

Last update - 13:32 13/06/2007

Olmert mulls int'l force to stop arms smuggling at Gaza-Egypt border

By [Aluf Benn](#), [Yoav Stern](#) and Avi Issacharoff, Haaretz Correspondents

The deployment of a multinational force along the Philadelphi Route in Rafah, on the Gaza-Egypt border, should be seriously considered, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Tuesday.

The presence of an international force could help curb the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip from Egypt, and halt the ongoing strengthening of the militant groups in the Gaza Strip.

Olmert raised the likelihood of such a deployment following the continued internecine violence in the Gaza Strip that claimed the lives of at least 25 Palestinians Tuesday.

Speaking after a meeting with visiting Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen, Olmert said that "Western countries need to act soon to alter the situation in the Gaza Strip."

Olmert suggested that the multinational force would be similar to the United Nations peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon.

Olmert is likely to raise the idea of a multinational force during his talks with President George Bush in Washington next Tuesday.

The idea of a such a force along the Philadelphi Route was proposed by the Foreign Ministry, and was presented during a meeting of the security cabinet three weeks ago, which centered on the situation in the Strip.

According to the plan the force would serve to prevent the smuggling of arms from Sinai to the Gaza Strip in coordination with an Egyptian force operating on the Egyptian side of the border.

The multinational force is not envisioned to have a role in preventing the clashes between Fatah and Hamas, or ending the Qassam rocket attacks.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni described the arms smuggling as the main "cause of terrorism" in the Gaza Strip, and proposed that the U.S. fund the building of a barrier that will prevent smuggling.

Meanwhile, the continuing deterioration in Gaza led the prime minister to warn Tuesday that "if the Gaza Strip falls completely into the hands of Hamas, this will have regional implications."

Noting that "Israel is defending and will continue to defend its citizens against the aggression of terrorist groups," Olmert recognized that "we cannot enter the Gaza Strip to fight the war of the Palestinian pragmatists [Fatah] against the extremist forces [Hamas]."

However, Israel did consider the possibility of allowing the transfer of urgently needed military aid to the Fatah forces in the Gaza Strip. The idea did not gain approval.

Also Tuesday, Jordan's King Abdullah and Egyptian President Hosni

Mubarak expressed concerns about the deteriorating security situation in the Gaza Strip. After a meeting in Cairo, they said they worry the infighting will spread to the West Bank.

Egyptian and Jordanian sources were quoted in the Arab press as having expressed concern that an "Islamic Emirate of Hamas" will be set up in the Gaza Strip.

One of the main fears of the Egyptian government is the impact a Hamas victory would have on the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition group in Egypt.

An Arab Web site, Ilaf, said these worries centered on a "regional spread" of fundamentalist elements in the Middle East.

The Jordanian news agency Petra reported that King Abdullah and Egypt's Mubarak had emphasized the need for dialogue to resolve the intra-Palestinian conflict.

"The internal conflict is something that should not happen and does not serve the Palestinian cause," a statement read.

Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said that the Palestinian infighting had "enraged" Arab leaders, and it must stop.

There is a great deal of frustration among Egyptian officials who have tried for months to assist Fatah and Hamas in reaching an accommodation. Osama el-Baz, a senior adviser to President Mubarak, told reporters in Cairo that "the Palestinians must help themselves so that we can be able to help them."

Egyptian sources told Haaretz that the situation in the Gaza Strip is being closely followed. "We are promoting an effort that will bring about an end to the infighting on a permanent basis and prevent the constant outbreak of renewed fighting," the sources said.

In recent weeks, aides of Egypt's chief of intelligence, Omer Suleiman, have held talks with the various Palestinian factions in an effort to reach agreement on a cease-fire.

The Egyptians are preparing a document that will be presented to representatives of the various factions for agreement. Such a meeting was scheduled to take place late this month, but it has been postponed to July.

In late June, representatives of the Quartet - the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia - are scheduled to meet in Egypt, and a meeting is being planned in parallel for representatives of Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

</hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=870531>

[close window](#)