaza jail-break has exposed Egypt’s fragile position as an ally of the US and its limited ability to cooperate with Israel. And that may well change the assumptions that the US and Israel have made regarding the peace process.

Helena Cobban, who has been following it closely, indirectly blames Bush’s bumbling for the timing of the jail-bust.

I just want to add to all my previous

posts here on the Gaza Palestinians' bust-out of earlier today that the political ground for this intriguing new move was sown in good part by President Bush's amazingly maladroit trip around the Middle East over the past two weeks.

During the trip, Bush underlined again and again his intense concern for Israelis, their security, and their every last little whim. But he turned a notably deaf ear to the pleas he heard from all his most ardent Arab friends that he do something to demonstrate some concern for the hardships being suffered by the Palestinians and some real resolve to stop, for example, Israel's continued illegal encroachments on Palestinian land and the harsh- and also illegal- collective punishments it has been imposing on the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank for many years now.

[snip]

Is it in any wonder that in these circumstances Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak evidently feels he can do nothing to intervene to re-close the wall between Gaza and Egypt, and no other Arab leaders are prepared to step forward to help to stem the tide of Hamas's growing power?

Basically, Bush set up the opportunity for Hamas to break through the wall while retaining the sympathies of the international community.

Under pressure from Israel and the US, Egypt is currently trying to close the border again. Even if they succeed, they appear to be replacing concrete with barbed wire. And even still, it's not clear they'll succeed.

Egypt moved to restore its border with Gaza on Friday, stationing border guards and riot police to try to block

█ Palestinians from entering, but
Palestinians used a bulldozer to knock
down another portion of the wall,
originally built by Israel just inside
Gaza, to continue their shopping spree.

Whether or not Egypt does restore the wall, Gaza
has already exposed Egypt's fragile position.

I noted last week that the Saudis appear less
willing to play the economic role we've long
relied on them to play. Hamas sure seems intent
on convincing Egypt to stop playing the
strategic role we've relied on them to play.