

Gaza Under Siege

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After Hamas' January 25, 2006 electoral victory, Israel targeted Gaza oppressively. All outside aid was cut off. Sanctions and an economic embargo were imposed, and the democratically elected government was falsely called a terrorist organization and isolated. Stepped up repression followed along with repeated IDF incursions, attacks, killings, targeted assassinations, arrests, destruction of property and more in a pattern all too familiar to Palestinians for over six decades. Gazans are imprisoned in their own land and have been traumatized for months. In June 2007, things got worse after Israel placed the Territory under siege – described by some as medieval because of its extreme harshness.

On June 14, 2007, collaboratively with Israel and the US, Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas declared a “state of emergency,” illegally dismissed Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh and his national unity government, and appointed his own prime minister and new “emergency” cabinet. Authority is now split. Abbas runs the West Bank. Hamas governs Gaza while Israel controls everything – land, sea, air, movement inside and between the Territories, the population registry, family unification, and all goods and services in and from Occupied Palestine. Especially Gaza under siege for nearly 14 months and solely dependent on Israel for its fuel, electricity and gas. Other essentials as well.

Hamas remains isolated. It's called a “hostile entity,” and after last September 19 was squeezed by tightened sanctions. Electricity, fuel and gas were reduced and intermittently cut off. So were supplies of food, medicines, water and other essentials. Its industrial production dropped 95%, and its agricultural output is about half its pre-2007 level. Nearly all construction also stopped, and according to a new UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) report, poverty tops 50% and unemployment is nearly as high. Other unofficial estimates say 80% for both is more accurate. Things are bad and worsening.

Shops are short of everything because Israel allows in only nine basic materials. Their availability is spotty, and some essentials are banned like:

- certain medicines;
- restricted food items like fruit, milk and other dairy products, wheat flour, rice, sugar, salt, cooking oil, and frozen foods;
- cleaning materials;
- agricultural samplings;
- herbicides and pesticides;

- footwear;
- clothing;
- fabrics, threads, and buttons;
- construction materials: cement, tin, iron, plastic pipes, asbestos, wood, nails, screws, wires, paint, etc.;
- spare parts and supplies for manufacturing goods;
- electrical appliances;
- office equipment and supplies;
- livestock and fodder;
- books;
- computers;
- telephones and mobiles;
- spare parts for communication devices;
- tobacco and cigarettes;
- beverages;
- all types of motor vehicles, including spare parts (batteries, tires, engine oil, etc.);
- elevators and their spare parts;
- water pumps and their spare parts; and
- the import or export of raw materials for industry, construction and agriculture - virtually everything a modern society needs to function and survive.

Compared to 9000 commodities imported before June 2007, now it's only 20. People don't get enough to eat, and conditions keep getting worse. Even fishing is restricted, idling thousands of local fishermen because anyone in open waters risks detention and harassment.

Power is in short supply - affecting hospitals, fresh water availability, sanitation, and the functioning of daily life under conditions of extreme duress. Families (including spouses) are also cut off. Some live in Gaza, others in the West Bank and Israel, and all endure prolonged separation after authorities prohibited travel from one area to the other and imposed sweeping restrictions on Egyptian and Jordanian crossings.

Earlier, family unification was denied after the Knesset passed the Nationality and Entry into Israel Law (July 2003). It bars Palestinians in the Territories with an Israeli spouse from getting citizenship or residency status in Israel so families can live together.

Thousands of married couples and their children are affected - forced to remain apart or

leave Israel. The new law solely targets Palestinians. It's discriminatory, illegal, racist, unrelated to security, and one of many collective punishment acts. Besides the law, Israeli Arabs married to Gazans are barred from entering the Territory to visit families.

Here's a brief snapshot of Gaza. It measures 360 square kilometers in area or about half the size of Chicago for its 1.5 million residents – in the world's largest and most congested open-air prison. Over 40% of them live in eight densely overcrowded refugee camps, and in the best of times, their conditions are inadequate, adverse and sometimes grim. Under siege, they're intolerable.

International law (including the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention) obligates occupying powers to protect civilian populations. Its Article 3(1) specifically states:

"Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat (out of action) by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria."

Israel disdains the law and disagrees. After its 2005 "disengagement," it denied all "responsibility for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip" even though the argument is baseless under international humanitarian and human rights laws. Their language and interpretation are clear and require occupiers to ensure the safety and welfare of people they "effective(ly) control" – even if their forces have no fixed presence in their territory. Israeli security forces have total control over Gaza and the West Bank and operate freely in both Territories. They invade and maraud, secure their borders, key points of entry, air space, and for Gaza its coastline and open waters.

Under Fourth Geneva law, Israel is obligated to protect all Palestinians – especially the sick, wounded, children under 15, pregnant women, the elderly, infirm and disabled. It must also allow free passage of food, medicines and other essentials, let medical teams provide help, and refrain from imposing collective punishment and de facto martial law. The (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights goes further, and Israel is a signatory. It recognizes the right of every person to freedom of movement, work, an adequate standard of living, education, proper health care, and a normal family life. Its Article 1 states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" – including ones under occupation or "effective(ly) control(led)" by another state.

Israeli Human Rights Violations

In January 2008, John Dugard, the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on Palestine prepared a scathing indictment of Israel's human rights violations. Leading human and civil rights organizations have their own like the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), B'Tselem, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), and the Alternative Information Center (AIC). It's an "internationally oriented, progressive, joint Palestinian – Israeli activist organization" (disseminating) information, political advocacy, grassroots activism and critical analysis of" Palestinian – Israeli societies and the conflict.

Its March 9, 2008 report is called: "The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion." Here are some highlights:

- Gaza conditions are the worst ever under occupation; they're entirely "manmade," avoidable, and with political will reversible;
- Gazans are effectively imprisoned; movement in and out of the Territory is "impossible;" food, water, health care, sewage treatment, sanitation and other essentials "can no longer be taken for granted;"
- because of the siege and economic collapse, there's "little money to buy food and limited food to buy;" rising prices exacerbate the problem;
- trucks carrying commercial and humanitarian supplies into Gaza have "plummeted" - from around 250 a day pre-crisis to a maximum of 45 a day or less;
- extreme poverty levels have "increased sharply" making 80% of Gazans dependent on humanitarian aid when it's available - a 10-fold increase in the last decade; in 2007, households (on average) spent about 62% of their income on food;
- 95% of Gaza's industrial operations shut down because production inputs aren't available and border closures prevent exports; construction is "paralysed;" agriculture "badly hit;" unemployment and poverty skyrocketed; in September 2000, 24,000 Gazans worked in Israel; today none do;
- the siege destroyed public service infrastructure; Israel prevents repairs and maintenance; spare parts imports are prohibited; electricity and fuel are severely restricted; hospitals and public institutions can't function properly; power cuts last 8 - 12 hours daily; 40 - 50 or more million liters of partially and untreated sewage are daily dumped in the sea;
- The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) says its higher - up to 60 million liters daily; in addition, raw sewage is being pumped into heavily populated areas, including three million liters recently into the Jabaliya camp storm water lagoon;
- since Israel bombed Gaza's power plant (in June 2006), it functions at one-third of capacity but needs fuel to operate;
- the Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU) provides drinking water and treats sewage; with limited electricity, fuel, maintenance and spare parts, the network can't function adequately; as a result, nearly one-third of Gazans have no running water; pre-siege, they all did;
- education is so undermined that classes are cancelled; dropout rates are high because families can't afford to send their children to school; for those attending, school days are shortened; textbooks and other resources are in short supply; and failure rates are nearly 80%; 90% in math;
- healthcare has deteriorated markedly - inside Gaza and in access to outside treatment; Gazans needing special treatment are denied exit permits; patients are dying for lack of care, including children;
- Israel's siege "effectively dismantled the economy and impoverished" its people; "ordinary men, women and children" are collectively punished in violation of international and humanitarian law; these measures also hamper the "broader peace process itself;"

— Israel effectively controls Gaza; it's obligated to protect its people but instead punishes them by its: military presence, attacks, extra-judicial assassinations, land and infrastructure destruction, restrictions on movement, lack of drinking water, food, medical care and other essentials, unemployment, impoverishment, and barriers to education;

— isolating Hamas has been counterproductive; it's failed "at all levels;" a new strategy of engagement is needed: condemn the siege; go public on the humanitarian crisis; pressure Israel to end it; provide adequate emergency help; reactivate Gaza's economy; enforce international law; and work towards "an inclusive (productive) political process."

The Al Mezan Center for Human Rights also monitors Gaza's siege. It calls itself "a (non-partisan) Palestinian (NGO) based in" Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp with a mandate "to promote, protect and prevent violations of human rights in general and economic, social and cultural (ECS) rights in particular; to provide effective aid to those victims of such violations; and to enhance the quality of (community) life in marginalized (Gaza) sectors." It also provides legal aid and advocacy and raises awareness of the continued state of violence, repression and desperate conditions in Occupied Palestine, particularly in Gaza under siege.

On April 8, it produced a scathing report called "Worst Year under Occupation: 2008 1st Quarter Report on (Israeli) Violations of Human Rights in the Gaza Strip." Below are its highlights:

— during the first quarter of 2008, Gaza experienced an "unprecedented escalation" of human rights violations - principally caused by a "serious increase" in IDF international law breaches;

— the level of 247 killings exceeded the combined totals reached for the 2005 through 2007 first quarter periods; they nearly equal all of them for 2007;

— public and private property destruction greatly increased; dunums of agricultural land destroyed as well;

— Gaza's economy was crushed; the number of poor and unemployed doubled reaching "unprecedented levels" - the worst ever under occupation;

— the international community remains silent in the face of systematic, "strangling" collective punishment on an unprecedented scale; the lives and well-being of Gazans are affected in all ways imaginable;

— the number of Gazans victimized and their material losses show the extent of violations under international law; the international community's failure to intervene made current conditions possible;

— Al Mezan condemns Israel's "aggression" and "gross human rights violations;" they're willful crimes of war and against humanity and one of the most extreme examples ever of collective punishment against a civilian population; Al Mazen calls on the international community to intervene - to "investigate, pursue and prosecute those who ordered and/or perpetrated (these) crimes."

US Special Middle East Envoy Criticizes Administration Policy

Last November, former NATO commander, (retired) General James Jones, was named the

administration's special Middle East envoy with this endorsement: he's the "person we need to take up this vital mission....an experienced leader who can address the regional security challenges comprehensively and at the highest levels...." His assignment: draft a strategic security stabilization plan to complement Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Word is now out about a report Jones is preparing that his superiors won't like. Nor will Israelis. According to Haaretz (on July 22), it's "extremely critical....of Israel's policies in the territories and its attitude toward the Palestinian Authority's (PA) security services" - President Mahmoud Abbas' repressive shock troops doing Israel's dirty work and targeting Hamas in Gaza and its supporters in the West Bank.

Administration officials have a draft summary, and it's "arousing considerable discomfort. (It's) conclusions about Israel are scathing (and those who've seen it say it) make(s) Israel look very bad" in at least two respects:

- it's "fairly broad definition" of West Bank security "under any final-status agreement," and

- "its attitude toward the PA security services."

That's not all. Jones criticizes Washington as well. He blames administration figures for failing "to reform PA security services," not coordinating them, and not preparing them to "enforc(e) the law in the West Bank." Hamas controls Gaza. Administration officials and Israelis want the report buried, but Jones will apparently publish it in full. So far, its contents aren't public, and only hints about it are being discussed.

Gaza Under Siege: "an atrocity, a crime, an abomination" - Jimmy Carter

That was Carter's assessment in an April 17 speech at the American University in Cairo. Palestinians are being "starved to death," and US efforts to undermine Hamas are counterproductive. In late May, he went further on a visit to the Welsh town of Hay by calling on EU nations to break with Washington over the siege - "one of the greatest human rights crimes on earth (and) to see Europeans going along with this is embarrassing." He called on EU leaders to reassess their position if Hamas agrees to a ceasefire - and that's what's likely behind his trip and comments, although Carter knows Hamas unilaterally observed months of ceasefire in the past and again declared one on June 19. What then is Carter up to?

Last April, he met with Khaled Meshaal (Hamas' exiled leader) in Damascus at the behest of Israel and the Bush administration - not on his own or as the media said was despite fierce opposition to his trip. High-level envoys never diverge from state policy or act independently. Where they go, who they see, and what they say have a purpose, but it's not always apparent. Carter in part explained it in a comment to the London Guardian that "The top opinion pollster in Ramallah (said) that opinion on the West Bank is shifting to Hamas, because people believe Fatah sold out to Israel and the US."

For Washington and Israel, avoiding that possibility is crucial, but more importantly, the nightmarish scenario of a united Arab front (or a unified Muslim one) against the West should the Bush administration and/or Israel attack Iran, Syria and/or Hezbollah in Lebanon. A wider war is very possible, but planners know the risk - inciting the whole region or worse yet letting it become WW III.

Washington's and Israeli strategy may be shifting, but not for any humanitarian concerns. Keeping Gaza under siege and letting Hamas' support grow isn't benefitting their imperial project. But it hasn't helped Gazans either, and nothing hints it will any time soon.

A Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) Narrative Under Siege - "Swimming in Sewage"

It's one of many PCHR accounts to show how Gazans' lives have deteriorated under siege. It begins as follows: "I think the sea probably is polluted. Sometimes I get strange white marks on my skin; but we come down to the beach each day because we have nowhere else to go." That's Salim's voice speaking for himself and his friends. They go to Gaza City beach, and one of the boys today holds a plastic bottle with small fish and a crab inside. The fish are dead, and here's why. Close by, a "sewage pipe pours mucky water into streams of dark waste that flow towards the sea" where the boys swim.

People flock to beaches in summer because it's hot, but some of them are "swimming in sewage." According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), around 60 million liters of untreated and partially treated sewage pour into the sea around Gaza City daily - because fuel and electricity supplies are spotty, and conditions months ago became desperate. According to an OCHA worker, "the sea is (getting) dirtier and more contaminated because of chronic (fuel and spare parts) shortages. (We) need 14 days of uninterrupted power in order to run a proper sewage treatment cycle, for the sake of Gaza's public health."

The Gaza Coastal Municipal Water Utility (CMWU) supplies the Territory's water and manages its three sewage treatment plants. Because of power and spare parts shortages, unfiltered tap water is saline and undrinkable, and sewage plants can't function normally. It forces CMWU to dump raw sewage into the sea so it doesn't flood residential areas.

Concern is great and growing. The World Health Organization (WHO) took samples from 30 Gaza shore sites to test for human and animal fecal contaminants. It found 13 areas covering seven beaches polluted and unsuitable for swimming, including three beaches along central and southern Gaza and four others around Gaza City. The beach where Samer and his friends swim is one of them.

WHO warned that "Waterborne outbreaks are....to be avoided because of their capacity to result in the simultaneous infection of a high proportion of (the) community" - most notably with gastroenteritis, ear and eye infections, dermatitis, dysentery, respiratory and urinary tract infections, giardia, and e-coli strains. These pathogens cause these diseases and death, so it's crucial to avoid them.

Gaza can't do it without enough fuel and electricity and a major upgrading of its plants and equipment. PCHR Head of the Economic and Social Rights Unit, Khalil Shaheen, says: Israeli "restrictions are a clear violation of the universal right to health and....a clean environment. Under international humanitarian law, Israel, as an occupying power, is obligated to facilitate access to all (essential to life) amenities. Access to clean drinking (and sea) water are....basic human rights."

Israel is unresponsive. The siege continues. Essential to life needs go unfilled. Health conditions keep deteriorating, and Gaza's undrinkable tap water and contaminated sea water are two reasons why. Nothing is being done to remediate them, and Gazans are

forced to endure.

Activists Plan to “breach the (Gaza) siege”

On August 6 or 7, about 40 unarmed activist members of the International Solidarity Movement, the Israeli Commission against House Demolitions and others will depart Cyprus on two wooden sailboats – to “get into the Gaza harbor and breach the siege.” On board will be an 81 year Catholic nun, an 83 year old Holocaust survivor, a Nakba survivor, an Israeli professor, Palestinians from Gaza, 16 nationalities, four religions, the international press, and reportedly three members of the European Parliament. Private boats were invited to join them.

“The IDF will probably stop us but part of the point is to show that Gaza is closed off,” according to spokesperson Angela Godfrey-Goldstein. The IDF’s Spokesman’s Office didn’t comment on what if any counteraction it would take. However, Israeli ships regularly patrol coastal waters and deny all vessels access to Gaza in violation of international law.

NGOs Worldwide Call for An End to Gaza’s Siege

The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) is one of many. It’s a “growing alliance of trade unions, community groups, faith groups, women and youth organisations, NGOs and other campaigners working together across more than 100 national platforms....to end poverty, inequality,” injustice and human suffering. It cites deep concern about Gaza’s 1.5 million people suffering under Israel’s siege and calls for its end. It wants world leaders and the Security Council to demand that Israel “abide by international and humanitarian law and UN resolutions....immediately (end) its (collective punishment) policy,” and halt its Gaza siege.

Other NGOs voice similar demands:

— in January 2007, 8 Israeli human rights organizations collaboratively joined an international campaign to end Gaza’s siege immediately; they are:

- (1) The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI);
- (2) Amnesty-Israel;
- (3) Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights;
- (4) Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement;
- (5) Hamoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual;
- (6) The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI);
- (7) Physicians for Human Rights – Israel; and
- (8) Yesh Din – Volunteers for Human Rights.

Others have as well:

— Gaza’s Culture and Free Thought Association says: “We are living in fear of the devastation of our society. (Gaza’s) siege is a terrible crime....tell the world – don’t say you

didn't know;"

— the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) says: "The blockade makes export impossible so farmers are abandoning their crops; Israeli incursions result in huge destruction to lands and enterprises; almost every industry in Gaza is facing ruin; this collective punishment must end;"

— the Palestinian Medical Relief Society says: "Gaza alone without the West Bank cannot survive; it needs free borders and access; 1.5 million people cut off with no trade or water, it's impossible;"

— the Women's Affairs Centre says: "Gaza is a prison;" its people are trapped, and "the result is violence;" not just "factional violence, domestic violence is also increasing;" and

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) says: "How can Gaza be a normal place; how can we live a normal life here....(we need) free movement between Gaza and the West Bank and open access to the outside world;"

Many others worldwide as well call for;

- ending Gaza's siege;
- Israel's illegal isolation policy;
- the right to work and an adequate standard of living;
- the right to health;
- education;
- life; and
- 41 illegal years of occupation.

The world no longer can wait. Neither can the people of Gaza, the West Bank and their growing numbers of supporters worldwide.

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