

Gaza New Siege Mechanism

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The rebuilding of Gaza has become the latest siege weapon. The Israeli occupation, the US that had backed its offensive, and the EU which did nothing to stop it are conspiring to turn the reconstruction process into a means to produce a suitable “peace partner” while the Arab summit in Kuwait hopes to use it to bring about Palestinian reconciliation. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority (PA) government is urging all parties and others to look to it as the sole channel for administering the construction process on the grounds that it is the government formed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation that is recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Soon we will see that freezing reconstruction will become the tool of all those parties for extracting from the resistance what they have been unable to gain from three weeks of warfare and the long blockade that preceded it.

Israel, the occupying power, is determined to keep a tight grip on the reconstruction process, which is why it sustained its closure of the border crossing following its “unilateral” ceasefire. Indeed, this is why it declared the ceasefire unilaterally: it did not want to be bound by any agreement — the Egyptian initiative or any other framework — that would oblige it to lift the embargo, if only partially, in order to facilitate reconstruction. Tel Aviv has also been seeking to obtain “guarantees” from international agencies such as UNWRA. On 19 January Reuters reported that Western diplomats revealed that Israel had asked the UN and other agencies to submit itemised lists of the goods, equipment and staff that they intend to send into Gaza, whether for urgent relief or for the more long-term reconstruction process. According to these sources, Israel plans to keep close tabs on these processes by insisting that the various agencies obtain its approval in advance for every project. One of the conditions for that approval will be that the project will not benefit Hamas or its government in Gaza. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has appointed Social Affairs Minister Isaac Herzog as coordinator of the Gaza reconstruction drive.

The US not only fully supports Israel on this; it is open about using the reconstruction process to help the PA reassert its authority and influence in Gaza. The EU is equally frank in its approval. EU External Relations Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner made clear that the EU would not contribute to reconstruction unless Gaza produced a viable peace partner and that it would not make aid available to a government led by Hamas. A high-level European diplomat was reported by Reuters as saying that this was “a recipe for failure”. “Let’s be realistic. If the PA is going to be responsible, its leadership and institutions have to exist on the ground. Right now none of that does,” he said.

It is patently clear that to Tel Aviv, Washington and Brussels the assertion of PA rule over Gaza is the strongest argument for holding off reconstruction as a Damocles sword over Gaza, and for the occupying power this condition is its strongest “guarantee” for sustaining its grip on that sword. The fear now is that Israel and the international powers that have

helped it to perpetuate its occupation since 1967 will use a Palestinian façade buttressed by official Arab support to stage a repeat in Gaza of the Iraq experience in the wake of the 1991 war when reconstruction and development were perpetually deferred in order to further weaken the country preparatory to toppling the regime through the invasion that took place in 2003. It may or may not be a coincidence that the Israeli invasion of Gaza ended almost on the same date that the war against Iraq started 18 years ago. Nor does it bode well for the aftermath of a “regime change” scenario in Gaza that Iraq’s infrastructure today, six days after the Saddam regime was toppled, is worse than it was beforehand.

The attempt to engineer such a scenario can be seen in PA President Mahmoud Abbas’s appeal to the Arab summit last week to channel the reconstruction process through the PA and its institutions, an appeal echoed by World Bank President Robert Zoellick who met with Abbas on the fringes of the summit in Kuwait. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and other Western leaders had proposed creating a temporary international committee to oversee the funding and organisation of the reconstruction effort. However, Abbas and his supporters rejected such a mechanism on the grounds that “it presumes that the separation between Gaza and the West Bank will continue,” as acting PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad put it, adding that international donors who are eager to reconstruct Gaza “will risk deepening the Palestinian division by ignoring the role of the PA”.

The PA’s stance, if followed, would condemn Arab pledges made in Kuwait — as well as any pledges made in a possible international conference on the reconstruction of Gaza called for by Egypt, the PA and the EU president — to remain pending until such time as a “viable peace partner” secures a steady seat in Gaza.

Although the participants at the Kuwaiti summit stressed the need for the reconstruction of Gaza in principle, they failed to reach an agreement over the mechanism. Differences between leaders obstructed a proposal to create a reconstruction fund and the most participants managed to agree upon was to make reconstruction contingent upon Palestinian reconciliation, a task they designated to Arab foreign ministers without setting a date or place for a ministerial meeting for this purpose, leaving us with the question as to when and how Arab ministers are to succeed where their heads of state failed.

Of course this procrastination through delegating makes the pledge to reconstruct Gaza barely worth the paper it was written on and will probably consign it to the same oblivion fated for so many other Arab summit resolutions. One of those forgotten resolutions was that adopted by the emergency Arab summit in Cairo in October 2000 calling for the creation of an Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem Fund for the purpose of reconstructing Palestinian infrastructure, especially in the sectors of healthcare, education, agriculture and housing. Apparently Arab leaders in Kuwait did not wish to recall that that resolution did not restrict the distribution of funds through the channel of the PA but also provided for other channels such as UNWRA, the Egyptian and Qatari Red Crescents, the Jordanian Royal Philanthropic Organisation, the UN Arab Gulf Programme and other such regional and international humanitarian agencies. Perhaps, too, they did not want to remind anyone that when that earlier resolution was passed there was no “ Hamas problem ” behind which are hiding those who do not really want to reconstruct the occupied territories, whether in Gaza or in the West Bank.

The underlying reason why the Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem Fund was not adopted by the Kuwaiti summit as a mechanism for the reconstruction of Gaza is that the urgent humanitarian

mission has been politicised whereas it should remain above the political fray between Palestinians, Arabs, foreign powers and everyone else whose voices are loud enough to drown out the appeals of those in need. There is nothing to debate about humanitarian relief. The Israeli offensive destroyed all the civil infrastructure of the government in Gaza on the grounds that it served as bases for Hamas whereas in fact it was PA infrastructure paid for by taxpayers in donor countries. Whole residential quarters were flattened, totally destroying 4,000 homes and severely damaging around 16,000 more. There are now some 100,000 civilians in urgent need of shelter, temporarily accommodated in some 12 refuges opened by UNWRA in schools that were also targeted by Israeli guns and therefore need to be repaired as well. In addition, agricultural land ruined by bombardment has to be reclaimed, potable water needs to be supplied to half a million Palestinians, electricity has to be restored to about the same number of people, and about 80 per cent of the inhabitants of Gaza are in urgent need of food relief (these are all UN estimates). Any political argument for postponing such urgent aid is morally outrageous.

The Israeli list of “prohibited materials” even before its offensive includes such items as iron, steel and cement, which are now absolutely vital to reconstruction. UN Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes pointed out this self-evident truth in a statement last Tuesday saying that if Israel refuses to allow in construction materials reconstruction cannot begin.

It is equally obvious that to adopt the PA as the sole channel for reconstruction financing is to effectively allow the occupying power, which destroyed Gaza, to supervise reconstruction. It is hardly possible to expect the PA, which is at Israel’s every beck and call, to independently and effectively manage the reconstruction process by remote control from Ramallah, let alone release funding for projects without Israel’s prior approval. Remember that President Abbas, himself, pleaded the difficulty of obtaining an Israeli exit permit on short notice as the reason he did not appear at the Doha summit on Gaza, according to Qatari Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Sheikh Hamed Ben Jasem Al Thani. Also, only two months ago, Abbas’s government in Ramallah could not disburse salaries to some 70,000 PA government employees who are believed paid to stay home because of the internal Palestinian rift. If, as acting Prime Minister Fayyad repeats on every occasion, the PA is unable to deliver the budgetary allocation to Gaza, which is about half of its total budget, how can that government be relied upon to deliver the funds that have been pledged — or will be pledged — for reconstruction?

Kuwait, for one, acted correctly when instead of waiting for the Arab summit to reach an agreement it donated \$34 million directly to UNRWA. Similarly, Norway donated 20 million kroner to organisations capable of reaching civilians directly in Gaza, such as the International Red Cross. Such noble examples confirm the existence of practical, serious channels for meeting urgent humanitarian needs. These should not be made pawn to the demand for the arrival of a Palestinian “peace partner” to Gaza, contrary to the insistence of PA Foreign Minister Riyad Al-Maliki in Kuwait that everything had to be coordinated with the PA “in all fields” before beginning the relief and reconstruction process. If that demand is met, nothing could be more guaranteed to subject the reconstruction process to the whims of the occupying power and turn it into another way to besiege Gaza in order to bring it to its knees.

The writer is a veteran Arab journalist based in Bir Zeit on the West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. This article was translated from Arabic and published by Al-Ahram Weekly, Issue No. 932, 29 January - 4 February 2009.

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