

Blockade 'eased' as Gaza starves more slowly

'Let them eat coriander!'

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As Israel this week declared the "easing" of the four-year blockade of Gaza, an official explained the new guiding principle: "Civilian goods for civilian people." The severe and apparently arbitrary restrictions on foodstuffs entering the enclave – coriander bad, cinnamon good – will finally end, we are told. Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants will have all the coriander they want.

This "adjustment", as the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu termed it, is aimed solely at damage limitation. With Israel responsible for killing nine civilians aboard a Gaza-bound aid flotilla three weeks ago, the world has finally begun to wonder what purpose the siege serves. Did those nine really need to die to stop coriander, chocolate and children's toys from reaching Gaza? And, as Israel awaits other flotillas, will more need to be executed to enforce the policy?

Faced with this unwelcome scrutiny, Israel – as well as the United States and the European states that have been complicit in the siege – desperately wants to deflect attention away from demands for the blockade to be lifted entirely. Instead it prefers to argue that the more liberal blockade for Gaza will distinguish effectively between a necessary "security" measures and an unfair "civilian" blockade. Israel has cast itself as the surgeon who, faced with Siamese twins, is mastering the miraculous operation needed to decouple them.

The result, Mr Netanyahu told his cabinet, would be a "tightening of the security blockade because we have taken away Hamas' ability to blame Israel for harming the civilian population". Listen to Israeli officials and it sounds as if thousands of "civilian" items are ready to pour into Gaza. No Qassam rockets for Hamas but soon, if we are to believe them, Gaza's shops will be as well-stocked as your average Wal-Mart.

Be sure, it won't happen.

Even if many items are no longer banned, they still have to find their way into the enclave. Israel controls the crossing points and determines how many trucks are allowed in daily. Currently, only a quarter of the number once permitted are able to deliver their cargo, and that is unlikely to change to any significant degree. Moreover, as part of the "security" blockade, the ban is expected to remain on items such as cement and steel desperately needed to build and repair the thousands of homes devastated by Israel's attack 18 months ago.

In any case, until Gaza's borders, port and airspace are its own, its factories are rebuilt, and exports are again possible, the hobbled economy has no hope of recovering. For the

overwhelming majority of Palestinians in Gaza, mired in poverty, the new list of permissible items – including coriander – will remain nothing more than an aspiration.

But more importantly for Israel, by concentrating our attention on the supposed ending of the “civilian” blockade, Israel hopes we will forget to ask a more pertinent question: what is the purpose of this refashioned “security” blockade?

Over the years Israelis have variously been told that the blockade was imposed to isolate Gaza’s “terrorist” rulers, Hamas; to serve as leverage to stop rocket attacks on nearby Israeli communities; to prevent arms smuggling into Gaza; and to force the return of the captured soldier Gilad Shalit.

None of the reasons stands up to minimal scrutiny. Hamas is more powerful than ever; the rocket attacks all but ceased long ago; arms smugglers use the plentiful tunnels under the Egyptian border, not Erez or Karni crossings; and Sgt Shalit would already be home had Israel seriously wanted to trade him for an end to the siege.

The real goal of the blockade was set out in blunt fashion at its inception, in early 2006, shortly after Hamas won the Palestinian elections. Dov Weisglass, the government’s chief adviser at the time, said it would put Palestinians in Gaza “on a diet, but not make them die of hunger”. Aid agencies can testify to the rampant malnutrition that followed. The ultimate aim, Mr Weisglass admitted, was to punish ordinary Gazans in the hope that they would overthrow Hamas.

Is Mr Weisglass a relic of the pre-Netanyahu era, his blockade-as-diet long ago superseded? Not a bit. Only last month, during a court case against the siege, Mr Netanyahu’s government justified the policy not as a security measure but as “economic warfare” against Gaza. One document even set out the minimum calories – or “red lines”, as they were also referred to – needed by Gazans according to their age and sex.

In truth, Israel’s “security” blockade is, in both its old and new incarnations, every bit a “civilian” blockade. It was designed and continues to be “collective punishment” of the people of Gaza for electing the wrong rulers. Helpfully, international law defines the status of Israel’s policy: it is a crime against humanity.

Easing the siege so that Gaza starves more slowly may be better than nothing. But breaking 1.5 million Palestinians out of the prison Israel has built for them is the real duty of the international community.

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