

Hamas backers Saudi Arabia and Tehran Step into Gaza Crisis

DEBKAFfile Special Report

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On the sixth day of the Palestinian surge out of Gaza into northern Sinai, Egyptian intelligence is discovering that, far from being chaotic, it was minutely planned by the fundamentalist Hamas group which rules the Gaza Strip.

According to DEBKAFfile's military sources, each of the estimated half a million Gazans in flight, one-third of the total population, received a \$300 grant, which accounts for the shopping spree they could suddenly afford. Hamas was therefore willing to spend \$150 million on a maneuver for seizing control of an enclave in northern Sinai.

Egyptian border troops were forced to stand aside by this mass of surging humanity. Dozens were injured by gunmen shooting from inside the mob. Early Monday, Jan. 28, Cairo deployed a border guard brigade in the northern Sinai town of El Arish, to hold the line against the spread of the Palestinian tide into the largest town in the peninsula.

It is calculated that if the Palestinians take over El Arish, they will use as a springboard to advance on Egypt proper.

Egyptian forces have in the last 24 hours, apprehended 30 Palestinians on their way to the Suez Canal armed with weapons, explosives and devices for monitoring Egyptian and Israeli security communications, and a second group heading for the unfenced 220-km Egyptian-Israeli border.

DEBKAFfile's military sources also report that Cairo has, without making a public announcement, clamped an economic blockade on El Arish, closing down shops, hotels, restaurants and gas pumps, to make the town less attractive to the roving Palestinians than their own towns in Gaza.

In Riyadh, meanwhile, Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal is holding talks Monday with the Hamas bureau chief Khaled Meshal, summoned from Damascus where the conference of 17 rejectionist Palestinian organizations has just ended. This conversation will prepare the ground for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's meetings in Cairo Wednesday with a Hamas delegation.

The Saudi government backs Hamas. Therefore Faisal and Meshal are expected to agree on a formula for resolving the crisis that will keep the Gaza-Egyptian border terminal of Rafah open to traffic under the joint control of Egypt, Hamas and a token Palestinian Authority presence. The Saudis will use this formula as the key to unlock their long-sought objective of a process of reconciliation between Hamas, Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. The Saudis will bring all their clout to bear to persuade Abbas to drop his conditions for negotiations with Hamas on the reconstitution of a Palestinian national unity government.

Tehran, for its part, sent Iran's foreign ministry director general Ali Asghar to Cairo Sunday, Jan. 27, to put its oar into the standoff. He was quickly received by Egyptian foreign minister Aboul Gheit. For three decades, Egypt and Iran have not had formal diplomatic relations, but in the last two months, their government ministers have met frequently and, last week, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad phoned Mubarak to discuss how Tehran could cooperate in solving the Gaza border issue.

Asghar brought to Cairo, according to our sources, an offer to airlift tons of foodstuffs and medicines to El Arish airport for Egyptian authorities to distribute to the Palestinians. This step would bring Iranian airplanes into the Egyptian-Israeli border region for the first time. Iran would thereby claim a stake in the lives of the Palestinians living around Israel's borders for the entire Arab world to see.

Three of the forces most directly involved in these seminal events are pushed to the fringes of the game: The United States is teetering on the brink of an economic recession and caught up in election primaries, Israel's prime minister Ehud Olmert is busy maneuvering to save his skin and control the damage expected from the Lebanon War report out in two days, and Hosni Mubarak's authority is waning in the twilight of his presidency.

In any case, Mubarak knows that a tough Egyptian crackdown on the Palestinians and their Hamas leaders would spark violent protests in his own streets by the Hamas' parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Furthermore, Egypt's defense minister cannot be counted on to lift a finger to help his rival, the intelligence minister Omar Suleiman, who is in charge of Sinai and Gaza security, out of a fix. Sunday, Egyptian foreign minister Gheit was reduced to appealing to "our Palestinian brothers"

not to abuse his government's hospitality.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have lost no time and stepping into this opportune power vacuum to advance their interests.

In the summer of 2005, Israeli generals and **DEBKAFfile**'s military experts warned the Sharon government, of which Olmert and foreign minister Tzipi Livni were members, not to pull the IDF out of the Gazan-Egyptian border strip in 2005, or rely on Cairo for Israeli border security.

They now blame the incumbent defense minister Ehud Barak for blockading Gaza as a futile tactic for halting the incessant Palestinian missile attacks on Israeli civilians, while calling off a well-prepared, effective military operation, when it was still possible to cut the Hamas and its war machine down to size. The blockade reflected badly on the Israel and was finally breached by Hamas along with the Gaza-Sinai border wall.

Hamas and its terrorist confederates have now acquired a safe haven on Egyptian soil, out of Israel's reach, much like Hizballah's enclave north of the Litani River or al Qaeda's across the Afghan border in Pakistan's tribal regions. Saudi Arabia and Iran are not expected to rob them of this prime strategic advantage, despite the dangerous precedent of a terrorist organization capturing Arab land twice in seven months – Gaza from the Palestinian Authority and an enclave in northern Sinai from Egypt.

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