

## Gaza: Ten Years of Economic Blockade

By [Stephen McCloskey](#)

Global Research, August 06, 2017

[openDemocracy](#) 25 July 2017

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

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity, Law and Justice, Police State & Civil Rights, Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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*The tenth anniversary of Israel's illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip has been marked by a glut of new reports from human rights organisations alerting the world to a deepening humanitarian crisis in the territory. Perhaps the starkest warning has come from the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) in suggesting that "a systemic collapse of an already battered infrastructure and economy is impending."*

What distinguishes this crisis from the disasters and emergencies that normally push civilian populations to the edge of catastrophe is that it is not the result of a hurricane, flood, tsunami, drought or famine but the calculated policy of the Israeli government.

As Harvard scholar **Sara Roy**, who has meticulously [researched](#) the impact of Israel's policy-making on Gaza for thirty years suggests,

"What is happening to Gaza is catastrophic; it is also deliberate, considered and purposeful."

Roy argues that Gaza has been subjected to 'de-development' meaning that it has been "dispossessed of its capacity for rational and sustainable economic growth and development, coupled with a growing inability to effect social change". So, what we are witnessing in Gaza today is the 'logical endpoint' of this policy; "a Gaza that is functionally unviable".

In its public pronouncements on Gaza, Israel insists that the blockade is a security matter designed to keep Hamas, the Palestinian political group with a militant wing, at arm's length. In its more off-guard moments, however, Israel has revealed its true hand in Gaza.

United States government [cables](#) leaked to Wikileaks show that the Israeli government kept the US embassy in Tel Aviv briefed on the blockade and on "multiple occasions" said their policy aimed "to keep the Gazan economy on the brink of collapse without quite pushing it over the edge."

This appears to have been Israel's blockade policy from the outset as the BBC [reported](#) an Israeli government adviser, **Dov Weisglass**, as having said in 2006:

"The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of

hunger.” And, in 2012, an Israeli court forced the release of a government ‘red lines’ [document](#) which detailed “the number of calories Palestinians in Gaza need to consume to avoid malnutrition.”

The Israeli human rights organisation [Gisha](#), which won the legal battle to have the red lines document published, argues that “the research contradicts Israel’s assertions that the blockade is needed for security reasons.”

The chilling calculation behind the ‘red lines’ policy underlines the extent of Israel’s deception in publicly suggesting that the blockade is a security measure while privately, and quite methodically, inflicting collective punishment on an already desperately poor population, mostly comprising refugees.

On visits to Gaza’s eight refugee camps, I’ve seen stunted children clearly undernourished and underweight, living in desolate, concrete environments devoid of any greenery or safe spaces to play. The camps are concrete blocks heaped upon each other constrained in their expansion on the ground by Gaza’s tiny area of 360 square kilometres which is home to 1.8 million people; a population density akin to that of Manhattan or Tokyo.

Around 70 percent of Gazans are refugees and, according to the [Euro-Med Monitor for Human Rights](#), food insecurity in the territory is at 72 percent and unemployment at 43.2 percent.

This economic crisis has created serious mental health problems in Gaza. Sara Roy quotes the Gaza Community Mental Health Program which has found that “forty percent of Palestinians are clinically depressed, a rate unmatched anywhere in the world” with Gaza’s Shifa Hospital receiving “up to 30 patients every month who have attempted suicide.”

Israel imposed the blockade on Gaza in 2007 following the return of a Hamas government in elections in 2006. The US and EU followed Israel’s lead in refusing to accept the legitimacy of the election result. International pressure contributed to an internal Palestinian power struggle which resulted in Hamas assuming control of Gaza and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority governing the West Bank.

While Israel had withdrawn its settlements from Gaza in 2005, it remained the territory’s occupying power under international law by controlling its borders, airspace and coastline.

As Sara Roy [suggests](#), the 2005 withdrawal reflected “Israel’s desire to rid itself of any responsibility for Gaza while retaining control of it.” She regards the core goals of Israel’s disengagement as seeking:

“to internally divide, separate, and isolate the Palestinians – demographically, economically, and politically – so as to ensure Israel’s full control both direct (West Bank) and indirect (Gaza Strip) – over all Palestinian lands and resources”.

The imposition of strict border controls tightly limiting the movement of goods and people across Gaza’s borders by Israel has been compounded by the closure of smuggling tunnels into Gaza by **General Abdel Fattah El Sisi**, who seized power in Egypt through a military coup in 2013.

The tunnels were an economic lifeline for Gaza and the passenger terminal at Rafah into Egypt, which became the only means for most Palestinians of leaving Gaza, has opened only intermittently under Sisi.

[Euro-Med Monitor for Human Rights](#) found that less than 50 percent of requests to exit Gaza for medical treatment through Israel's Erez Crossing were approved in 2016 and 43 cancer patients were refused permission to cross to seek treatment in the first half of 2016.

With only a trickle of Palestinians securing passage through the Rafah crossing, these closures can be a death sentence for patients in need of medical assistance. They also deny opportunities for employment and study overseas which, for the majority, are the only escape routes from poverty.

### **The compounding pressures of war**

The social pressures of poverty, isolation and economic inertia caused by the blockade have been compounded and exacerbated by three Israeli military operations in Gaza since 2008, which have collectively [claimed](#) the lives of 3,745 Palestinians and wounded 17,441.



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The most recent operation, 'Protective Edge', was a 51-day onslaught in July and August 2014 that [killed](#) 2,131 Palestinians, of whom 1,473 were civilians, 501 were children and 257 women. There were 71 Israeli casualties; 66 soldiers and five civilians.

The infrastructural [damage](#) caused by 'Protective Edge' was devastating with: 78 hospitals and clinics damaged; 7 schools destroyed and 252 damaged; 17,800 homes damaged or completed destroyed; and half of the open-field crop areas damaged or destroyed. Just 46 percent of the \$1.59 billion pledged by donors for reconstruction in Gaza has been received and a constant source of crisis is the greatly reduced electricity supply which impacts on all aspects of daily life in Gaza.

The World Health Organisation (2017) has [said](#) that the worsening electricity outages are "threatening the closure of essential health services which would leave thousands of people without access to life-saving health care."

This crisis has been compounded by the Palestinian Authority's [decision](#) this summer not to pay the full fuel bill to Israel for Gaza's electricity supply in an attempt to weaken Hamas and wrest back control of the territory.

This wreckless and petty politicking by the PA will add to the bitterness of internal relations in Palestine and further delay overdue elections in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It leaves the prospects for much needed Palestinian unity and strategy at a low ebb.

### **Unhappy anniversaries**

This has been a year of significant and painful anniversaries for Palestine. It is the centenary of the [Balfour Declaration](#) in which the British Foreign Secretary in 1917, **Arthur James Balfour**, declared

“with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

**Theresa May** has celebrated the centenary with ‘pride’ and seems unconcerned with the continued marginal existence of Palestinians on their own land.

**Robert Fisk** was closer to the mark when he [described](#) the Balfour Declaration as the “most mendacious, deceitful and hypocritical document in modern British history.”

2017 is also the 50th anniversary of the [six day war](#) in 1967 when Israel seized control of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, as well as the Syrian Golan Heights, and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. This annexation has continued apace since then with the settlement of 600,000 colonists in settlements across the West Bank that [Amnesty International](#) describes as illegal under Article 49 of the Geneva Convention.

These unhappy anniversaries are as much a result of the collusion and mendacity of western powers as they are of the relentless colonialism of Palestinian land by Israel which should compel us all to take action and oppose the siege and construction of settlements.



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Gaza’s creaking infrastructure and impoverished population cannot countenance another decade of siege and war, and Israel has shown itself unwilling to respect its human rights obligations as the territory’s occupying power.

Only external pressure will change Israel’s policy toward Gaza which is why Palestinian civil society has reluctantly called for international support of the [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions](#) (BDS) movement. This is a non-violent, vibrant and truly global movement for freedom, justice and equality in Palestine inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement.

BDS urges action to pressure Israel to respect international law and is supported by trade unions, churches, academics and grassroots movements across the world. Supporting BDS will hasten an end to the siege and help lance a running sore in the Middle East and international relations. It deserves your support.

**Stephen McCloskey** is Director of the Centre for Global Education, a development non-governmental organisation based in Belfast. He is editor of [Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review](#), an online, open access, peer reviewed journal. He is editor (with Gerard McCann) of *From the Local to the Global: Key Issues in Development Studies* (Pluto Press, 2015). He manages education projects for young people in the Gaza Strip and writes regularly on a range of development issues for books, journals and online publications.

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