

Life in Occupied Gaza

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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Life in occupied Gaza was never easy, but conditions worsened markedly after Hamas' surprise January 2006 electoral victory. Israel refused recognition along with the US and the West. All outside aid was cut off, an economic embargo and sanctions were imposed, and the legitimate government was isolated. Stepped up repression followed along with repeated IDF incursions, attacks and arrests. Gaza's people have been imprisoned in their own land and traumatized for months. No one outside the Territories cares or offers enough aid. Things then got worse.

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, in league with Israel and the US, declared a "state of emergency last June 14 and illegally dismissed Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and his national unity government. On June 15, he appointed former IMF and World Bank official Salam Fayyad prime minister even though his party got only 2% of the votes in the 2006 election. On June 17, Abbas swore in a new (illegitimate) 13 member "emergency" cabinet with plans for future elections, excluding Hamas.

Israel and the US showed gratitude. The West Bank embargo ended, Israel began releasing frozen Palestinian tax funds, and the US and European Union (EU) resumed aid to the PA but continued isolating Hamas in Gaza that since 1995 has been designated a terrorist organization. After passage of the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, the State Department included Hamas among the first 30 groups designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in October 1997. It makes it illegal to provide funds or other material support. It also ignores how Israel once embraced Hamas in the 1980s.

It's name means courage and bravery, and it's also an abbreviation of Islamic Resistance Movement in Arabic. It grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood (that had roots in Egypt) and was formed in 1987 during the first Intifada. At the time, Israel offered support and used Hamas to counter the PLO's nationalist threat under Arafat. Ever since, it's been an effective resistance movement against repression, occupation and much more. It provides essential social services like medical clinics; education, including centers for women; free meals for children; financial and technical help to Palestinians whose homes Israel destroyed; aid to refugees in the camps; and youth and sports clubs for young people.

Hamas is also a formidable defender, and that gets it in trouble. It established the Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades, an elite military wing, and other security forces like its Tanfithya Executive Force for self-defense and law enforcement. Washington and Tel Aviv call it "terrorism" because Hamas wants the occupation ended, won't surrender its sovereignty like Fatah did under Arafat and Abbas, is willing to recognize Israel (though that's never reported), but only if Palestinians get equal recognition and what's rightfully theirs - an independent homeland inside pre-1967 borders or one "state for all its citizens," Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze and others.

Instead, Hamas got isolated, hammered and called a “hostile entity” by Israel’s security cabinet. It was announced on September 19, sanctions on Gaza were tightened, and it was decided to “reduce the amount of megawattage provide(d) to the Strip, and Hamas will have to decide whether to provide electricity to hospitals or weapons lathes.” There was more as well - cutbacks in fuel, food, other essentials and even tighter border crossing restrictions.

Even before the latest crisis, Gaza was devastated. Its industrial production was down 90%, and its agricultural output was half its pre-2007 level. In addition, nearly all construction stopped, unemployment and poverty topped 80%, and by now it may be 90%. After September 19, it got worse when shops began running out of everything. Israel allows in only nine basic materials, their availability is spotty, and some essentials are banned, like certain medicines, and others restricted like fruit, milk and other dairy products. Before June 2007, 9000 commodities could be imported. Today, it’s down to 20, people don’t get enough food, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was unusually blunt in its criticism. In a November 2007 report called “Dignity Denied in the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” it said:

“....Palestinians....face hardship (in) their (daily) lives; they are prevented from doing what makes up the daily fabric of most people’s existence. (They) face a deep human crisis, where millions of people are denied their human dignity. Not once in a while, but every day (and the people of Gaza are) trapped (and) sealed off.” The “humanitarian cost (is) enormous,” people can barely survive, “families unable to get enough food increased by 14%, (and) Palestinians (are) being trampled underfoot day after day. (In) Gaza (under siege, Palestinians) continue to pay for conflict and economic containment with their health and livelihoods. Cutting power and fuel further compounds their hardship.”

Let ‘em eat cake, walk, and live without light or heat is apparently Israel’s solution, and noted Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, took note. He calls it “genocide....to describe what the Israeli army is doing in the Gaza Strip.” Knowing the facts, who can disagree.

Then there’s the matter of energy. With electricity restricted and fuel supplies reduced, Israel went further. It sealed its borders and cut all fuel shipments in response to Palestinian rocket attacks in and around the border town of Sderot. They’re fired in self-defense and used in response to repeated Israeli attacks that in the week of January 17 - 23 alone:

- killed 19 Palestinians along with three others from previous IDF-inflicted wounds;
- extra-judicially executed seven of the victims, including two women;
- wounded 71 Palestinians, including 24 children and three women;
- made 33 IDF incursions in the West Bank and five in Gaza;
- arrested 58 Palestinian civilians, including seven children, in the West Bank, and 32 in Gaza, including 3 children;
- destroyed five homes and razed agricultural land in Jabalya in northern Gaza;
- allowed further settler attacks against civilians and property in Hebron.

The same pattern continued the following week through January 30 with more Israeli incursions, attacks and arrests. In the West Bank:

— Nablus was targeted and several Palestinian civilians arrested; several homes were also searched and ransacked in the villages of Kufer Kalil, Beit Dajan and Beit Fourik;

— the IDF seized six Palestinians in Jenin in a pre-dawn invasion; another followed their several days later, the Israeli army opened fire randomly, one civilian was injured, four others arrested and a home was ransacked; several civilian homes were attacked and ransacked in the town of Qabatiya and village of Abu Da'eif in the northern West Bank; local sources reported unprovoked random gunfire by heavily armed troops in civilian neighborhoods;

— the IDF invaded Bethlehem, killed one civilian, arrested another, and injured seven others; eyewitnesses reported that local journalists were prevented from witnessing and documenting the incursion;

— several other West Bank cities were targeted and six civilians arrested: the Al Toor neighborhood in northern Jerusalem; the village of Beit Rima near Ramallah; Tulkarem city and the nearby Nur Shams refugee camp; and Jenin city.

These are malicious acts of aggression, abductions and wanton killing. Mostly civilians are targeted, and when Palestinians respond with crude Qassam rockets and children throw rocks, it's called "terrorism." Israel's response - fiercer attacks and incursions in the Territories on any pretext or none at all and further tightening of its medieval siege on Gaza.

Its border crossings have been closed since June 2007, and severe restrictions were imposed on movement. Finally, food and fuel supplies were cut. Gaza's power plant exhausted its supply, shut down, and the Strip went dark on January 20. Israel remained defiant, and Prime Minister Olmert announced...."as far as I am concerned, every resident of Gaza can walk because they have no gasoline for their vehicles," and Foreign Ministry spokesman, Arye Meckel, told AP the blackout was "a Hamas ploy to pretend there is some kind of crisis to attract international sympathy."

The Director of Gaza's main Shiffa hospital, Dr. Hassan Khalaf, had a different view. He described the situation as "potentially disastrous." Already Israel's siege was directly responsible for 45 deaths, and he said cutting hospital power would cause 30 premature babies to die immediately. The World Health Organization was also alarmed. It said insufficient electricity "disrupt(s)...intensive care units, operating theatres, and emergency rooms (and) power shortages have interrupted refrigeration of perishable medical supplies, including vaccine."

To operate at full capacity, Gaza needs 230 - 250 daily megawatts of electricity. Its only power plant supplies around 30% of it, but people in central Gaza and Gaza city are totally dependent on what can't be supplied if industrial diesel fuel the plant depends on is cut off. The result is critically ill people are endangered, bread and other baked goods can't be produced without electricity to power ovens, food is already in short supply, so is fresh water, and sanitation conditions are disastrous.

Michele Mercier of the International Red Cross said hospital medications were running out and wouldn't "last for more than two or three days." In addition, allowable food shipments are endangered according to UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) spokesman, Christopher

Gunness. He explained that the agency would have to suspend distribution to 860,000 people because of a fuel and plastic bags shortage.

Israel was unapologetic with Internal Security Minister, Avi Dichter, saying the IDF must “eliminate the rocket fire from Gaza, irrespective of the cost to Palestinians.” Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, added: “We are impacting the overall quality of life in Gaza and destroying the terror infrastructure.” He meant civilians as did Ehud Olmert claiming: “We are trying to hit only those involved in terrorism, but also signaling to the population in Gaza that it cannot be free from responsibility for the situation.”

Israel makes no distinction between civilians (including women and children) and resistance fighters, and B’Tselem stated that Yuval Diskin, head of the Israel Security Agency (ISA), “defines every Palestinian killed in the Gaza Strip as a terrorist,” including small children and the elderly infirm. The world approves, the Security Council debates and abstains, the dominant media is silent, and innocent Palestinians suffer and die – over 75 killed in January and several hundred injured. Who cares and who’s counting. They’re just Arab Muslims.

They’re also needy human beings, now desperate, and on January 23 they responded courageously. No help is coming so Hamas acted preemptively. It destroyed 200 meters of metal barrier separating both sides of Rafah that was divided in 1982 as part of Israel’s peace treaty with Egypt. About 40,000 people live in Egypt and another 200,000 in Gaza in the original town and an adjacent refugee camp. Until the outbreak of the second Intifada in September, 2000, crossing both ways was uncomplicated. That ended as violence increased, and Israel erected a barrier. Now it’s breached, Gazans took advantage, and some called it a “jail break.” Hundreds of thousands entered Egypt for needed essentials unavailable at home. Finally, the media noticed.

On January 24, The New York Times tried to have it both ways. It called Hamas’ border breach “an act of defiance” and continued indifferently. Unmindful of an 18 month siege, mass impoverishment, a humanitarian crisis and daily killings, correspondent Steven Erlanger made things seem festive in his report. Almost flippantly he said “Tens of thousands of Palestinians.... crossed the border for a ‘buying spree’ of medicine, cement, sheep....gasoline, soap and countless other supplies that have been cut off.”

Most Gazans can barely afford food and essentials and struggle daily to survive. Yet, Erlanger said they stocked up on “Coca-Cola, Cleopatra and Malimbo cigarettes, and satellite dishes” and on January 25 added “televisions (and) washing machines.” It was a party, “Egyptian merchants greeted them with a ‘cornucopia of consumer goods,” and Hamas joined the festivities by “mak(ing no) visible effort to control or tax” purchases. Those who could afford it indeed took advantage. Merchants bought items for resale at lower Egyptian prices. Most Palestinians, however, bought essentials – food, fuel, medicine if available and various household items.

Earlier on January 21, Israel relented to international pressure and a PR disaster impossible to ignore. Haaretz highlighted it in a January 26 editorial headlined “The siege of Gaza has failed.” Hamas ended it “via a well-planned operation and simultaneously won the sympathy of the world, which has forgotten the rain of Qassam rockets on Sderot, (and Israel looks foolish) entrenching itself in positions that look outdated.” Only a week ago, the government was crowing. Triumphant, it claimed its policy was “bearing fruit.”

Today, it’s all bitter with Olmert in denial. In a speech at the January Herzliya Conference, he

said: "Mistakes were made; there were failures. But in addition, lessons were learned, mistakes were corrected, modes of behavior were changed, and above all, the decisions we have made since then have led to greater security, greater calm and greater deterrence than there had been for many years." Haaretz had another view, and it was harsh. It stated events in Gaza "completely (contradict) his statements. If that is what learning lessons looks like, if that is what deterrence means, the Olmert government has precious little to boast about." So it acted.

AP reported on January 21 that authorities "agreed today to ship diesel fuel and medicine into Gaza on a one-time basis," easing its blockade, but it wouldn't continue unless rocket firings stopped. Everything then changed on January 27.

Aljazeera, The New York Times, Haaretz and other sources reported that the Olmert government relented. It agreed to resume fuel shipments to Gaza, easing its blockade. The decision came on the same day Israel's Supreme Court addressed the petition of 10 human rights organizations to order a resumption and prevent a humanitarian disaster. No decision was rendered, but state authorities acted anyway.

They agreed to supply 2.2 million weekly liters of industrial diesel fuel, the minimum amount needed to power central Gaza and Gaza City, but it's not enough overall according to Rafiq Maliha, the project manager at An-Nuseirat's power plant location. It's only two-thirds the amount needed, a mere fraction was delivered the first day, and Maliha said Gaza's gas companies would strike and resist this "Israeli plot" masquerading as humanitarian aid. His doubts are well-founded. On the same day fuel shipments resumed, Israeli warplanes struck northern Gaza in two separate raids. Hamas sources said two missiles hit a Palestinian car and others targeted a Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades position causing four injuries.

Human rights groups are also dismissive. They noted previous promises made, then broken, and the GISHA group (the Israeli NGO for freedom of Palestinian movement in the Territories) spokesperson said that Israel "repeatedly promised that it would ship 2.2 million litres (of fuel) a week into Gaza and has repeatedly broken that promise." Why believe authorities now, and with events so fluid it seems every day, a new policy.

At the same time, Hamas and Egyptian security forces are cooperating to close the border eight days after it was breached. On January 28, Haaretz reported that openings were being sealed by barbed wire, but not entirely as some two-way traffic continues as of January 30. Hamas and Egyptian forces now man the main Salah Eddin gate, most cars and trucks aren't passing through, but pedestrians still in Egypt "scoured (nearly) empty stores for food and consumer products to take back to the Gaza Strip....in fear of an imminent border reclosing."

What's next is anyone's guess, but Israel's Supreme Court will affect it. On January 30, it upheld the government's Gaza sanctions and its right to restrict fuel and electricity. In its statement, the three-judge panel left no doubt where it stands. It wrote:

"We emphasize that the Gaza Strip is controlled by a 'murderous terror group' that operates incessantly to strike the state of Israel and its citizens, and violates every precept of international law with its violent actions." Israel, nonetheless, will supply enough fuel and electricity to "fulfill the vital humanitarian needs of the Gaza Strip at this time."

Israeli human rights petitioners were quick to respond, and their message was clear and

harsh. For its part, the Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights called the ruling a “dangerous legal precedent that allows Israel to continue to violate the rights of Gaza residents and deprive them of basic humanitarian needs in violation of international law.” Hamas spokesperson, Fawzi Barhoum, was equally pointed. He added: The High Court’s decision “reflects the criminal, ugly face of the occupation.”

Things are now back to square one, Israel’s siege has been sanctified, and an unworkable 2005 security arrangement remains in place. Hamas wants it replaced with a new one and demands justice for Gaza’s 1.5 million people. Its main objection is Israel controls all movement and monitors it with cameras and computers to track everyone entering and leaving Gaza. On January 27, Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, said: ‘We don’t accept a continued Israeli veto on the movement, the exit and entry through Rafah.’ It’s time for a new system.

Getting one is another matter, according to Israeli officials. They commented on January 28 saying “Israel will not allow the continuation of the current state where its security interests are being compromised,” and Olmert and Abbas met on January 27 to discuss it. Initial reports were that Israel wanted Egypt to control the border, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak wants Abbas to do it, he, in turn, agrees to anything Olmert and George Bush want, and they at first rejected putting Abbas in charge, but that’s now changed according to Haaretz.

On January 29, it reported “Israel does not plan to block....Abbas from assuming control of Gaza’s border crossing with Egypt (if Cairo agrees).” Abbas, in turn, says it does as well as the EU, Arab League and Condoleezza Rice. Hamas reacted angrily through its spokesperson, Sami Abu-Zuhri. He called the plan an “Israeli-led international conspiracy (against the legitimate government) with the participation of some regional parties. We tell all parties that we will not allow the return of old conditions at the crossing.”

So the beat goes on. Nothing has changed, and unconsidered is what Palestinians want, need and deserve. After decades of abuse, forces they can’t control continue buffeting them, yet they persist and endure.

Now there’s the latest crisis, and consider Haaretz’s January 27 report. It was after Olmert and Abbas met “for a two-hour tete-a-tete....in Jerusalem” at which Olmert again made promises. He said Israel wouldn’t let a humanitarian crisis develop in Gaza, when, in fact, one has existed for months, his government caused it, and it’s accompanied by daily attacks, killings, arrests and a vast array of human rights abuses against an isolated population barely hanging on.

On January 23, various Palestinian factions met in Damascus with plenty to say. With little hope of being heeded, they called on Abbas to end the “ridiculous” negotiations he insists must continue with Olmert. Among those attending were Khaled Meshaal of Hamas and Ramadan Shallah of Islamic Jihad. Their message was strong: “I want to ask our brothers in Ramallah (Fatah headquarters), what exactly are you waiting for?” While you’re talking, Palestinians in “the biggest prison in history (are) being massacred.”

Even Abbas supporters are dubious, and Palestinian writer, Hani Al-Masri, expressed their view: “It doesn’t make sense for negotiations to continue while Israel is changing facts on the ground and undermining the chances for a just and acceptable solution.” The Arab League also responded, but not with teeth. It denounced Israel’s siege, but does nothing to

end it. That's Hamas' view with Khaled Meshaal saying the League could force change but instead prefers words, meetings, resolutions and more meetings in Arab capitals.

Still more are planned. Cairo is involved. So are the Saudis, but most of all Washington and Tel Aviv. They control everything and will decide what's next with one thing assured. Gazans are isolated, locked in the Territory, children and the elderly are dying, so are the sick without medical care, daily attacks kill others, and no end is in sight.

The plight of Palestinians won't change as things continue lurching from one crisis to another the way they have for decades. It won't end until world leaders buckle to growing world sentiment that no longer will injustices this grave be tolerated. How much more suffering must be endured, how many more deaths are acceptable, when will justice finally be served? People of conscience want answers. It's about time they got them.

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