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Analyze This: Waiting for the call to return to Rafah

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On May 24, the current mandate of the European Union Border Assistance Mission at Rafah Crossing Point in the Palestinian Territories - EUBAM Rafah for short - will expire.

Wait a minute - didn't the mission of the European monitors at the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt end last June, with the Hamas takeover there? Well, yes and no - and therein lies an important point worth making about the efforts by Hamas to supposedly break the "siege of Gaza," including its attacks on those Israeli-controlled crossings that do remain open.

It is true that last June, after Hamas seized control of Gaza from Palestinian Authority forces, EUBAM pulled its personnel from the Rafah crossing, where they had been working together with PA border monitors according to an agreement reached soon after the Israeli disengagement in August, 2005. This was necessitated by security concerns and the fact that the EU, like Israel and the US, has a policy not to permit direct contact with Hamas officials until it renounces terror, recognizes Israel's right to exist, and honors past Palestinian agreements reached with Israel.

But as it happens, just a month earlier, the EU had approved a one-year continuance of EUBAM Rafah's mandate. Thus, while officially suspending its activities at the Gaza-Egyptian border, EUBAM decided to keep a presence on the ground here, administered out of its Ashkelon office.

According to EUBAM spokeswoman Maria Telleria, the mission has trimmed its workforce from the 90 it had while still working at the border, down to 36, enough of a core group for it to maintain its infrastructure.

What's more, Telleria says she expects that between now and the end of May, the EU will extend its mandate for at least another six months.

What's the point? Well, EUBAM remains an important element in the proposals that have been floated over reopening the Rafah crossing, which has remained largely sealed over the past year except for brief periods (including when the Palestinians breached the border fence with Egypt in January).

Those proposals have become more urgent in recent weeks, as those Israeli crossings (Kerem Shalom, Nahal Oz, Kissufim) that do remain open - and are the only passage into Gaza for food, fuel, medical supplies and other necessities - become increasingly difficult for Israel to maintain in the face of continual Hamas attacks.

Among the suggestions that have been floated in the past three months, both by the Egyptians and in the one set of direct talks between the two Palestinian sides in Yemen, is that Hamas permit PA officials to return to Gaza specifically to resume work alongside EUBAM at the Rafah crossing, thus enabling the Europeans to bypass the restriction against working directly with Hamas.

This arrangement is also supposed to provide Israel with some measure of confidence over the security arrangements at Rafah. Unfortunately, even when the crossing operated prior to the Hamas

takeover with both EUBAM present and video cameras on-site that allowed Israeli security officials to see and vet in real time those Palestinians passing in and out of Gaza, there were serious questions in Jerusalem about its efficacy.

Earlier this month, reports circulated that Defense Minister Ehud Barak was encountering serious opposition within the IDF over any agreement that relied largely on PA forces to provide security at Rafah. Israeli officials told *The Jerusalem Post* they were looking into the possibility of strengthening the mandate of EUBAM monitors to allow them to inspect the people passing between Gaza and Egypt, an authority they have not previously enjoyed.

Although some of the ideas sound plausible, there has been one major obstacle along the way in moving them forward - Hamas.

In the past few months, Hamas first said it would not accept any arrangement in which PA personnel would supersede its own authority at the border. Then it said it would consider allowing PA officials to function there, but only those it had vetted and allowed.

Then it said it would consider allowing the EUBAM monitors to return, but also on condition - in this case, that they relocate their home base to either Gaza or Egypt, so they couldn't be "influenced" by Israeli authorities. And yesterday, former US president Jimmy Carter said his efforts to discuss an arrangement with Hamas officials about the border-crossing issue separate from other matters (such as a cease-fire and prisoner exchange) went nowhere.

In the meantime, the EUBAM team still sits in Ashkelon, waiting for the call to return for duty at Rafah.

"We can be back there, and have the crossing up and running the way it was before, almost immediately," says spokeswoman Telleria.

Clearly though, despite what Hamas continually describes as a "crisis" situation for Palestinians - and even as it launches attacks on the Israeli crossings that right now are the only source of humanitarian aid - the rulers of Gaza don't appear in any particular rush to move forward in reopening the Rafah crossing, except under its own terms.

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