

## The 41st kilometer: Gaza, “A Zoo”

The hermetic imprisonment of 1.5 million human beings

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A zoo. This is one of the ways that Palestinians describe the conditions under which nearly 1.5 million of them have been living: in an area of some 360 square kilometers, closed in on three sides by sophisticated barbed-wire fences, concrete walls and military lookout towers, and to the west by Israeli navy ships that seal them off from the sea. Overhead, in the sky, unmanned aircraft and hot air balloons continually photograph whatever happens inside this closed cage, which has seven gates connecting it to the world, all of which are sealed off almost hermetically.

During the past four months, Israel has permitted about 2,000 people to leave the Gaza Strip – a minority of them were ill; more than half were Fatah senior activists or loyalists who were fleeing from the Strip; and the rest were individuals holding dual citizenship or visas for prolonged stays abroad. For the sake of comparison: In 1999, 1,400 people a day went through the Rafah crossing point alone, in addition to the thousands who passed through the Erez crossing point, despite the permanent closure policy. Now, 1.5 million human beings are living with the knowledge that the length of their world is at most 41 kilometers long and 12 kilometers wide.

The comparison to a zoo was made by Dr. Mamdouh al Aker, a doctor who heads the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights. For another Gazan, a prominent businessman whose food plant is working at about 5 percent of its capacity, the situation is reminiscent of a hospital: Like patients, the inhabitants do not work, but they receive food. They do not work, because for four months Israel has prohibited not only the exit of any Gazan products to market, but also the entry of any raw materials or means of production. If the prices of goods continue to rise and the cash crisis worsens because of the severing of contact between banks in Israel and the banks in Gaza, the international aid organizations will soon increase the quantities of food that they donate, which today account for about 10 percent of the supplies that are brought in. Perhaps the day will come when they will drop food packages from helicopters.

The governments of Israel, the United States and Europe see the hermetic imprisonment of 1.5 million human beings and the final destruction of Gaza's economic infrastructure as a suitable answer to Hamas, at least until it falls. It appears that the Ramallah “government” agrees with them. Indeed, the head of the Gazan “government,” Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, has hinted that the exclusive Hamas regime in Gaza is temporary. But, this temporary nature depends on the success of a dialogue between Hamas and Fatah, whereas Israel and the United States are forbidding Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas from carrying on such a dialogue. And Abbas, in any case, is for the moment sticking to the approach that Hamas is a hostile entity.

As always, the students who are not being allowed to leave are a minority whose imprisonment reflects the extent of the destruction inflicted upon the Palestinian future. For years now Israel has been preventing Gazans from studying in the West Bank. As a consequence, those who want to undertake advanced studies at the university level must go abroad. Take, for example, 10 outstanding students who have received scholarships for master's and doctoral studies in Germany. Take another several hundred students who are already studying abroad and got stuck in the Gaza Strip over the summer, and others who registered for studies abroad this year. The essential future contribution by all of these students to their community is ensured. But if they do not leave the Gaza Strip today, right now, some of them will lose their scholarships, others the first semester of the school year and still others the entire year. Thousands of other young people have simply given up on their aspiration to study abroad because of the closed-gates policy. And when they do not receive the opportunity to get to know the world, the world according to Hamas and the religious horizons that it offers are the most persuasive.

Since 1991, Israel has been using the partial or total imprisonment of the Gazans in their cage, for longer or shorter periods, as a political strategy: Sometimes it is depicted as punishment, sometimes as a deterrent action and always as a preface to a political plan. Until not long ago, it seemed as though the terms of imprisonment could not be any worse. The past four months have proven that there is always "worse."

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