

Easing of Israel's Siege May Have Negligible Effect on Gaza

'During the past three years I lost all that my father managed to build in 50 years, this is the story of all Gazans.'

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'Ketchup won't bring about the change we want'

The decisions of the Israeli government regarding the easing of the siege on the Gaza Strip were not felt on the ground the day after the decision. The economist Muhammed Skaik, trade officer at the Gaza branch of the Palestinian trade center Paltrade, told Haaretz that improvement and change depend on a number of factors and cannot be measured only by the increase in the number of items permitted to be brought into the Strip.

"Since January this year," he said, "Israel has added every month or two about 10 items to the list of permitted items. But ketchup, snacks and mayonnaise, for example, which are now permitted, are not essential items that will genuinely change the situation."

Even if Israel announces tomorrow that it is adding 500 items to the list of what is allowed into the Strip, Skaik said, "we need time in order to assess the change - perhaps a month or two. The market is still full of items brought through the tunnels and it is possible that merchants will not immediately order 'permitted' items from Israel - because there are similar items from Egypt."

From the government's announcement it is still unclear what kinds and amounts of raw materials for production and construction will be allowed, Skaik says. "If construction materials are allowed in, change will be felt quickly. But if the change focuses only on secondary consumer goods, it will have no effect."

Attorney Sari Bashi, director of the NGO Gisha that closely follows the restrictions on the freedom of movement of persons and goods, says that as far as is known, the "easing" has not included construction materials or raw materials.

"Continuing the restrictions on the ability to produce will also limit the [Palestinians] buying power," she said.

Another unanswered question is whether Israel intends to allow the export of goods produced by Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, Skaik said. "Even if it allows into the Strip certain raw materials [for example for the textile industry that was always very developed in the Strip, until it was shut down three years ago], there is no point in ordering them if they will not be able to market their products like they did in the past [to Israel and the West Bank]."

In other words, it is possible that the producers will fear investing in the purchase of raw materials if selling outside the Strip is not guaranteed. This is true for the furniture industry and the food and agriculture industries.

Bashi says that if there is no promise of marketing outside the Strip, profitability will be low, which will affect the willingness and ability of producers to hire workers. Without employment the workers will not be able to acquire purchasing power. "Without an increase in buying power in the Strip there is no point in increasing the number of items on the list, because the merchants will not order more goods if they know that the people are unable to buy them."

There is also the question of whether it will be permitted to import spare parts for machines that broke down because they have been left derelict for so long.

A third unclear variable is the border crossings. "Without the opening of all the crossings, without expanding their hours of operation, there will be little impact on the decision to expand the list [of permissible items]," Skaik said.

"During the past three years I lost all that my father had managed to build in 50 years," said Fuad Juda, who owns a textile factory his father established in 1960. "This is the story of everyone, not only my story," he told Haaretz.

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