

Politics Unmercifully Trespass Humanitarian Borders in Gaza

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Global Research, August 12, 2007

12 August 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The major political players who are involved in sealing off 1.5 million Palestinians into an open air prison in the world's most densely populated 360-square-kilometre area of the Gaza Strip are unmercifully trespassing humanitarian borders there; they perceive in the collapsing economy of the Mediterranean coastal strip, which is rapidly developing into a humanitarian crisis, a political "window of opportunity."

Ironically they are counterproductively citing security and peace making as their casus belli, but they are creating on the ground an explosive humanitarian disaster that could blow off the local as well as the regional security in a way that precludes any credible efforts towards reviving a deadlocked peace process, moribund since 2000. Human rights and morality as well as realpolitics are facing a critical test in the Gaza Strip, where the culprits of the tragic status quo perceive a "window of opportunity."

According to Yoram Meital, Chairperson of the Chaim Herzog Center for Middle East Studies & Diplomacy at Israel's Ben-Gurion University (ynetnews.com on August 6), the first to point to this "window of opportunity" was the U.S. president, George W. Bush, who last month vaguely proposed an ambiguous public relations "international" conference on Middle East in the fall with the aim of advancing the peace process. In parallel, the Israeli prime minister suggested an "agreement of principles" for a final-status deal with the Palestinians. On August 8, Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni joined Bush's new "vision" on the opportunity: "Gaza creates a security threat for us, while the other part (West Bank) controlled by the new Palestinian government (of Salam Fayyad) can create an opportunity," she said.

A flurry of diplomatic traffic followed. Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited the region and met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert before they held their latest bimonthly meeting in Jericho, the special envoy of the Quartet of the U.S., U.N., EU and Russia Tony Blair also made a regional visit, which coincided with another historic and first of its kind by the foreign ministers of Egypt, Ahmed Aboul Ghei, and Jordan, Abdul-Ilah Khatib, to Israel to present the Arab Peace Initiative of the League of Arab States. None of these events cared to put the looming disaster in Gaza on the agenda.

Ignoring the time bomb that is clicking in Gaza , their message was conveyed by way of default and contrast. Making the life of Palestinians under the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank look easier, economically promising, and diplomatically and politically in interacting contact with the civilized world is meant to be a contrast for comparison by their compatriots in the "liberated" Gaza Strip, locked in by the Israeli military siege, the economic blockade and the political and diplomatic isolation.

'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts'

To confirm their message and sustain the inter-Palestinian divisive status quo, Bush recently unveiled a U.S. aid package for the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, which is expected neither to alleviate the economic distress in the West Bank nor avert the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, but would exacerbate the Gaza's isolation as well as its political rift with the northern compatriots.

Bush promised to provide the Palestinians with \$190 million in aid and \$80 million in security assistance. The biggest chunk — \$140 million — is the budget that is already scheduled for the UNRWA. The other \$50 million of the \$190 million in aid is money attached to political conditions to be channeled through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator and senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a think-tank based in Washington, said: "The president continued to promote deepening divisions among the Palestinians, insist on preconditions to a two-state solution and display an unwillingness to outline his own parameters for an Israeli-Palestinian endgame deal," Levy told IPS.

Linda S. Heard in an opinion column on Online Journal on August 2 quoted "an old expression that goes, 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,' which has its origins in Virgil's rendition of the Trojan horse legend. Another translation reads 'Trust not their presents, not admit the horse' ... change the word 'Greeks' to 'Americans' (and) the warning may well be valid today."

More than ten billion dollars of donors' aid since 2000, \$6 billion of European taxpayers' money given in aid to Palestinians between 1993 and 2004, an annual average of \$350-450 million injected into the PA from 1994-2000 and about \$650 million annually from 2001-2007, which amounts to over \$7 billion, more per capita than anyplace in the world except for Israel, which is heavily subsidized by the U.S., have all failed to stave off the current collapse of the Palestinian economy, polity and society or to secure a permanent opening of even one border crossing between Gaza and the outside world.

All those billions of donors money were squandered in vain, because: "The Palestinians have been too grateful and too helpless for too long to be critical of the political agenda of their donors who have practically nailed them down as political hostages to the donors' money, which was promised initially to help build an independent Palestinian state, but ended up as a political instrument effectively used by the Israeli occupying power," as this author wrote in the Middle East Times on September 7, 2006.

"The internal political crisis is only a result of the deeper economic and humanitarian crisis, which is crushing the Palestinian people to the brink of a "social revolt," especially in the "ticking time bomb" of Gaza Strip, and the donors-sustained Palestinian Authority (PA) to the brink of collapse since the donors tightened the Israeli military siege by imposing a suffocating financial blockade early in the year. The ensuing Palestinian divide is being further exacerbated by the donors' public siding with one party of the divide, to the detriment of the people whom the donors are trying in vain to reach out for," this author added. Less than one year on, this donors' role is reinforced.

Had Gandhi Been Alive

Only an international nonviolent resistance project, "The Free Gaza Movement," is "taking

action” to alert the world public opinion to the threatening status quo in Gaza to hopefully awake to the danger simmering there and defuse the clicking time bomb. Up to 100 international volunteered Palestinian, Israeli, American, European, African and Asian rabbis, imams, Christian and Buddhist clerics, British MPs, entertainment celebrities, and internationally known journalists as well as Nakba and Holocaust survivors will sail from Cyprus to Gaza in 2 to 6 seagoing vessels of 12 to 60 passengers each, prospectively on August 15.

Their declared mission is to: “1.To open Gaza to unrestricted international access, i.e. Palestinian sovereignty, 2. To demonstrate that Israel still occupies Gaza, despite its claims to the contrary, 3. To show international solidarity with the people of Gaza and the rest of Palestine, 4. To demonstrate the potential of nonviolent resistance methods.” More than 35 organizers from 13 countries have consulted Greenpeace among others for logistical support to sail safe through expected highly risky Israeli security impediments and restrictions.

The Daily India, on August 4, reported that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi alias Mahatma Gandhi, the world’s spiritual leader of nonviolence and “Father of the Indian Nation,” would have headed for the Gaza Strip to fight for the freedom of Palestinians had he been alive, says his 72-year-old grandson. According to Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, the son of Devdas Gandhi, the Mahatma’s youngest son, “If he (Mahatma Gandhi) was around today, my grandfather would have been in the Gaza Strip, shoulder-to-shoulder with the Palestinians.”

Warnings Fall on Deaf Ears

None of the same or lesser caliber figures is even thinking of heading for Gaza, but several prominent humanitarian spokesmen and women have at least voiced their warnings against the unfolding humanitarian disaster there, including the U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, his Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, the acting director of World Bank activities in the Palestinian Authority territories, Faris Hadad-Zervos, who warned of a “severe humanitarian impact,” exacerbation of “the economic crisis,” and “risk of virtually irreversible collapse” of the “pillars of Gaza’s economy.”

Commissioner General of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Karen AbuZayd, warned that, “the Gaza economy will collapse” unless the crossings are “opened for exports and not just for imports.” Director of the UNRWA in Gaza, John Ging, noted that 1.1 million of Palestinians in Gaza are dependent on international aid and the impending humanitarian crisis could overwhelm U.N. resources. The United Nations has suspended vital construction projects such as homes, schools and sewage treatment in Gaza. “Some \$93 million [£46 million] of projects are on hold because cement and other building supplies have run out,” said Ging. UNRWA’s construction projects employ 121,000 people in a territory where about 80 per cent of people live on \$2 a day. Michael Williams, a coordinator for the U.N.’s regional efforts, told the Security Council early this month that 75 percent of factories have closed since June. He quoted World Bank data that since June, 68,000 jobs have been lost in the teeming strip.

Oxfam warned against the “increasing desperation of Gazans as shortages of fuel, water and food are reported” and that “thousands of refugees across Gaza will face imminent cuts in water and sewage services if more fuel is not provided in the coming days and weeks.”

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, in an "Urgent Appeal from Israeli Human Rights Groups to Israeli Defense Minister," raised its alarm "Open Gaza's Borders to Prevent a Humanitarian Crisis."

Food shortage is another great cause for concern. UNRWA officials are anxious about running down their reserves. The World Food Programme has also been noticing growing food insecurity in Gaza . The cancellation of the Gaza customs code by Israeli authorities also meant that more than 1,300 containers of commercial materials destined for Gaza remained stranded at Israeli ports, and essential items such as milk powder, baby formula, vegetable oil and medical supplies were now in short supply.

"There is no doubt, Gaza is becoming aid-dependent," said Liz Sime from CARE International. "They want aid in the form of job-creation programs." Such programs may remain a "pipe dream" if the borders stay shut, Sime said. The Association of Palestinian Businessmen warned that if the closure continues, at least 120,000 workers in Gaza could lose their jobs; more than 65,000 already did. Oxfam's Michael Bailey agreed. If the crossings between Gaza and Israel aren't opened soon, "the slide into all-out dependency will be swift and inevitable," he said.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported on August 3 that the vast majority of import-dependent industries have temporarily closed down and only 10 per cent of Gaza 's industries remain partially functional. "We need to see all crossings at least as operational as they were before 9 June, or risk facing serious social, economic and humanitarian concerns," the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, warned in a press release. Gazan industry is based on enterprises ninety-five percent of which rely on the importation of raw materials. On July 26 The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) meeting in Geneva demanded that Israel comply with the Protocol on Economic Relations between the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Palestinian Authority Ambivalent

U.S. Ambassador Dennis Ross on August 1st warned in the New Republic : "We cannot ignore that providing assistance to Gaza now requires someone to deal with Hamas. It need not be us, but total isolation and a cut-off could produce a humanitarian disaster. If we don't want others in the international community to feel compelled to establish normal contacts with Hamas, we need to forge an international consensus on how to deal with the realities in Gaza ," Ross wrote, adding: "There is a need to avoid a humanitarian crisis. There may be a need to permit at least some limited commerce to prevent a complete economic collapse."

However all warnings are falling on deaf Israeli, American, European, Arab and even Palestinian ears. For example no word has so far been heard from the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, the Swiss Jean Ziegler, to draw attention to the hunger in Gaza . May be he is waiting for hunger to bite more or waiting for an "official" word from the Palestinian Authority (PA), or others, to act on the looming disaster, a word that politics would expectedly play a game of brinkmanship with hunger to make Gaza "scream" before the outcry is voiced out as a state of emergency, despite the "state of emergency" declared by the PA on June 14 for political reasons. The PA's passive ambivalence seems to keep similar human rights organizations with enough excuse to stay disconnected.

Senior Abbas aide and Palestinian chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said it would be “short-sighted” to try to exploit the Gaza closure for political gain: “No one thinks like that in Abbas’ office.” Separately, Nimr Hamad, an adviser to Abbas said: “We need to differentiate between punishing the people of Gaza and weakening Hamas. We don’t want the people to suffer.”

However, at least by default the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah seems ambivalent vis-à-vis the Gazans’ plight. Objecting they had not been in advance consulted about it, they welcomed on July 30 the withdrawal of a statement proposed to the U.N. Security Council, drafted by Qatar and Indonesia, on the situation in Gaza, demanding the reopening of all Gaza crossing points, a move that would ease the isolation of Hamas as well as the deploring conditions there. The draft was withdrawn, but the PA had to contain the diplomatic blundering arising therefrom.

The PA’s former foreign minister, Nabil Shaath visited Indonesia as a special envoy for President Abbas; Gaza needed humanitarian assistance, he said and appealed to the international community to help end Israel’s siege, saying in Jakarta the siege is “pushing Palestinians towards starvation.” Shaath sounded contradictory with the measures taken by the PA on the ground, described by Egypt’s Al-Ahram Weekly on 2 – 8 August as bringing the conflict to “the limits of absurdity.”

Abbas suspended the Gaza Strip attorney general’s work and ordered the police to stop working. Instructions were issued not to implement court verdicts, and forbade the courts to collect money, paralyzing the civil courts. Each of the two governments fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other’s security agencies. The PA warned its employees not to continue working in Gaza ; while guaranteeing their rights, it has threatened those who go to work with “breaking the law and the legal and administrative measures of the government,” in orders issued by the Ministry of Transportation in the Fayyad government. “Why did the Fayyad government order its police not to report to their units and threaten those undertaking their duties with loss of pay? They are destroying the judiciary,” said the director of the Gaza – based Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Raji Al-Sourani, a lawyer.

The PA Salam Fayyad’s government announced the weekend to be on Friday and Saturday while the Gaza government of Ismael Hanniyah, which Abbas dissolved, still observes the weekend on Thursday and Friday. The health sector was paralyzed as each of the two governments has appointed a director for the major hospitals in the Gaza Strip; moreover the Ramallah government has issued an order for fees not to be collected for examinations, treatment, and other health services, so that they do not go into the Haniyeh government’s treasury. Yet the other government has asked patients to pay fees, albeit with flexibility. There is also fear that Palestinians in the Gaza Strip will not be able to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca this year because each of the two governments has an agency for pilgrimage and each is conducting a lottery to select those who will be allowed to undertake the journey. It has become possible for Gazans to drive their cars without licences; the Ramallah government has issued instructions to close all PA license offices in the Gaza Strip. Most recently the Fayyad government delayed announcing the high school matriculation exam results and threatened not to recognize the results of exams held in the Gaza Strip as they have not been authorized by the Ministry of Education in the Ramallah because the Haniyeh government does not have the right to approve the results because it is an “illegitimate” government.

Moreover, and more importantly, the PA was not sending the right message for international

humanitarian intervention. On July 10 President Abbas linked Hamas, now ruling in Gaza , to al-Qaeda: "Yes, through Hamas, al-Qaeda has entered Gaza and through Hamas, al-Qaeda is protected," he told Italian Rai TV in Rome . Earlier he decreed to outlaw the military wing of the Islamic movement as a "terrorist" organization. These and similar introductory statements were necessary to demand that an international force should be deployed in the Gaza Strip to allow humanitarian aid to be delivered, as if Hamas, and not Israel, was responsible for blocking the flow in of the urgently needed aid. Most likely the catastrophic evolution of the humanitarian crisis could unfold before his proposal is seriously considered by the world community.

The Case for Military Intervention

Israeli officials, who had all along rejected older Palestinian similar demands as a buffer force to spare Gazans the still ongoing Israeli military incursions, were quick this time to promote Abbas' controversial demand internationally, which is widely opposed internally by Palestinians.

Most likely therefore is that if military intervention was to come it will be Israeli and not international. Since Hamas took over in Gaza in June media reports were ample on a possible Israeli large scale military operation there. "With Gaza being defined as a hostile entity and its whole population as allied to Hamas, there is no doubt that it will be, in the near future, the target of a brutal Israeli aggression: eventual military incursions, bombardments and starvation. This is why our top priority, in Israel as well as throughout the world, is to organize solidarity with Gaza and its population," Michel Warschawski, a journalist who co-founded the Alternative Information Center (AIC) in Israel, wrote on July 12 (Global Research, ZNet).

Israel acknowledges the "humanitarian crisis" in Gaza but blames Hamas for it. "I am not saying the situation in Gaza is good," said Shlomo Dror, from Israel 's Ministry of Defense, but he was "not convinced" the economy would irreversibly collapse: "We are working to prevent a humanitarian crisis. But if the Palestinians have complaints, they should put pressure on Hamas."

On July 16, Sari Bashi, the executive director of the Israeli human rights group, GISHA, said Israel was violating international law by strangling economic activity in Gaza ; she was inflicting "collective punishment" on the 1.5 million Palestinians by closing the main commercial crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip at Karni. "This amounts to the implementation of a policy of collective punishment which is in breach of international law because it involves the intentional inflicting of suffering on a civilian population," Miss Bashi said (telegraph.co.uk).

Refuting Israel 's security pretexts, Bashi earlier told the Voice of America: " Israel has legitimate security interests in protecting its personnel at Karni crossing, but those security interests are being used as a pretext to keep Karni closed. Karni can be opened; people in the private sector have offered to secure the crossings to coordinate re-opening the crossings but they need Israeli cooperation in order to do so."

Israel completely controls the Gaza air space and territorial waters. The Gazan foreign trade is conducted almost solely with Israel or via Israeli ports through five border-crossing points under Israeli control (Erez, Karni, Nahal Oz, Sufa, and Kerem Shalom), closed since June 10.

The Rafah crossing point with Egypt, the only outlet of Gaza to the outside world, was closed in June, stranding more than 6.000 returning Palestinians on the Egyptian side for more than two months, which resulted in the death of 33 of them according to the U.N.; more than 90 people, many of them seriously ill, who went to Egypt for treatment, were trapped at the airport, according to a joint statement by 12 human rights organizations active in PA territories.

The major player in Gaza's evolving tragedy is the Israeli occupying power, who has shuttered the security of the Palestinian people and the peace of their life and mind since Israel trespassed into their territory over the borders demarcated by the United Nations Resolution 181 of 1947 and is displacing ever since more than four million refugees who constitute now more than 75 percent of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. "This" expanded Israel is now sarcastically citing a security threat to tighten the screws of the siege her crushing war machine has been imposing on an area torn by her blockade and military onslaughts very long before Hamas even came into being to overrun Gaza in June this year.

"They hope that, with progress in the West Bank, stagnation in Gaza and growing pressure from ordinary Palestinians, a discredited Hamas will be forced out or forced to surrender. They are mistaken ... as long as the Palestinian schism endures, progress is on shaky ground. Security and a credible peace process depend on minimal intra-Palestinian consensus," an "executive summary" of the International Crisis Group concluded on August 2. Similarly, it would be disingenuous in the extreme to minimize the role of the U.S. and the European Union in particular. "Through their words and deeds, they helped persuade important Fatah elements that the unity government was a transient phenomenon and that their former control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) could be restored ... Paradoxically, the more successful the strategy of strengthening Abbas, the greater Hamas's motivation to sabotage it," the ICG added.

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