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Gazan activist: We need democracy and stability in Egypt

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy



Israeli-Arab protesters hold Tunisian flags and posters Feb. 1, depicting Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser during a demonstration outside the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv, to show support for the people of Egypt and Tunisia. (CNS photo/Ammar Awad, Reuters)

On the ninth day of the uprising in Egypt, *NCR* spoke with Husam el Nounou -- public relations coordinator for the Gaza Community Mental Health Project and a human rights activist living in Gaza City -- and asked for his views on the unrest in the country next door.

Egypt shares a small portion of its northeastern border with the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Territory has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when Hamas seized power during a US-fueled coup.

Egypt, which controls the crossing point at the Gazan town of Rafah, participated in the blockade but eased restrictions last summer after an Israeli assault on a humanitarian aid flotilla to Gaza.

Following is *NCR's* conversation with El Nounou, edited for clarity.

NCR:Are Gazans watching events in Egypt closely?

El Nounou: Yes, they are because Gaza is very close to Egypt, [Gazans] are always very concerned about what happens in Egypt. In fact, most of the people I know are staying glued to their TV or radios to follow the news about what is happening with the revolution.

The Associated Press reported that the Rafah crossing point was closed on January 30th. Could you talk about how events in Egypt are immediately affecting Gazans?

The border is totally closed now. You know previously the border was open but there was not free movement for people. Only certain categories of people were allowed to move: patients, students, people with foreign passports, and people who have permanent residency outside Gaza. The rest of the population was not allowed [to leave].

But now, even these categories are not allowed to go out of Gaza and cross over into Egypt and this is creating a serious humanitarian problem for these people, especially for the patients who go for medical treatment outside Gaza. A lot of these people have health conditions which are deteriorating and they, of course, cannot leave and get the medical treatment that they need.

The press reports give the impression that it is pretty chaotic throughout Egypt right now. So who's monitoring the border? The Egyptian military?

Of course. On the Egyptian side, the Egyptian authorities are monitoring and controlling the border. Then on the Palestinian side, the government in Gaza -- the Hamas government -- are responsible for controlling movement from the Gaza side.

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Has Hamas spoken out in support of the demonstrators?

No. In fact, the official position of Hamas has been very conservative. They were almost silent about the uprising in Egypt because they don't want to [jeopardize] their relations with the Egyptian authorities by making any announcements pro or against the revolution.

What are your own thoughts about the uprising? Do you think it represents a change in the status quo or do you consider this a temporary disruption?

I can answer this question on two levels: as an individual, and the general view.

First, the general view: People in Gaza viewed the Egyptian regime as not so supportive of the Palestinian people, the Palestinian cause. [The regime] could have done more to help the Palestinians in the difficult situation that they are suffering especially because of the siege imposed by the Israeli authorities.

So generally speaking, the general mood in Gaza is pro the revolution and making democratic changes in Egypt because eventually [Gazans] believe this is going to be reflected positively on their cause.

At the personal level, if you ask me this question, I think we need to have a democratic change in Egypt --

because this is good, but we need stability in Egypt, as well. My concern is that if there will be any unrest or any political turmoil, that can negatively affect the Palestinian cause. Maybe there will be some problems -- maybe some violence that we in Gaza will be affected by.

Do you think what is happening in Egypt will have any influence on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in terms of putting more pressure for some kind of resolution?

You know Egypt is a very powerful player in the Middle East peace process so any political change will definitely affect the Middle East environment. If there are no changes in the Egyptian regime, it will definitely affect the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

If there are any democratic changes, I think this will be for the good and [could contribute] to Palestinian liberation and getting rid of the occupation.

NCR contributor Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is conducting interviews with people connected to the unrest in Egypt this week. For her previous interviews, see:

- **Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'**, a conversation with Egyptian expert John Esposito
- **In Egypt, most powerful example of 'people power' in history**, a conversation with Gene Sharp, a renowned scholar of nonviolent struggle
- **Violence on Cairo streets, Egyptian demonstrators say 'will not be silenced'**, a conversation with says Philip Rizk, an Egyptian filmmaker and activist

For a sampling of photos of the unrest in Egypt, see the slideshow of CNS photos below.

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