

The Implications of Siege and the Internal Palestinian Division on the Situation in the Gaza Strip Since 2007

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Introduction

June 2017 marks the 10th year of the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip. It began on June 15, 2007, one day after Hamas seized control in Gaza and one year after Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections, which left Gaza mired in internal political conflict. The closure policy was not new; since 1967 the occupation military forces have implemented systematic closures and sieges in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the West Bank and Gaza. However, the imposition of a full siege was new in its range and comprehensiveness. The effects and implications of the siege, internal Palestinian divisions, boycotts by the international community and several Israeli wars on Gaza have left the area in a catastrophic situation.

The Siege and the International Law

This article addresses the implications of the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip in its 10th year. This siege is a clear violation of international and humanitarian lawⁱ and a form of collective punishment. The International Red Cross considers the siege a violation of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Conventionⁱⁱ, which prohibits collective punishment in any form. And in spite of international legal and humanitarian standards and the attempted interventions of several governments to end it, the Western governments' efforts remain weak and often consist only of issuing reports warning of the deterioration of humanitarian conditions caused by the siege, without any actual or serious intervention on the ground. Only civil society organizations — international activist flotillas and solidarity groups — have attempted to break the siege.

The Palestinians in Gaza live under harsh conditions that affect all aspects of their lives and are getting more ruthless by the day. According to

a report by the Israeli human rights organization B'tselemⁱⁱⁱ, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip but maintained strict control over the air and sea space as well as the land borders of the area. Anyone who wants to go outside of the Gaza Strip requires approval from Israel. The report added that the aim of the siege imposed after Hamas took over in June 2007 was to force Hamas out and to secure the release of the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. The siege itself is considered a form of collective punishment of the civil population of Gaza, and therefore it is illegal.

The Palestinian Parliamentary Elections and the Internal Palestinian Division

The second Palestinian parliamentary elections were held in January 2006, and instead of strengthening democracy and the principle of the rule of law, it produced divisions and political friction. From the moment the election results were announced, conflicts erupted, and the Palestinian political scene was dominated by quarrels over authority and power between Hamas, which won the elections and the Palestinian Authority led by Fateh, which lost. The sometimes violent conflict lasted for a year and a half and ended in 2007 when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip while the Fateh-led PA remained in control of the West Bank.

This was a turning point in the life and future of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian political process. All hope of electing a new legitimate government, since the previous government had been elected in 1996, vanished with disappointment. The political system was divided and the new democratic process frozen. Arrests took place in the West Bank and Gaza; freedoms were restricted, whether for individuals or civil society organizations, and the media and the press came under tight control. Accusation campaigns between Hamas and Fateh harmed Palestinian national rights, not only at the local level but also at the international level. The accumulation of these events, and the continuous Israeli wars on the Gaza Strip left the area in a critical political, social, economic situation. However, in spite of the reconciliation agreements (Cairo 2011, Doha 2012, Shati 2014), the goal of which was the formation of a unity government, Hamas still controls Gaza, and the current government in Ramallah plays a limited role.

The Characteristics of the Israeli Siege

In 2005 Israel dismantled and evacuated the Gush Katif settlements in accordance with its plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. The Israeli army withdrew from the populated areas but maintained control of the borders

and the air and sea space. The Israeli government resolved to boycott any government that Hamas forms or is a part of. Israeli policy has continued to be ruthless and comprehensive. It is possible to summarize the Israeli policies and measures against the Gaza Strip as follows:

1. Partial siege of the six entrances that connect the Gaza Strip with the outside world

- 1) The Rafah Border is for people to travel from Gaza to Egypt and to the outside world. The European Observation Team that is supposed to be present to observe the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) withdrew.
- 2) The Erez Crossing (Beit Hanoun) is for people to cross from Gaza to Israel and the West Bank and Jordan. Movement there has been reduced to a minimum and limited to the employees of international organizations, humanitarian cases and some businesspeople.
- 3) The Sufa Crossing is for transporting infrastructure material into Gaza.
- 4) The Nahal Oz Crossing is for transporting energy resources into Gaza.
- 5) The Karam Abu Salem Crossing (Kerem Shalom) is for importing goods from Israel, Arab and foreign countries and is sometimes used for exporting some goods from Gaza.
- 6) The Almentar Commercial Crossing (Karni) is the biggest commercial crossing and is located east of Gaza City.

The siege has resulted in the complete cessation of trade (import and export) between the Gaza Strip and the outside world. And Israel has gradually reduced entry via the Karam Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) Crossing, located on the Palestinian/Egyptian/Israeli borders as a major access point for transporting goods, and at Beit Hanoun (Erez), the crossing for people's movement.

2. The declaration of the Gaza Strip as an enemy territory

Israel declared the Gaza Strip to be enemy territory, and thus it is an area not recognized by the Israeli trade system, the Israeli banks, customs and other financial and commercial institutions; health organizations are banned from having direct relations with those in Gaza. These relations are conducted through official PA offices in Ramallah. This critical measure has kept Gaza outside of the common customs sphere that was agreed upon in the Paris Protocol (Israeli-Palestinian economic agreement). And the importers

and exporters in Gaza are banned from having direct relations with Israel or the outside world. Trade is conducted through agents in the West Bank, which has increased the costs for raw material and imported services, and has also led to a decrease in the competitive capability of the Gaza exports because of the production costs and intermediary agents.

3. Restriction of movement of people through the crossings

Restriction of movement through the border crossings is one of the ugliest forms of the siege. Until today people in the Gaza Strip are having extreme difficulties in freedom of movement, and this violates the international Declaration of Human Rights. The number of crossings that connect the Gaza Strip with the West Bank and Israel were reduced from four crossings to one: Karam Abu Salem in the southeast. It is not within this crossing's capacity to facilitate entry of goods and fuel into Gaza, while the Erez Crossing in the north is for the limited movement of people, with tight security measures. These measures forbid people in Gaza from communicating with their relatives in the West Bank and Israel, and prevent hundreds of students from attending universities in the West Bank and in occupied East Jerusalem, or from travelling abroad. However, a few humanitarian cases, journalists and workers in international organizations, and businessmen are allowed to travel through the crossing under strict control, and most of the times with long waiting hours at the borders.

4. Three bloody wars

The Gaza Strip went through three bloody wars and unlimited Israeli invasions in the past 10 years. The first war began on December 27, 2008, and



Destruction in Gaza during the summer of 2014.

lasted for 22 days, during which 1,455 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were killed and 5,303 were injured. The second war occurred in 2012 in which 179 Palestinian, mostly civilians, were killed and 1,592 were injured. The third war, the deadliest so far, was between July 8, 2014 and Aug. 28, 2014. It lasted for 51 consecutive days, during which 2,322 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were killed, 11,064 were injured and 446,000 were displaced. These three wars left thousands dead and destroyed the infrastructure and production facilities, houses, buildings, institutions, factories, agriculture and irrigation channels.

The Implications of the Siege and Divisions across the Gaza Strip

The Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip has led to a huge regression in the economic activity and an unprecedented distortion of the Gazan social structure and culture, and a decline in health services, education and other humanitarian sectors. The situation at present is like a time bomb that could explode at any minute. It had been

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expected that after Israel withdrew from Gaza, prosperity and development would flourish, assuming freedom of movement without restrictions on movement and communication with the outside world. Instead, continued

Israeli control over the borders led to an economic crisis after the withdrawal. The economy experienced extreme human and financial losses, which affected the overall Palestinian economy, and led to a rise in unemployment and poverty rates and a continuous regression in investment growth. It is possible to summarize the implications of the Israeli policies that accompanied the Palestinian divergence on the Gaza Strip as follows:

1. The political level

The Palestinian Division that has lasted for over 10 years and what has resulted from it — the formation of two political entities that are exchanging accusations — has caused a decline in the legitimacy of all of the Palestinian representative bodies, mainly the Palestinian Legislative Council, the presidency and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), leaving the Palestinian political system vulnerable, weak and characterized by anarchy. This is a threat that might lead to a replacement of the current Palestinian leadership with local and foreign support. The impact the siege and division among Palestinian have left on the Gaza Strip — poverty, unemployment and despair among the youth — is creating an ideal environment for jihadist groups. The rise of extremism in Gaza is not only a threat to Hamas, the

national movement groups and the Palestinian national struggle, but it also could intensify social frictions and cause the Palestinian society to regress.

Talk about the creation of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and its official separation from the Palestinian national struggle is a by-product of the political, economic and social fears created by the Israeli siege and ongoing Palestinian divisions; the current harsh reality that offers no opportunity or hope for the creation of a Palestinian state or any political accomplishments; and a general lack of interest in the Palestinian national struggle. What is happening in the West Bank and Gaza with the ongoing divisions is a serious regression in the Palestinian national program, characterized by the lack of a serious political path and headed for a dead end without finding a solution. The divisions have dramatically increased Palestinian suffering. Without national reconciliation and a solution, the Gaza Strip will be completely isolated “geographically and politically” from the West Bank.

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2. The economic level

The Palestinian economy in the Gaza Strip is characterized by very harsh conditions. Regression in the economy is a result of the continuous siege since 2007, in addition to the three wars that Israel launched in 2008, 2012 and 2014, which destroyed the infrastructure and production facilities. Its implications have affected the Palestinian economic performance, poverty and unemployment have increased, living standards have decreased, and there is an absence of food security.

The main implications of the Israeli siege on the economic situation are:

- 1) The rise in unemployment, which reached unprecedented levels of 45%, the highest in the world, of which 60% is in the youth sector. According to the latest statistics, there are 272,000 unemployed workers, of whom 63,000 have a bachelor’s degree, 35,000 a diploma, over 500 with Masters degrees, with 17,500 high school graduates, and dozens of PhDs. Only 150,000 Gazans have employment.

The siege and aggression of the occupation has transformed Gaza into a humanitarian disaster area, where 80% of the population lives on food packages from the UNRWA and other UN institutions, the poverty rate has reached 48 %, extreme poverty 21%, and complete absence of food security 57%.

- 2) The regression in agricultural productivity, the most important economic sector that the Gazan population is dependent upon and which forms a big portion in the local economy, prevents the creation of valuable job opportunities. Agriculture provides sustainable and temporarily jobs to around 30,000 workers, 13.4% of employed workers in Gaza, and it provides food and livelihoods to 25% of the population. This sector has been directly affected by the siege and the wars and has incurred great losses. Eighty percent of the agricultural crops were damaged because of the Israeli ban on agricultural medications, fertilizers, and agricultural supplies. According to the annual 2015 Report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Gaza will become uninhabitable by 2020, considering the current crisis and conditions. The report added that 72% of the Gaza Strip population suffers from absence of food security.
- 3) The regression in the level of health care which is characterized by a lack of basic medications that reach up to 30% of medical credits, and 40% of basic medical consumptions, especially for chronic diseases, in addition to the banning of complementary medications for cancer and kidney and liver failures. The hospitals in Gaza work with less than 40% of capacity, and surgeries in the biggest hospitals are delayed for periods of up to 18 months.
- 4) The education sector in the Gaza Strip was seriously affected by the siege and the collective punishment policy. The educational institutions lack classrooms, are housed in inadequate buildings, especially due to the siege that prevents the expansion of schools, and are not appropriately equipped as a result of the lack of building materials, not to mention the high cost of available building materials, especially after the destruction that followed the wars that usually involved destroying schools, colleges and universities.

3. The social level

The ongoing siege has produced severe social phenomena as a result of the deterioration in the economic situation, mainly poverty and unemployment, in addition to the desire to emigrate, extremism, and increases in the levels of crime, intolerance, social isolation, despair, depression, child labor, mendacity, early marriage, spinsterhood, and divorce, as well as in incidence of depriving women of inheritance, violence against women, preventing women from political or institutional participation, and preventing women from participating in political reconciliation efforts. The

terminology of the division dominates the national and social dialogue, and its effects can be seen in the public perception and opinion in regard to the developments in the nation. The Palestinian citizen in Gaza feels like a second-degree citizen, discriminated against by the PA in the West Bank, while tribal customs now dominate much of social life because of decline of the rule of the law.

Recommendations for Approaches to the Situation

Given the continuous escalation of the implications of the siege and the Palestinian divisions, not only in Gaza, but also on regional stability and on the possibility of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is possible to present some recommendations to approach the problems that are facing the Palestinian reality:

- * Immediate end to the Palestinian divisions and the implementation of an actual Palestinian reconciliation. Activating the Palestinian legislative bodies and holding legislative and presidential elections.
- * Lifting completely the siege of the Gaza Strip in order to allow production facilities to work, thereby reducing the levels of unemployment, poverty and radicalization.
- * Ensuring the geographical consistency between Gaza and the West Bank and East Jerusalem in order to maintain the unity of the people, while confirming that there will be no Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and no Palestinian state without the Gaza Strip.
- * Activating the role of the Palestinian institutions in order to ensure the full participation of all of the Palestinian political parties and political movements in the Palestinian National Council so as to revive Palestinian national unity and the unity of the Palestinian political system.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.bbc.com/news/10306193>

ⁱⁱ <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/>

[ihl/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c5](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c5)

ⁱⁱⁱ http://m.btselem.org/arabic/gaza_strip/20100531_the_siege_on_gaza