

Is the destruction of Rafah tunnels held hostage to hostage negotiations?

By Lev Tsitrin

Normally, one's thinking gets triggered by hearing the news; yet, the thoughts that follow resulted from the absence of news.

The absent news in question is the news of the destruction of Rafah tunnels heading into Egypt – the tunnels through which Hamas smuggles arms and contraband goods. I would have expected their demolition to have been the first order of business after the Israeli army took over the so-called Philadelphia corridor that separates Egypt from Gaza, and took operational control over the city of Rafah that abuts it.

And yet, I have not read of any Rafah tunnels being blown up, flooded, or destroyed by drilling shafts into them.

Gaza Metro

Israeli Defence chiefs have previously indicated the likely tunnel system in Gaza, which it targeted in airstrikes in 2021. Hamas has said the network stretches over 500km.

— Tunnel network as identified by IDF



Source: Israel Defence Forces

Left, map of tunnels from [News.com Australia](#)

There could be several reasons for the absence of such news. For one, it may be happening – but the press is not being told, and so it is not relaying the information to us. Needless to say, I would be perfectly fine with that state of affairs.

The other reason may be, that the Israelis refrain from destroying the Rafah tunnels so as not to upset the Biden administration which seems to have become extremely touchy when it comes to the damage done to Gaza infrastructure. Demolition of tunnels of necessity collapses the structures above them. Demolish Rafah tunnels, and the path of destruction north of the Egypt border becomes much wider – and

among other things, it would greatly expand the Philadelphia corridor, turning it into a veritable buffer zone – which is something that Secretary of State Antony Blinken vehemently opposed, time and again.

The reason for his negative stance on the buffer zone around Gaza is not entirely clear. From the standpoint of international law, there can be no objections. Because of Palestinian intransigence during the Oslo process, the borders were never demarcated. The “green line” that marks the Israeli border is not an internationally-recognized border but merely an armistice line that can move as a result to new hostilities – and can legally move inside Gaza since the current war was initiated by the Palestinian side. So Biden’s reasoning is likely political. On the one hand, the scenes of fresh destruction in Gaza will further inflame anti-Israel wing of the Democrats, making it harder for them to vote for the Democratic ticket. On the other hand, it may be that the buffer zone that is controlled in perpetuity, by the Israelis – as it ought to be after October 7 – goes counter to the administration’s “two-state” ideology. Not to mention that this arrangement upsets the Egyptians who will no longer be able to control the flow of people and goods, and to take bribes for looking the other way as contraband items are shipped into Gaza by trucks.

But there can also be a yet another reason: the hostage/ceasefire negotiations. Hamas decision-makers are split by the Gaza border. The political echelon is openly operating in Qatar; the military leadership that has a decisive voice, is hidden in the Gaza tunnels, surrounded by Israeli hostages who act as human shields. Hamas’ negotiating position gets hammered out by Qatar guys talking to the Gaza guys – of necessity, clandestinely. Hamasers cannot simply pick up a phone, and talk to each other – the lines are undoubtedly wiretapped, and the connection is unreliable. We are being told that it takes days for the messages to pass

between Hamasers in Doha and Hamasers in Gaza – hence, the dragged-out negotiating process. It looks as if the messages are being passed by hand – given to someone on the Egypt side of the border who gets it to the Gaza side, and in a relay, it eventually gets to the top Hamasers in the tunnels. The same relay get their response back to Egypt, and from their the Doha guys receive it.

Clearly, Hamas messengers cannot openly cross the border into Gaza – because once the Israelis know their business, they will be interrogated and their movement will be tracked – leading to the underground lair of the chief planners of the October 7 attack. So, the messengers have to go undetected – and the only way to do so, is through the Rafah cross-border tunnels. Destroy those tunnels – and you will destroy the key link between the Hamas decision-makers, and with it, the very possibility of not just the cease-fire agreement, but of negotiations themselves.

So I wonder whether this is the real reason behind the absence of news of the destruction of Gaza tunnels: Israelis keep them intact to allow for inter-Hamas negotiations to happen – so the hostage negotiations can go on. The hostages, thus, protect the Rafah tunnels, too. In effect, the destruction of those tunnels is a hostage to the hostage negotiations.

I hope I got this wrong, and it is just a conspiracy theory that popped into my head. Yet I wonder whether this is indeed what's holding up the permanent choking off of the connection between Gaza and Egypt without which the war on Hamas cannot be won.