

Let`s Talk about Gaza

An interview regarding the social media campaign on relinquishing control of the Rafah border to the Palestinian Authority

December 2015



A social media campaign was launched from the Gaza Strip urging Hamas to relinquish control over Gaza's southern border-crossing (Rafah) to the Palestinian Authority. This is after it has been shut down for most of the year by the Egyptian government. The campaign was launched by a group of young activists who are suffering from Gaza's non-stop crisis and wish to change the situation.

This interview is with activists Motaz Al-Araj and Noor Swirki about the #salmoelmabar campaign. It was conducted by Bessan Shehada, Project Coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip.

Why did you launch this campaign?

We launched the hashtag #salmoelmabar (relinquish the border) campaign, asking Hamas to relinquish control over Rafah border to the Palestinian Authority because the Egyptian government has demanded it as a condition to open the border. The opening of the Rafah border crossing is a major humanitarian need for the Gazan citizens who are ultimately fed up with all internal political conflicts between Hamas and Fatah.

Why is Rafah border so important for the Gazans?

The Rafah crossing is the sole crossing point between Egypt and Gaza, and is considered to be the only way to the outside world that does not go through Israel.

The closure of the Rafah border crossing presents huge obstacles for Gazan patients who desperately seek access to medical care at hospitals in Egypt. This can literally be a life or death issue for many Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. It is vital for patients who cannot receive proper medical treatment at hospitals within Gaza's borders and who have been denied or are ineligible for access to Israeli or Palestinian hospitals in the West Bank, through Gaza's northern border crossing, Erez.

Additionally, many students who seek education outside the strip, and have been granted scholarships, are denied access to their host foreign universities due to the closure.

Why did you choose to use social media to launch this campaign?

Social media is a free space for everybody to express their feelings, and everybody is using social media now. In addition to that, we used this space to demonstrate what we want electronically as the people are afraid to demonstrate it in the streets because of Hamas's repressive practices.

How did people react to the hashtag #salmoelmabar?

The hashtag achieved the first trend on social media in Palestine. 20,000 tweets have been shared in 10 days, and according to TOPSY, a website which provides statistics about tweets, the hashtag has reached 22 million people on social media around the world.

The campaign made the people participate widely, as every citizen of Gaza needs to pass the border for important causes. We are really living in a big prison and we want to practice our right to travel freely.

Hamas social media activists tried to launch a counter-campaign asking Egypt to open the border, and there was a huge discussion on social media about the issue. However, this didn't work because Hamas' hashtag did not reach the same amount of people as our hashtag did. Our hashtag #salmoelmabar and our demands are clear, and this is what made our campaign go viral.

What was Hamas politicians' reaction to the hashtag?

Their reaction was very depressing. They accused us of being collaborators with the Israeli occupation and that we "were some people who are aiming to destroy the Palestinian resistance and Hamas."

Hamas is using us as hostages to their policies; they just don't care about the people's needs and rights. All that they care about is to keep control over Gaza.

How do you describe the situation in Gaza strip?

Gaza is on the top of a volcano. There are many real problems: Gazan people suffer from poverty, unemployment, siege, and Israeli aggressions against Gaza.

What is your hope or wish for the near future?

We wish that the Palestinian factions, and especially Hamas who is controlling Gaza Strip, would look at us as human beings, not hostages for their party's political advantages.

Background on the Rafah crossing

In June 2006, following the capture of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, the Rafah crossing began to operate on an irregular basis. In June 2007, following the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) suspended operations at Rafah, although the crossing continued to open two or three days each month for scheduled, but irregular, and limited passage of specified Palestinian pedestrians. In June 2010 in the wake of the Israeli attack on the Gaza bound flotilla, the Egyptian authorities re-opened the crossing on a more regular basis in both directions, and also permitted humanitarian aid to enter Gaza through the crossing. The number of Palestinians crossing increased steadily over the following three years, with almost 420,000 crossing in both directions in 2012, when Rafah was open for a total of 312 days. This trend continued into the first six months of 2013, when 40,000 crossed monthly (in both directions). During the second half of 2013 the crossing was closed for a total of 97 days, compared with five days during the first half of the year; the number of Palestinians crossing declined by 28 per cent compared with 2012. In 2014, the crossing opened for only 158 days and less than 100,000 people traversed the crossing. Following an attack on 24 October 2014 in the Sinai Peninsula in which over 30 Egyptian military personnel were killed, Rafah was closed for the remainder of the year, with a few exceptional openings. In 2015, up to the end of April, Rafah had opened for only five days with only around 5,000 people crossing.

For more details on the topic, please see the following links:

http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_the_humanitarian_monitor_2014_05_29_english.pdf

<http://www.ochaopt.org/gazacrossing/index.aspx?id=2>