

The Strangulation of Gaza

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“Gaza is on the threshold of becoming the first territory to be intentionally reduced to a state of abject destitution, with the knowledge, acquiescence and—some would say—encouragement of the international community,” the commissioner-general of UNRWA warned recently.

The people of Gaza were able to enjoy a few days of freedom last week, after demolition charges brought down the iron wall separating the impoverished Palestinian territory from Egypt, allowing hundreds of thousands to burst out of the virtual prison into which Gaza has been transformed over the past few years—the terminal stage of four decades of Israeli occupation—and to shop for desperately needed supplies in Egyptian border towns.

Gaza’s doors are slowly closing again, however. Under mounting pressure from the United States and Israel, Egypt has dispatched additional border guards armed with water cannons and electric cattle prods to try to regain control. It has already cut off the flow of supplies crossing the Suez Canal to its own border towns. For now, in effect, Suez is the new border: even if Palestinians could get out of Gaza in search of new supplies, they would have to cross the desolate expanses of the Sinai Desert and cross the canal, on the other side of which they would find the regular Egyptian army (barred from most of Sinai as a condition of the 1979 Camp David treaty with Israel) waiting for them.

Now that Gaza’s fleeting taste of freedom is beginning to fade, the grim reality facing the territory’s 1.5 million people is once again looming large. “After feeling imprisoned for so long, it has been a psychological relief for Gazans to know that there is a way out,” said John Ging, the local director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). “But it does not resolve their crisis by any stretch of the imagination.”

Indeed, all the frenzied shopping in Egyptian border towns brought into Gaza a mere fraction of the food that UN and other relief agencies have been blocked by Israel from delivering to the people who depend on them for their very survival. As long as the border with Egypt is even partially open, Israel refuses to open its own borders with Gaza to anything other than the bare minimum of industrial fuel to keep the territory’s one power plant operating at a subsistence level, and a few trucks of other supplies a day.

UNRWA has almost depleted the stocks of emergency food aid it had previously built up in Gaza. Only thirty-two truckloads of goods have been allowed to enter Gaza since Israel imposed its total closure on January 18; 250 trucks were entering every day before last June, and even that was insufficient to meet the population’s needs.

On January 30 UNRWA warned that unless something changes, the daily ration that it will distribute on the 31st to 860,000 destitute refugees in Gaza will lack a protein component:

the canned meat that is the only source of protein in the food parcels—which even under the best of circumstances contributes less than two-thirds of minimum daily nourishment—is being held up by Israel, and the stock of those cans inside Gaza has been exhausted. The World Food Program, which feeds another 340,000 people in Gaza, has brought in nine trucks of food aid in the past two weeks; in the seven months before that, it had been bringing in fifteen trucks a day.

Gazans have been ground into poverty by years of methodical Israeli restrictions and closures; 80 percent of the population now depends on food aid for day-to-day subsistence. With the aid, they were receiving “enough to survive, not to live,” as the International Red Cross put it. Without it, they will die.

All this is supposed to be in response to Palestinian militant groups’ firing of crude homemade rockets into Israel, which rarely cause any actual damage. There can be no excuse for firing rockets at civilian targets, but Israel was squeezing Gaza long before the first of those primitive projectiles was cobbled together. The first fatal rocket attack took place four years ago; Israel has been occupying Gaza for four decades.

The current squeeze on Gaza began in 1991. It was tightened with the institutionalization of the Israeli occupation enabled by the Oslo Accords of 1993. It was tightened further with the intensification of the occupation in response to the second intifada in 2000. It was tightened further still when Israel redeployed its settlers and troops from inside Gaza in 2005 and transformed the territory into what John Dugard, the UN’s special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied territories, referred to as a prison, the key to which, Dugard said, Israel had “thrown away.” It was tightened to the point of strangulation following the Hamas electoral victory in 2006, when Israel began restricting supplies of food and other resources into Gaza. It was tightened beyond the point of strangulation following the deposition of the Hamas-led government in June 2007. And now this.

When Israel limited commercial shipments of food—but not humanitarian relief—into Gaza in 2006, a senior government adviser, Dov Weisglass, explained that “the idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet but not to make them die of hunger.”

Israel’s “diet” was taking its toll even before last week. The World Food Program warned last November that less than half of Gaza’s food-import needs were being met. Basics including wheat grain, vegetable oil, dairy products and baby milk were in short supply. Few families can afford meat. Anemia rates rocketed to almost 80 percent. UNRWA noted at about the same time that “we are seeing evidence of the stunting of children, their growth is slowing, because our ration is only 61 percent of what people should have and that has to be supplemented.”

By further restricting the supply of food to an already malnourished population, Israel has clearly decided to take its “diet” a step further. If the people of Gaza remain cut off from the food aid on which their survival now depends, they will face starvation.

They are now essentially out of food; the water system is faltering (almost half the population now lacks access to safe water supplies); the sewage system has broken down and is discharging raw waste into streets and the sea; the power supply is intermittent at best; hospitals lack heat and spare parts for diagnostic machines, ventilators, incubators; dozens of lifesaving medicines are no longer available. Slowly but surely, Gaza is dying.

Patients are dying unnecessarily: cancer patients cut off from chemotherapy regimens, kidney patients cut off from dialysis treatments, premature babies cut off from blood-clotting medications. In the past few weeks, many more Palestinian parents have watched the lives of their sick children ebb slowly, quietly and (as far as the global media are concerned) invisibly away in Gaza's besieged hospitals than Israelis have been hurt-let alone actually killed-by the erratic firing of primitive homemade rockets from Gaza, about which we have heard so much. (According to the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, these rockets have killed thirteen Israelis in the past four years, while Israeli forces have killed more than 1,000 Palestinians in the occupied territories in the past two years alone, almost half of them civilians, including some 200 children.)

Israel's squeeze is expressly intended to punish the entire population for the firing of those rockets by militants, which ordinary civilians are powerless to stop. "We will not allow them to lead a pleasant life," said Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert when Israel cut off fuel supplies on January 18, thereby plunging Gaza into darkness. "As far as I am concerned, all of Gaza's residents can walk and have no fuel for their cars."

Olmert's views and, more important, his policies were reaffirmed and given the legal sanction of Israel's High Court. In what human rights organizations referred to as a "devastating" decision, on January 30 the court ruled in favor of the government's plan to further restrict supplies of fuel and electricity to Gaza. "The decision means that Israel may deliberately deprive civilians in Gaza of fuel and electricity supplies," pointed out Sari Bashi, of the Gisha human rights organization in Israel. "During wartime, the civilian population is the first and central victim of the fighting, even when efforts are made to minimize the damage," the court said. In other words, harm to the civilian population is an inevitable effect of war and therefore legally permissible.

That may be the view of Israel's highest legal authority, but it is not how the matter is viewed by international law, which strictly regulates the way civilian populations are to be treated in time of war. "The parties to a conflict must at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants in order to spare the civilian population and civilian property," the International Red Cross points out, invoking the Geneva Conventions and other founding documents of international humanitarian law. "Neither the civilian population as a whole nor individual civilians may be attacked."

Moreover, no matter what Israel's High Court says, what is happening in Gaza is not a war in the conventional sense: Gaza is not a state at war with the state of Israel. It is a territory militarily occupied by Israel. Even after its 2005 redeployment, Israel did not release its hold on Gaza; it continues to control all access to the territory, as well as its airspace, territorial waters and even its population registry. Over and above all the routine prohibitions on attacks on the civilian population and other forms of collective punishment that hold true in case of war, in other words, international law also holds Israel responsible for the welfare of the Gaza population. Article 55 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) specifically demands, for example, that, "to the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population; it should, in particular, bring in the necessary foodstuffs, medical stores and other articles if the resources of the occupied territory are inadequate."

Israel's methodical actions make it clear that it is systematically grinding down and now actually starving people for whose welfare it is legally accountable simply because it regards

Gaza's 1.5 million men, women and children as a surplus population it would, quite simply, like to get rid of one way or the other: a sentiment made quite clear when Israel's chief Ashkenazi rabbi proposed, shortly after the current crisis began, that the entire Palestinian population of Gaza should just be removed and transferred to the Egyptian desert. "They will have a nice country, and we shall have our country and we shall live in peace," he said, without eliciting even a murmur of protest in Israel.

The overwhelming majority of Gazans are refugees or the descendants of refugees who were expelled from their homes when Palestine was destroyed and Israel was created in 1948. Like all Palestinian refugees, those of Gaza have a moral and legal right to return to the homeland from which they were expelled. Israel blocks their return for the same reason it expelled them in the first place, because their presence would undermine its already tenuous claim to Jewishness (this is the nature of the so-called "demographic problem" about which Israeli politicians openly complain). As long as the refugees live, what Israel regards as the mortal threat of their right of return lives on. But if they would somehow just go away...

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The question now is whether the world will simply sit and watch, now that this unprecedented threshold is actually being crossed.

Having taken matters into their hands and destroyed the wall cutting them off from the outside world, it is most unlikely that the people of Gaza will simply submit to that fate. A hermetic closure ultimately depends not merely on Israel's whims but on Egypt's willingness—or ability—to cut off the Palestinians of Gaza and watch them starve. For all the US and Israeli pressure on Egypt, and for all the steps Egypt is now taking, it seems most unlikely that it would let things go that far. Not intervening to save fellow Arabs from the Israeli occupation is one thing; actually participating in their repression is quite another. The Egyptian government would have to answer not only to the people of Palestine but to its own people, and indeed to all Arabs.

Working together, Hamas and the people of Gaza have forced Egypt's hand and made much more visible than ever before the role it had been playing all along in the Israeli occupation and strangulation of Gaza; now that its role in assisting Israel has been revealed, it will be difficult for Egypt to go back to the status quo. Gazans have thrown Israel's plans into disarray, because Israel's leaders could do little more than watch with pursed lips as the people of Gaza burst out of their prison. And they have placed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the government of Ramallah in a corner: they will have to choose between defending their people's rights and needs or confirming once and for all—as indeed they are doing—that the PA is there to serve Israel's interests, not those of the Palestinians. In which case they too will one day be called to account.

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