



Egypt-Gaza Tunnels Pose Threat to Israel's War Aims

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Though Egypt has claimed to have destroyed all cross-border tunnels between Gaza and Egypt, the sizable number of remaining cross-border tunnels—[estimated](#) by Israeli officials to be at least 12—continue to pose a security threat to Israelis and Palestinians alike, threatening the rise of a resurgent Hamas by enabling Hamas to smuggle further arms in and allowing Hamas leaders to escape from the Gaza Strip and continue to plot attacks from abroad.

The United States must use all policy levers available to ensure that it, Israel, and Egypt are jointly able to secure the ground above and below the Gaza-Egypt border and the abutting buffer zone, known as the Philadelphi Corridor, to ensure that Israel can achieve its wartime objectives in Gaza.

What Happened?

- On February 6, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#), citing Egyptian officials, that Israeli officials had recently told the Egyptian government that “there are at least 12 tunnels left between Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula” in Egypt.
 - » The IDF had previously, on October 26, [confirmed](#) reports that a significant quantity of weapons and ammunition had been smuggled into Gaza in recent years through tunnels underneath the Egypt-Gaza border.

Why Is It Important?

- Cross-border tunnels between Egypt and Gaza—some of which are sufficiently [large](#) to fit automobiles and have been used to smuggle [hundreds of tons](#) of explosives, [thousands](#) of rockets, and countless firearms and weapons components—remain a serious obstacle to Israel's war aims. Despite Egypt's [claims](#) that no such tunnels exist, Israeli officials have [asserted](#) that at least 12 cross-border tunnels remain. Failure to detect and eliminate all cross-border tunnels would pose a serious threat to Israel's aims of defeating Hamas and demilitarizing Gaza.



Source: [France24](#)

- As JINSA [noted](#) in its recent report, *The Day After: A Plan For Gaza*, “permanently dismantling Hamas’s military capabilities cannot succeed without a dramatically improved effort to staunch the smuggling of weapons and other military-related goods and equipment across Gaza’s border with Egypt.”
 - » Current and former Israeli officials have repeatedly stressed that an effective security regime—one that includes a role for Israel—along the Philadelphi axis is necessary to interdict future, or any ongoing, efforts to smuggle weapons into Gaza.
 - Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [stated](#) on December 30, “the Philadelphi axis, or rather the southern bracket, must be in our hands and must be closed. Any other arrangement will not guarantee the demilitarization [of the Gaza Strip] that we want and must guarantee.”
 - On January 18, Israel’s former National Security Advisor and JINSA Distinguished Fellow IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror said the cross-border tunnels [remain](#) “something we are very concerned about, and we will have to find the solution.”
 - Former Head of the IDF General Staff Operations Branch and JINSA’s Julian and Jenny Josephson Senior Vice President for Israeli Affairs IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish stated on December 21, “the [connection](#) between the Egyptian Rafah and the Palestinian Rafah via the different tunnels – this is a source of supply materials and oxygen for Hamas. This is something we will have to address.”
- Effective security monitoring of the ground beneath the border is essential not only to combat weapons smuggling into Gaza, but also to prevent Hamas leaders from fleeing from Gaza to safe havens abroad, and to prevent future October 7-style attacks.
 - » [Reports](#) from December 23, citing Hamas-linked sources, indicated that senior Hamas leaders formulated a plan to smuggle top Hamas leaders in Gaza—including Hamas’s

military wing leader Mohammed Deif, Deif's deputy Marwan Issa, and others—into Egypt via the cross-border tunnels.

- According to Palestinian media sources, in late-December, Director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate Abbas Kamel [spoke](#) to Hamas's leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar through a secure telecommunications line passing through a tunnel from the Egyptian side of Rafah to the Gazan side of Rafah.
- The existence of a secure line from Gazan Rafah to Egyptian Rafah running through a cross-border tunnel suggests, as an Israeli journalist [observed](#), “that other components in the tunnel are also active,” potentially permitting Sinwar and other leaders to escape to Egypt.
- » Israeli authorities also are reportedly [concerned](#) that terrorists may covertly enter Egypt through the tunnels and then, via the Egypt-Israel border, infiltrate into southern Israel to perpetrate attacks on Israeli communities.
- Hamas smuggled large quantities of munitions through the cross-border tunnels in the nearly two decades it controlled the Gaza Strip after Israel [ceded](#) control of the Philadelphi Corridor in September 2005 during its unilateral disengagement from Gaza.
 - » Between 2006 and 2013, Hamas [constructed](#) hundreds of tunnels, many of [advanced sophistication](#)—featuring large carts moving on rails powered by electric motors—to smuggle in a number of items, including ammunition, weapons, weapons components, raw materials to construct weapons, and terror operatives.
 - Israel's intelligence agencies [estimate](#) that by December 2008, approximately 4,000 rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), 1,800 rockets, and 250 tons of explosives had been smuggled into the Gaza Strip.
 - According to Israel's estimates, about 300 cross-border tunnels—some [reportedly](#) at depths of nearly 200 feet—existed by December 2008. Egyptian authorities [said](#) that by February 2013, there were 225 cross-border tunnels; Palestinian sources [told](#) *The New York Times* in February 2013 there were around 250 tunnels.
 - In February 2013, an Egyptian court [ordered](#) the military to destroy the tunnel network after ruling in favor of a plaintiff who alleged the tunnels threatened “national security.” The plaintiff in the case provided evidence showing the number of active cross-border tunnels to be nearly 2,000.
 - According to a 2017 journal article in *Engineer*, a U.S. Army Engineer Corps publication, smuggling became a [multi-million-dollar industry](#) between 2008 and 2013 and, according to one estimate, the number of cross-border tunnels reached a pinnacle of nearly 2,500 tunnels.
 - Underscoring the immense volume of smuggling, a *New York Times* reporter [wrote](#) in February 2013 that “about two cargo trucks” worth of material were entering Gaza per minute. Smugglers reportedly [transferred](#) approximately one million liters of diesel a day into the Gaza Strip.
 - » Iran has [provided](#) Hamas with component parts for missiles and rockets, which are smuggled through other countries into Egypt and then through the cross-border tunnels into Gaza, where they are assembled into lethal projectiles.
- Hamas's vast smuggling operation, despite facing occasional obstacles, continued largely unencumbered from 2006 and onward despite repeated Egyptian efforts—using a variety of methods—to disrupt it, underscoring the need for a security regime other than exclusively Egypt—though one including Egypt—to monitor the border, both above and below ground.

- » Ground-penetrating radar that the United States provided to Egypt in 2009 did little to assist with [disrupting](#) the tunnels, nor did some \$23 million in aid the United States allocated in 2008 to train Egyptian officials on smuggling prevention.
- » Egypt committed in 2009 to constructing an approximately 75-foot-deep steel barrier to stop the smuggling, but the initiative was [abandoned](#) by 2012.
 - Egypt was reportedly unable to [construct](#) large portions of the barrier due to rocky, impregnable ground, and smugglers were reportedly easily able to penetrate the barrier with blowtorches.
- » During then-President Hosni Mubarak’s reign, Egypt periodically [flooded](#) the tunnels with gas, which also proved inefficient, as smugglers remediated the issue by pumping air into the tunnels to disperse the gas.
- » In early 2013, the Egyptian military [flooded](#) about 24 of the hundreds of tunnels with wastewater. This method, too, proved ineffective, as smugglers pumped the wastewater out and reportedly could repair each tunnel in under a month’s time.
 - At the time, Egyptian authorities claimed that about 225 tunnels existed. Egypt reportedly [flooded](#) only 24 of the 225 tunnels, leaving the vast majority in operation.
- » In September 2015, Egypt [flooded](#) the tunnels with saltwater from the Mediterranean Sea and began constructing a large moat that would be as deep in some areas as 130 feet. Reportedly, the moat was [ineffective](#), as many smugglers simply reinforced their tunnels with concrete or metal.
- Egypt has repeatedly asserted that it has eliminated a vast majority of the cross-border tunnels, and currently [claims](#) that no Hamas-operated smuggling tunnels remain on its side of the border.
 - » In October 2013, Egypt’s top border official [asserted](#) that Egypt had destroyed 794 tunnels that year alone and 1,055 in total since January 2011. Arab media sources [claimed](#) that by December 2013, Egypt had destroyed up to 97 percent of Rafah’s cross-border smuggling tunnels.
 - » In 2018, Egypt claimed to have [destroyed](#) another 37 cross-border tunnels.
 - » In 2020, Egypt claimed to have [eliminated](#) over 3,000 tunnels along its border over the previous five years. Some of the tunnels, according to Egypt, were as deep as 90 feet.
- However, the sizable number of remaining cross-border tunnels—[estimated](#) by Israel to be at least 12—continue to pose a security threat to Israelis and Palestinians alike by threatening the rise of a resurgent Hamas and by allowing Hamas leaders to escape and continue to plot attacks from abroad.
- Egypt has reportedly signaled its unwillingness to cooperate with Israel’s requests for joint monitoring of the narrow buffer zone, known as the Philadelphi Corridor or Philadelphi Route, along the roughly eight-mile-long Egypt-Gaza border in recent months.
 - » The *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) on January 13 that “Egypt says its military and intelligence services maintain tight control over the border area. Using diplomatic and security channels, Egypt has been pushing back on Israel’s plans in hopes that Israel will back down, Egyptian officials said.”
 - » Reuters [reported](#) on January 9, citing three Egyptian officials, that Egypt rejected an Israeli proposal for Israel to maintain security monitoring capabilities along the Egypt-Gaza border.

- According to the report, Israel requested that Egypt install advanced monitoring equipment that would be jointly monitored by both countries, and Israel did not request control of the buffer zone. The report stated that Egypt rejected the request.
- » On January 7, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#), citing Egyptian and Israeli officials, that Egypt turned down an Israeli request to send surveillance drones into the buffer zone.
 - Israel reportedly requested that sensors to monitor smuggling efforts be installed along the Philadelphi Corridor and requested that it be notified if the sensors were triggered. Israel also reportedly sought permission to send surveillance drones into the area if the sensors detected suspicious activity.
 - Egypt, per the report, agreed to consider the sensor proposal but rejected Israel’s requests to be notified if the sensors were tripped. Egypt also reportedly rebuffed Israel’s request to send Israel’s surveillance drones into the area.
- Egypt has an obligation under multiple bilateral agreements with Israel to secure its side of the border with Gaza, including belowground.
 - » Under the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, Egypt is [obligated](#) to “ensure that acts or threats of belligerency, hostility, or violence do not originate from and are not committed from within its territory.”
 - » In September 2005, Israel signed an [agreement](#) with Egypt called the Agreed Arrangements Regarding the Deployment of a Designated Force of Border Guards Along the Border in the Rafah Area, also known as the Agreed Arrangements or the Philadelphi Accord.
 - » The agreement [stipulated](#), among other provisions, that Egypt work to combat cross-border smuggling, and mandated operational coordination and intelligence sharing between the countries. Under the agreement, Egypt is obligated to undertake a “comprehensive and systematic effort” to secure the border and prevent smuggling.
- The United States should incentivize greater Egyptian adherence to its bilateral agreements with Israel by ensuring that Egypt accedes to Israel’s reported [requests](#) to conduct drone and other intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activity along the border, which have reportedly been denied.
- Israel has successfully undertaken efforts to neutralize tunnel threats along its own border with Gaza, including technologies [funded](#) by the United States in the wake of the 2014 Israel-Hamas war. These include advanced sensors and an underground barrier.
 - » After the 2014 war, in which Hamas operatives successfully used tunnels to [infiltrate](#) into Israel from Gaza, Israel [developed](#) a suite of sensors capable of detecting tunnels even as they were being dug.
 - The sensors reportedly [incorporate](#) advanced technology that can detect signals from soil and soundwaves [generated](#) by digging.
 - » Israel [deployed](#) the sensors in conjunction with a concrete barrier, reportedly extending dozens of meters underground, along the Israel-Gaza border. The barrier system was [completed](#) in December 2021.
 - » Though a number of aboveground breaches occurred during the October 7 attack, there are no indications that terrorists entered from Gaza into Israel that day via tunnels. This points to the effectiveness of Israel’s anti-tunnel measures.
- By positioning underground sensors along the Philadelphi Corridor, Israel could both detect existing cross-border tunnels and proactively prevent new ones from emerging.

- The United States has played an important [role](#) in facilitating security cooperation already but can and should do more to aid Israel in its efforts to eliminate the cross-border tunnels.
 - » Section 1279(f) of the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act [authorized](#) the Department of Defense to “carry out research, development, testing, and evaluation jointly with Israel to establish anti-tunnel capabilities to detect, map, and neutralize tunnels,” and “provide maintenance support to Israel for the anti-tunnel capabilities research, development, test, and evaluation activities.”
 - » However, members of Congress have noted that the authorization is slated to expire at the end of 2024. In an effort to [extend](#) the authorization, a bipartisan group of congressmen have attempted to pass, thus far unsuccessfully, the United States-Israel Anti-Tunnel Cooperation Extension Act to extend the authorization through 2026.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Congress should consider passing legislation that extends the 2016 authorization, slated to expire in December of this year, until at least 2026. It should also consider legislation to grant more funds and a greater mandate to aid Israel’s efforts to destroy tunnels.
- As JINSA [called for](#) in its recent report *The Day After: A Plan For Gaza*, the United States should use its considerable influence “to secure meaningful and consistent Egyptian efforts to lessen threats” in order to prevent the “reconstitution of Hamas or other terrorist forces.”
 - » The United States should use all available policy levers to do more to incentivize greater Egyptian adherence to its bilateral agreements, including the 1979 bilateral peace treaty, by ensuring that Egypt accedes to the United States’ and Israel’s security requests regarding the cross-border tunnels and the Gaza-Egypt border more generally.
- As JINSA also [advocated for](#) in the report, the United States should “put major effort into cooperating with Israel, Egypt, and other helpful Arab partners to develop a new security regime on the Egypt-Gaza border.”
 - » As the report notes, this new regime should utilize the most advanced technological solutions and enhanced inspection protocols, potentially under contract to trusted third-country private firms with extensive expertise and experience managing customs and border security.