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PRODUCER: Andy Denwood

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ASH: Security and the recent war in Gaza top the agenda as Israelis cast their votes today. But what about the role played by Israel's former foe and current ally to the south – Egypt?

ACTUALITY OF DEMONSTRATIONS

ASH: As bombs rained, Egypt refused to open its border to fleeing Palestinians. Streets boiled with anger as people demonstrated not just against Israel, but also against their own Government.

EL ARIAN: I think now, among the people in the whole Arab and Islamic world, the Egyptian regime is criminal, is participating in this crime.

ASH: So did Cairo really side with Israel against its Muslim neighbours? In this week's File on Four I'll be investigating the behind-the-scenes role played by Egypt and its President, Hosni Mubarak, in the Gaza crisis. And I'll be reporting from the Rafah Border, which has become such a key symbol of this conflict.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF HOOTING CARS AT BORDER

ASH: Well, this is it, we are at the end of the road in Rafah. There's a blue arch which says, "Welcome to Egypt visitors" on one side, and on the other side, facing the Gaza Strip, there is a tailback of about a hundred lorries, parked some of them two deep. We're just walking now past something covered in green tarpaulin, a very big lorry, and it says Egyptian Red Crescent on the side, donation Kuwait, Red Crescent Society.

AL DRUHBI: We left Cairo with four full trucks and now we are here with less than one truck, probably two-thirds of a truck, because we had to unload all the food we had and all the clothes we had because they are not permitted through here and they have to go through Israel. And a lot of people don't have much faith that the things that go through Israel will get to Gaza

ASH: Ahmed al Druhbi looks tired. A volunteer from a charity group, he's driven here overnight from the Egyptian capital only to be told his journey's been largely in vain.

AL DRUHBI: If you are talking about fairness or logic or humanity, they have an obligation to let in food through this crossing. It's shameful what the Egyptian Government is doing - shameful not only to me as an Egyptian, but to any human being with a conscience about what's going on in Gaza.

ASH: The Rafah crossing on the fourteen kilometre Egypt/Gaza border is the only gateway to the Gaza Strip not under Israeli control. But Egypt will only allow medical supplies to go through here. Food, clothing and all other aid has to go to the El Auja checkpoint on the corner of the Strip, which is guarded and run by Israel. And today the medical aid seems to be going through here at a snail's pace. As soon as they spot my microphone, relief workers and volunteers from as far afield as Indonesia pounce on me to express their frustration after waiting hours in the hot midday sun. Nicola Jones is a Methodist minister from Birmingham with a van load of stuff donated by her parishioners in the UK.

JONES: It takes more than just wearing a dog collar to get through now and they are very cautious about who they are letting in, but that's just driving everybody insane. We have got Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, we have followed lorries from virtually every Arab country in the world. A lot more could be done here, and all this aid could be moved much much more quickly and processed.

ACTUALITY OF LORRY IDLING

ASH: The big gate's being opened now and a lorry is going through. Oh, that's your load in that Chevrolet van. So you must feel relieved seeing it go through the gates?

JONES: I'm so thankful I could just burst into tears actually, to know that the money that has been raised by ordinary Methodists in Birmingham – mainly a majority black congregation – who just feel for the people of Gaza and just say we must give whatever we can so there's wound dressings, there's milk, there's blankets, but the wound dressings are the most important of all. It's just a wonderful thing to see it go through and know it's going to help.

ACTUALITY OF GOING THROUGH THE GATE

ASH: I'm Lucy.

MEN: [Talking]

ASH: So some aid has gone in, but when I get inside I find that's not the end of the story. The lorries have now just joined another long queue inside this border compound, which reminds me of a ferry terminal.

ACTUALITY IN HALL

ASH: I'm led through a maze of corridors into a vast customs hall, where dazed looking foreign medics with heavy rucksacks sit and wait. We make a beeline for the state security office, but the men behind the glass don't want to talk. Finally we are ushered upstairs to meet Medhat Moussa, the general in charge of the crossing, but he is pretty tight lipped.

I know that you have a lot of aid to deal with, but a lot of people are very frustrated that it's taking so long. What is the actual system, because you have a queue of lorries outside the main black gate. How long do they wait inside this bit before they are actually allowed into Gaza proper?

MOUSSA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Until all the equipments they have and the trucks are screened to make sure that everything is in order and then they will go in eventually.

ASH: Okay, but everything has to be unloaded and gone through by hand?

MOUSSA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Stop the recording.

ASH: Why do we have to stop recording? Sorry?

MOUSSA [VIA INTERPRETER]: It is his wish.

ASH: Okay.

ASH: Despite all the delays holding up aid, some injured Palestinians have been allowed through the Rafah crossing. A handful were then flown abroad for treatment, but the majority - around 570 people - are now being cared for in hospitals in the border town of El Arish and in the Egyptian capital.

ACTUALITY IN HOSPITAL

ADIL: We are in Palestine hospital now. It is run by Palestinians and we have Egyptian colleagues. It's situated in Heliopolis in Cairo.

ASH: Dr Assam Adil is an eye specialist and director of this small hospital in a smart Cairo suburb. He takes me to meet a couple of the thirty-five Palestinian patients here who were wounded during Israel's bombing of Gaza.

ACTUALITY ON WARD

ASH: There's a young boy in the bed here, they're just lifting the blankets off him and a sheet. He's been amputated, both legs. They are wrapped in bandages. They have to be changed every other day?

ADIL: Every other day, yes.

ASH: And it's extremely painful?

ADIL: It's extremely painful. They used to do it under general anaesthesia. They tried once to do a dressing in here and it was intolerable, so they have to take him down to the theatre.

ASH: Amaar Abu Assi is a seventeen year old student from Khan Younis in the southern part of the Gaza Strip. At his bedside, his older brother Bilal proudly explains how Amaar set some old car tyres on fire to create a smokescreen to conceal Palestinian fighters. But then an Israeli rocket exploded right next to him, severing both legs and causing horrific burns to his torso. Bilal says his younger brother has been very brave and that he dreams of returning to Gaza as soon as possible to join the resistance. But it's clear that Amaar, whose eyes are filled with tears, no longer wants to play the hero.

ABU ASSI [VIA INTERPRETER]: He says , what can I do, what can I do, my legs are lost, what kind of work I'm going to do? I don't know.

ASH: Most of the other patients here were not actively resisting the Israelis when they were injured. Sabah Musba Kishco is a fifty year old mother from Gaza City. She tells me her home was wrecked in an Israeli missile attack as the family was sitting down to supper.

SABAH [VIA INTERPRETER]: The house came down and she was covered with the rubble all over except her face. She remembers the men coming from outside, calling, ‘Allah Akbar, there is a woman here,’ and they pulled her from beneath the rubble. She had, she said she had broken pelvis and broken legs. When she regained consciousness she asked about her family, they told her that everybody is just fine, but she knew in her heart that her daughter ...

ASH: You’re very upset as well, doctor, aren’t you?

ADIL: I’m sorry, usually I’m not really involved with my patients, but this is ... She knew at that time in her heart that her daughter, her name is Ibtihal, was not right.

ASH: In fact Sabah’s daughter and daughter-in-law had both been killed outright. Outside in the corridor, once he has recovered his composure, Dr Adil says his hospital has received a huge amount of support from the general public.

ADIL: Actually ordinary Egyptian people have supplied us with everything during the past four weeks: money foodstuff, linens, medicines supplies, everything actually, and we are treating those patients through these funds.

ASH: Yet many here feel that more could and should have been done to prevent such suffering in the first place.

ACTUALITY OF DEMONSTRATIONS

ASH: Throughout the three week long military action in Gaza, thousands of people up and down the country gathered to protest against Israel. But the demonstrators also turned on their own Government.

MAHER [VIA INTERPRETER]: We are not blaming Israel or the United States. This is what we expect of them – Israel to kill Palestinians and the USA to support it and give it US-made weapons. But we really blame the Egyptian regime and Mubarak for a completely weak position that they took towards this war.

ASH: Ahmed Maher is the leader of the April 6th group – a new coalition of government opponents - which first came together to back striking textile workers in the Nile Delta. The group, which claims it has 70,000 supporters, campaigns for human rights, labour rights, democratic elections and judicial reform. Ahmed said the group is also united in the belief that Egypt has failed its neighbours in Gaza.

MAHER [VIA INTERPRETER]: Mubarak himself could have done a lot. He could have kicked out the Israeli ambassador and withdrawn the Egyptian ambassador. He could have stopped them exporting cheap Egyptian gas to Israel. He could have threatened, even by words, that he will cut relations with Israel. These are among the things that he could have done, but he didn't.

ASH: Why do you think he didn't do those things?

MAHER [VIA INTERPRETER]: Many people have said that he did so because he does not have any public support among the Egyptians and he was very afraid that if he upset Israel, he will upset America and this will maybe shake his rule in Egypt. He wanted their support and that is why he was so afraid to make Israel upset.

ASH: Faced with mounting criticism, the Government is clamping down. Outside Cairo's main mosque, after Friday prayers, I was expecting a demonstration, but instead I found the place ringed with plain clothes security men and riot police. Yet discreet forms of protest are still alive.

ACTUALITY OF MUSIC

ASH: This is a benefit concert to raise money for Gaza in a fashionable downtown art gallery. Volunteers are doing a brisk trade here, selling Palestinian scarves and specially designed T-shirts to a young crowd of professionals and students.

ACTUALITY OF CHEERS

ASH: Philip Rizk, an Egyptian German blogger and activist, is one of the organisers.

RIZK: The problem is that the people that do identify with the Palestinians and are in solidarity with them don't have the freedom to say what they want to say. The Egyptian Government cracks down quite hard on any mobilisation, on any groupings.

ASH: This cracking down you are talking about, have you witnessed that personally?

RIZK: Yes. I mean, protests that are organised, Egyptian security shows up in various forms. So often there are plain clothes police officers or security personnel that grab people off the street, put them in private cars, drive them off to prison.

ASH: Do you think there any of these security officials in here tonight?

RIZK: Definitely. They have their security here. Any sort of event ...

ASH: Even here?

RIZK: I think this is not a public enough event for security to really crack down on. I mean, I imagine they have a presence here, they know what is going on, they know who is here but they are not interested in arresting people as far as we know - we'll see what happens later tonight. But if this were in a public square it would be stopped immediately.

ASH: Really?

RIZK: Yes.

ASH: Ironically, exactly a fortnight after our conversation took place, Philip Rizk was himself abducted by Egypt's state security forces. Last Friday he and fifteen friends took part in a Gaza solidarity march just north of Cairo. He was arrested

ASH cont: by police and later driven off to an unknown location in an unmarked car. I'm told that several hundred Egyptians have been detained for taking part in Gaza protests but it's difficult to get a reliable figure - not least because the authorities never make it public who they have arrested and very few are formally charged. The country's emergency law is now being used to silence criticism of the Gaza policy – a law originally adopted to combat terrorism after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat by Islamic extremists. Dr Hosaam Zaki is the spokesman for Egypt's Foreign Affairs Ministry.

ZAKI: I think it's more than justified to put those who try to stir public disorder away a little bit in order to make sure that stability reigns in this country. This is a big country of 18 million people; we don't want any instability to happen in Egypt, certainly not because of these events.

ASH: But people have a right, don't they, to go out on the street?

ZAKI: And they have and they have. If you have been here during these events you would have seen demonstrations in the north, in Cairo, in Alexandria, in Fahume, in many cities in Egypt, but people came out in thousands.

ASH: So why do they have to be locked up? I mean ...

ZAKI: But these are not the people that were locked up. Obviously, the people that were locked up, if they were locked up, these are people who did not care for the stability of this country.

ACTUALITY OF BROTHERHOOD MEETING

ASH: In a dusty upstairs meeting room in central Cairo, a group of middle aged men are holding a small press conference. These are the sort of people the Government accuses of plotting to destabilise the regime here. The speaker is Dr Essam El-Arian, political adviser of Egypt's most powerful opposition group – the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the group has 20% of seats in Parliament, officially it is banned and

ASH cont: the Government treats the Brotherhood's MPs as a motley bunch of independents. But, says Dr El Arian, they represent a real threat to President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party, and that's why, he says, there's been such a fierce clampdown on the group's Gaza protests.

EL-ARIAN: Today I come from visiting two prisons. In one where about eight doctors all are arrested because they support Gaza and the Palestinians.

ASH: But it's not illegal to help Palestinians.

EL-ARIAN: They add to these charges that they are outlawed group, they are working illegal way.

ASH: And apart from being doctors, are they also members of the Muslim Brotherhood?

EL-ARIAN: Of course many of them, yes. All of them are members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

ASH: Is that why they've been arrested?

EL-ARIAN: Yes, that is the main charge. This will lead to court if it will go on.

ASH: And all this is as a result of them protesting about Egyptian Government's policy?

EL-ARIAN: Yes supporting Gaza, supporting the people there against Israelis' aggression, that is the main piece. We have now many many protests against the regime from Alex to Aswan, and I think the regime is not aware about the suffering of the people. And the people are suffering a lot in their life, ordinary life, not political or not something like that, mainly social and economical suffering. And of course, if this accumulation of protest come, it will bring change.

ASH: Hamas's ascendancy in Gaza has made the ruling elite and some secular Egyptians very nervous. Their fears are compounded by Hamas's close ideological and historical ties to the Brotherhood, says Issander el Amrani of the International Crisis Group.

EL AMRANI: Hamas was founded by Palestinian students who had come to Egypt and had joined the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and then returned, so it's seen as a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood of today. Effectively it operates completely separately and obviously the military part especially. With the crisis in Gaza, the rise of Hamas, the rise of other Islamist groups that have reached a position of government in various countries, I mean obviously Palestine since 2006, we're seeing a likely entrance of a Hezbollah-led coalition in Lebanon later this year. This grants legitimacy to the idea that one day the Muslim Brotherhood could form the ruling government in Egypt. Now that's one thing that Egypt is worried about.

ASH: Keeping a lid on the Muslim Brotherhood is one thing. Controlling its offshoot across the border quite another. But many people, both in Egypt and abroad, believe the Government is so hostile to Hamas that it actually tried to engineer its destruction – with help from Israel. Such suspicions are reinforced by the fact that Israel's Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, visited Cairo less than 48 hours before the assaults on Gaza began.

LIVNI: Hamas need to understand that our aspiration to live in peace doesn't mean that Israel is going to take this kind of situation any longer. Enough is enough.

ASH: At a joint press conference with her Egyptian counterpart, Ahmed Aboul Gheit on the 25th of December, Livni vowed to retaliate against Palestinian rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. Aboul Gheit used the occasion to publicly urge restraint.

GHEIT: Egypt will be in touch with both parties, hoping that we would create enough quiet that would lead to an extended period of quiet.

ASH: The 'quiet' lasted less than two days – then the bombing started. Dr Essam El Arian of the Muslim Brotherhood is convinced Livni received a tacit go-ahead from Egyptian officials for the military campaign.

EL ARIAN: Or have a green light to go ahead maybe, why not?

ASH: What do you mean by a green light?

EL ARIAN: I think the Egyptian know everything about the plan of Israelis against Gaza and they participated in this plan. Egypt is not welcoming the control of Hamas on Gaza Strip. And before the visit of Livni to Egypt they invited all the Palestinian factions, resistance groups to come and Hamas refused to come. They failed to achieve that.

ASH: The Egyptian Government ...

EL ARIAN: They were very furious about that.

ASH: Egypt has long played go-between between Hamas and Fatah – the rival Palestinian faction which controls the West Bank - as well negotiating between Hamas and Israel. Sometimes it must seem like a thankless task. Issander el Amrani of the International Crisis Group suspects that the Egyptians might simply have run out of patience.

EL AMRANI: It does appear plausible, I mean Egypt was very frustrated with the way Hamas was conducting itself throughout December. But also at the same clear it is adamantly clear that the Egyptians will not tolerate in the long term what they call, what they often term 'an Islamic emirate of Gaza' - you know right at their border they think it's a source of radicalisation. The eventual goal, the Egyptian Israeli relationship, although it's difficult and complex and multi-layered, there's a lot of historic mistrust and deep mistrust, about each other's intentions. Yet on this issue, on the issue of Hamas, their interests largely converge. Neither state really can tolerate, can accept such a radical presence in Gaza.

ASH: But the Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hossam Zaki, firmly rejects the green light conspiracy theories.

HOSSAM: Absolutely false. Hamas is part of the Palestinian national scene. We're not trying to replace it or make it disappear. Moreover, Israel has a vested interest in seeing Hamas continue what it does best, which is Palestinian division, and we know that the attack on Gaza was never going to be about killing Hamas or about finishing it off. It was about to give it a lesson from an Israeli perspective.

ASH: What about from an Egyptian perspective?

HOSSAM: Absolutely not, we don't need to give Hamas a lesson, we have been dealing with Hamas for years. The fact that we are frustrated with Hamas behaviour is one thing. It is a completely different thing to say that Egypt has agreed or given a green light or accepted or looked the other way to let Israel teach Hamas a lesson, completely unacceptable.

ASH: But we live in a media age and the pictures of Tzipi Livni, Israel's Foreign Minister shaking the hand of Abdul Gate just before this war is unleashed plays a certain way around especially the Arab world.

HOSSAM: I give you that, that is, I accept this argument. Our intention, in talking with Tzipi Livni, was to warn and to advise and to say that if you're thinking about this, this is the wrong course of action. She said what she had to say, she left two days later. They attacked, it made us look very bad and I agree with that, but it does not mean for a second that there was any kind of acquiescence from the part of Egypt - this is absolute nonsense.

ASH: Egypt is under pressure from two directions. Hamas, its allies such as the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, and much of the Arab world accuse it of collaborating with the occupying power. It has been attacked for its failure to condemn Israeli aggression and for a border policy that blocks humanitarian aid to Palestinians. But to Israel and the West, Egypt's border is still too porous, because it's riddled with tunnels. And I want to know more about this underground economy.

ACTUALITY IN CAR

ASH: To get to the Gaza border from Cairo you have to cross the Sinai – the massive peninsula separating Africa from Asia. It is about a five hour drive over the Suez Canal and then on through the desert – the place described in the bible as the ‘great and terrible wilderness’. A few hundred miles to the south of here there are all the famous resorts like Sharm-el- Sheikh, packed with money and foreign tourists. But the boom definitely hasn’t spread up here to the Northern Sinai, mainly inhabited by Bedouin tribes people. It’s arid looking and very poor. Every now and again, through the car window, I spot a solitary figure leading a donkey through the scrubland. The houses are breeze block with corrugated iron or plastic rooves. It feels like a lonely place. There are very few cars on the road and I wouldn’t like to break down here.

ACTUALITY OF MAN SHOWING WALL

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: Of course the house was severely shook and there was some damages in the front of the house as you can see.

ASH: Yes, I can see a big crack down the wall.

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: And this big crack is caused by the first night of Israeli bombing of this area.

ASH: A man who lives next to the Rafah crossing invites me to inspect the damage to his wall caused by Israeli shells. From his house on top of a big sand dune I can look down through a grove of olive and almond trees and see Palestinian Rafah spread before me with its minarets and apartment blocks. The border is just 750 metres away and on their side at this very moment Palestinians are probably digging tunnels. You can even see the plastic sheeting they used to hide them. But to my host on this side, tunnels are a taboo subject.

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: I haven’t seen any tunnels, no, I haven’t been there and I haven’t seen any of them.

ASH: Do you know people that were working in smuggling?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: Yes, I know a lot of them.

ASH: And you've never seen a tunnel all the time you've lived here. I find that a little bit hard to believe. Aren't you a bit curious?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: I told you I haven't seen any.

ASH: I'm not surprised by his reluctance to talk. Now there are signs of a real crackdown on this lucrative source of revenue in this neglected border town.

ACTUALITY IN CAR

ASH: I'm driving down some back streets of Rafah. We are on our way to see a man who's on the run from the police for smuggling goods. Now he's a fugitive in a safe house and his cousin is taking me to see him. His cousin is sitting in the front seat in front of me, wrapped in a red and white Palestinian scarf. We are turning into a courtyard under an olive tree and we are now parked up against a big pile of sand. Going to get out. He's asked us to hide the car so that you can't see it from the road, so we're just parked up behind this group of olive trees. We have to be quite quick because this is a man on the run and he doesn't want anyone to catch him.

Can you tell me why you are on the run from the police, what's happened?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: I own a tunnel and it was destroyed and revealed and everybody knew that this land, there is tunnel there and I owned the land. So the police is looking for me at the moment. Before the last Israeli strike there was like three hundred tunnels, but now they have almost destroyed most of them. Everybody is so scared to get into a tunnel and then the tunnel gets raided or attacked or bombed and get killed in there, so nobody is smuggling any food or medicine at the moment. Most of the tunnels are actually completely destroyed and you cannot get inside them.

ASH: It sounds like a very risky kind of business; why do people here take these risks?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: Because of the money. You do nothing but sitting there while things are smuggled and you get like a hundred bucks a night. So for us here it's a big money. Unemployment rate here is skyrocket – almost 100%. There is nothing to do, there is no projects and some of us try to plant or work in agriculture but, you know, the desert is not very good to do so, so absolutely nothing. Most of us are unemployed.

ASH: Sitting cross-legged on the floor with shutters closed, the man is clearly agitated and keen for us to leave. But before we go, I have to ask if he has been involved in smuggling any weapons into the Strip.

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: My tunnel, not a single bullet have crossed since it was opened up until it was destroyed.

ASH: What about other people's tunnels?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: The tunnels I know, where I know their owners, they all smuggle food and medicine and cattle and stuff like this only. But I don't know anyone who smuggles weapons.

ASH: And do you know lots of people who have gone to prison because of tunnels?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: Dozens, I know dozens of people, including one of them. Some of them were sentenced to two or three years in prison, but one of them was famous because he got more than that because he was smuggling TNT material and some weapons.

ASH: So you do know someone who has been smuggling weapons then?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: He doesn't own a tunnel. He was on his way with some weapons in his car and some TNT.

ASH: TNT explosive?

MAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: TNT explosive in his car, and the Government, the police arrested him on the way.

ASH: Presumably on the way to a tunnel. Security arrangements agreed at Camp David, which led to the historic 1979 Egypt Israel peace treaty, force Egypt to fight arms smuggling. But Daniel Kurtzer, the former US ambassador to Egypt, says he doesn't think Cairo was trying hard enough to stop rockets from getting in – especially after Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005.

KURTZER: The war seems to have been a wake up call. Since the end of the fighting there certainly has been a renewed emphasis on the part of Egyptian authorities to see what they could do to curb the smuggling and to increase both their technical as well as their human resources along that border to try to prevent Hamas from rearming to the extent that it was before.

ASH: The border guards are not very well paid or necessarily well trained and there are limitations on the number of soldiers that can be kept on that border after the Camp David agreements. So in a way, isn't Egypt caught between rock and hard place on this?

KURTZER: Well it certainly is a dilemma, but clearly there's an interest that we all have to see the Egyptians do a better job, and that can be accomplished through enhanced training, perhaps through some targeted military assistance which can be used to compensate border guards in a difficult area and therefore reduce the incentives to be engaged in smuggling. I do think though that a stronger will on the part of the Egyptian authorities can improve the situation - it won't be perfect, but it'll certainly be better than it was before December.

ASH: Israel insists that smuggling should stop and that Egypt should have more checkpoints in the Sinai to intercept weapons before they get anywhere near the border. But Egypt's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hossam Zaki, hints that his country is getting a bit tired of all this foreign pressure and advice.

ZAKI: This is a complicated issue. These are tunnels that come out basically within houses. If you're an occupying power, you can erase houses without any consideration of international law. The Egyptian Government cannot just erase houses in Egyptian Rafah. We cannot do that. We have acquired from the United States equipment that would allow us to discover tunnels and they're going to be very useful. I have to tell you that this is not a new issue. Tunnels have existed in the Gaza strip for thirty or forty years. The thing is the Israelis, they have tried to find a scapegoat, to put the blame on somebody about the tunnels and then say, "Well, this is the party that is not doing its job and it's Egypt, and now we have to push Egypt in order to do more."

ASH: With all due respect, Mr Zaki, this is a 14 kilometre stretch where these tunnels are, and this is a huge country, Egypt, with quite a considerable military force. Why isn't it possible to eradicate these tunnels once and for all and make sure that no weapons can get into the Gaza Strip on this side?

ZAKI: Well you have to understand that this network of tunnels was created not because of arms and not for arms, it was created to smuggle goods and items that are not present and not circulated or traded in the Gaza Strip. Now people are inventive, people are creative and they have to get their necessities somewhere, and over the border, across the border everything is available, so they had to invent and they had to, this business of smuggling had to flourish for obvious reasons.

ASH: Egypt yet again is on the tightrope. Completely destroying the tunnels will lead to more anger on the Arab street. But it also has to prove its credentials as a staunch American ally, receiving nearly \$1.5 billion in US military and economic aid each year. And that financial support is another reason why President Mubarak's regime fears not so much criticism but competition from other Arab or Muslim states. Recently Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have all lobbied to take over the role as mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. But

ASH cont: playing the elder statesman of the Arab world is key to Egypt's identity, says Issander El Amrani of the International Crisis Group.

EL AMRANI: It has the largest diplomatic corps in the Arab world, it has the most embassies of any Arab country, it's a diplomatic force to reckon with. It does not have the money of Saudi Arabia, it does not have the military of an Israel or the willingness to use military force, so this diplomatic aspect, this media ... is extremely important to the Egyptians. For now Egypt, since after all the ceasefire initiative was branded as the Egyptian initiative, this did benefit Egypt. But the question is, is how solid is this role today, how can it be maintained?

ASH: Egypt is facing a succession crisis. Mubarak's opponents say the 80 year old president will do anything to keep his grip on power and ensure that his son, Gamal, inherits the throne, so most internal dissent is fiercely repressed. And when it comes to external relations, many have serious doubts as to whether Egypt can continue as peacemaker of the Middle East, after all the accusations of siding with Israel over Gaza. But Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hossam Zaki, brushes off any notion that his country will be sidelined.

ZAKI: Specific regional quarters want to elbow Egypt out of this Palestinian file and want to replace Egypt's role, and this is something that we are immensely conscious of and will not let it happen. We're going to hold our grounds and going to continue doing what we are doing best, which is building rather than destroying.

ASH: But do you think that Egypt will still have a major role to play?

ZAKI: Egypt's role is not defined by times. Egypt's role is going to remain there. This is a central country of this region, this is a powerhouse in demography, in geography and in politics. And if you're Egyptian, you would have understood exactly what I'm talking about.

SIGNATURE TUNE