

Gaza's Humanitarian Crisis: Who's to Blame for What?

By Nadia Hijab

While all eyes are fixed on the potential and pitfalls of the Annapolis meeting the United States is convening, the Gaza Strip is suffering a humanitarian crisis and ongoing violence from Israeli attacks and intra-Palestinian clashes. Who's to blame? Fingers are pointed at Hamas for having taken over Gaza by force in June 2007; at Israel for its boycott and siege; and at militant groups in Gaza for rockets fired at Israel. None of this saves the civilian population from disaster, or explains how the situation in Gaza deteriorated so quickly.

The British weekly newspaper the Observer wrote, "An empty watchtower overlooks a deserted road lined with rusting vehicle parts. ... nothing is entering or leaving Gaza ... families are existing on tiny amounts of money and businesses are facing collapse. ... the Gaza director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, said... 'the clock is ticking towards a crisis'." Those words sound as though they were written today; they were actually published on April 16, 2006, soon after Israel, the US, and the European Union imposed a boycott against the new Hamas government, which won the January 25, 2006 elections. Gaza has been in crisis since.

In fact, Gaza was heading toward a crisis before Hamas came to power - indeed, before Hamas even existed.¹ Gaza's fate should be high on the agenda of the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators scheduled to go to Annapolis at the end of this month, together with representatives from Arab countries, the US, and others. Understanding what happened to Gaza helps to explain Israel's policies toward the occupied territories as a whole and to show why a complete shift in approach is needed for a successful peace process.

Decades of Frozen Development

Soon after Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem in 1967, it began to integrate the economy and basic services of the territories into its own and to curtail indigenous socio-economic development.² For example, the occupied territories were forced into the Israeli grid, which is why Israel is able today to shut off Gaza's electricity at will, as well as its other services. As of 1970, faced with lack of economic opportunity at home, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers from the occupied territories sought jobs in Israel. This led to a short-lived increase in per capita income, much of it spent on consumer goods and housing due to tight Israeli restrictions on Palestinian investment in

their own economy. Under Israel's economic control, the occupied territories became Israel's second largest market. In a telling indicator of frozen development, industry share of the Palestinians' gross domestic product is today close to what it was 40 years ago.

Israel's military control was also very much in evidence after 1967. Former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon was a major player in the first attempts to crush Gaza. "Until late 1970, Wreckage, or Had'd, Street wasn't a street, ... [it] acquired its name after an unusually prolonged visit from Mr. Sharon's soldiers. Their orders were to bulldoze hundreds of homes to carve a wide, straight street. This would allow Israeli troops and their heavy armored vehicles to move easily through the camp, to exert control and hunt down men from the Palestinian Liberation Army."³ It was not for nothing that Sharon became known as the bulldozer. Demolishing homes en masse became an ongoing feature of Israel's occupation.⁴

The first intifada of December 1987 brought about a shift in Israel's occupation policies. No longer able to control the population through the measures of the previous 20 years, Israel gradually began separating the Palestinian and Israeli populations. The "permit system" was introduced in Gaza in 1988, and the closure policy was first imposed in 1991. Closures were institutionalized after March 1993 and have not been lifted since, though their intensity changes. Gaza was sealed off by an electronic wall in 1994 and the pass system was introduced in 1994, with passes given to less than 3% of the population in 1995.⁵ And these were the best years of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process launched by the Oslo Accord of September 1993. Closures have been the single most damaging Israeli policy to the Palestinian economy. For example, in 1996, losses from closure amounted to 39.6% of Gaza's GNP and 18.2% of the West Bank's; the sealing of borders since the Al Aqsa intifada of 2000 has literally "decimated" the Palestinian economy according to the World Bank.⁶

The main purpose of Israel's system of control was to enable it to confiscate and control Palestinian land and water resources. In Gaza, up until Israel's redeployment in the summer 2005, three blocs of Israeli settlements for at least 6,000 Israeli settlers together with bypass roads and military bases directly controlled a third of the tiny Strip, leaving 1.1 million Palestinians in cantons in the remainder.⁷ Israel continues to besiege Gaza from land, sea, and air and remains, under international law, accountable for the welfare of the civilian population. As for the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Israel directly or indirectly controls some 83% of the land and the water resources. The West Bank is sliced into slivers by over 400,000 settlers, 149 settlements, 96 outposts, 27 military bases, the separation wall Israel began building in 2002, closed military areas, nature reserves, roads for the exclusive use of settlers, permanent checkpoints, partial checkpoints, and tunnels.⁸

Gaza, Israel's Security, and the Role of the International Community

Israel maintains that its policies are intended to ensure security for its population. Yet Israel can never hope to feel secure so long as it is besieging Gaza and settling its people in the West Bank, in violation of international law, while precluding Palestinian development. Palestinians have resisted Israel's occupation, both violently and non-violently.⁹ In effect, the violence of Israel's occupation has bred counter-violence. For example, it was on March 5, 2002, after 35 years of occupation, that the first Qassam rocket was launched into Israeli territory.¹⁰ A mutually agreed Palestinian-Israeli ceasefire could greatly reduce the level of violence. However, Israel rejected a Hamas offer of ceasefire just before it declared Gaza a "hostile entity" on September 19, 2007¹¹ and later announced "additional sanctions ... on the Hamas regime."

Despite Israeli statements that it will not allow the civilian population to be harmed, Gaza's electricity supply has reportedly dropped 30% since October 24, 2007. Also since October, the Israeli military has limited the goods to Gaza Strip to only 9 basic materials. Gaza hospitals have reportedly stopped surgeries due to drug shortages. Whatever the security argument, Israel's actions in Gaza directly violate international law, which prohibits collective punishment. Israel's measures are superimposed on an economy that has crumbled after 40 years of occupation and siege. At any time, the situation could tip from crisis to catastrophe. For example, the New York Times reported on November 6, 2007 that Gazans face a sewage disaster far greater than the one that killed five people in March this year; as many as 250,000 Gazans could be affected. Without construction materials and electricity, it has not been possible to manage Gaza's sewage.

Throughout the decades of occupation, the international community has "urged" Israel to change its policies. Western donors also invested in major infrastructure during the Oslo peace process, like the Gaza airport that Israel later destroyed. Donors have also tried to mitigate the worst consequences of the occupation, with little success. The effects of economic stagnation and decline will take decades to reverse, as will rising malnutrition and illiteracy. However, donor countries have never fulfilled their responsibility to challenge the occupation and Israel's control of Palestinian land, water, economy, and basic freedoms. The fundamental questions for peace negotiators planning to meet at Annapolis are: Will Israel end its occupation and return control of Palestinian land and lives to Palestinian sovereignty? If not, who will make it? Anything short of this will fail.

Nadia Hijab is senior fellow at the Institute for Palestine Studies and co-director of its Washington office. Sara Roy kindly shared insights and information for this Policy Note.

- [1] Hamas, which has its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, began to emerge during the first Intifada of 1987.
- [2] The most authoritative account is *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development* by Sara Roy, published by the Institute for Palestine Studies (2nd edition, 2004), and now being updated.
- [3] From *The Independent* quoted by Christopher Hitchens in *Slate*, January 5, 2006.
- [4] See, e.g., the Human Rights Watch 2004 report *Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip*.
- [5] Anne Le More in *Aid, Diplomacy and Facts on the Ground: The Case of Palestine*, Chatham House, 2006.
- [6] See "Why Peace Failed: An Oslo Autopsy," in *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, Sara Roy, Pluto Press, 2007.
- [7] Roy, "Why Peace Failed: An Oslo Autopsy," op. cit.
- [8] See the *Fragmentation of the West Bank PowerPoint* produced by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, ochaopt.org
- [9] For an account of the non-violent resistance of the first Intifada see *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance*, by Mary Elizabeth King, Nation Books, 2007.
- [10] GlobalSecurity.org
- [11] *The New York Times*, September 22, 2007.

Published by the Institute for Palestine Studies

The Institute has produced authoritative studies on Palestinian affairs and the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1963. Its flagship *Journal of Palestine Studies* accounts for nearly 20% of all articles downloaded from Middle East publications carried by JSTOR, the leading US database of scholarly journals.

Email contact policynotes@palestine-studies.org