

Situation Update: The Gaza Strip

In the summer of 2007, following Hamas' consolidation of power in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government declared the territory to be a "hostile entity" and imposed a crippling blockade. The borders of Gaza were sealed shut and all but the most basic of humanitarian products prevented from entering. Over six years later and this collective punishment of a people continues unabated. The economy of the territory has imploded, public health has been severely damaged and attempts at reconstruction in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead nullified. In the words of the Prime Minister David Cameron, Gaza has become a "prison camp".

The Extent of the Closure

It is a regular claim by Israel that it ended the occupation of Gaza when it 'disengaged' in 2005 with the withdrawal of 8,000 settlers. However, Israel has remained as firmly in control of Gaza's sovereignty as at any point since 1967, controlling its borders, air space and coastal waters, whilst retaining for itself the right to enter. Land restrictions imposed since late 2008 still remain, preventing Palestinians from accessing land located 1,000-1,500 metres from the Green Line. This restricted area on land is estimated at 17% of the total land mass of the Gaza Strip and 35% of its agricultural land: a sore restriction on the densely populated territory. Fishermen are prohibited from accessing around 85% of the maritime areas they are entitled to according to the Oslo Accords. They are only allowed to fish 6 nautical miles off the coast which has resulted in an estimated fish-catch loss of 1,300 metric tonnes per year. The restrictions have had severe economic repercussions and 95% of all fishermen in Gaza receive international aid. The restrictions are enforced by Israeli soldiers on land and sea. Since 2007 five fisherman have been shot dead by Israeli naval forces enforcing the restrictions, and 214 Palestinians have been killed in Access Restricted Areas (ARA) on land.



Socioeconomic Conditions

Over the last six years the poverty in Gaza has increased rapidly. More than 70% of the population of currently receive humanitarian aid, and 31% of the population are unemployed, entirely reliant on international aid to survive.

Nearly 80% of the homes and businesses destroyed in Operation Cast Lead have not been rebuilt due to Israel's strict rules about importing building materials. Following Israel's Operation Pillar of Defence there was a slight improvement on the regulations and since December 2012, Israel has permitted certain construction materials to enter Gaza as well as 20 truckloads of cement a day. Despite the slight improvement there is still an extensive lack of construction materials. The Gaza Strip is short of 250 schools, meaning the existing schools are forced to run two or sometimes three shifts a day to accommodate all of the students. This results in less class time, and a lack of extra curricular activities. Furthermore a decline in school attendance and performance is perpetuated by frequent electrical power cuts due to a fuel shortage, which can continue for up to 12 hours per day. Water and sanitation conditions continue to be poor: 70 million litres of untreated or partially treated sewage is discharged into the environment on a daily basis and sea-water and sewage infiltrate the aquifer. As a result, 90% of the water in Gaza is undrinkable.

The Tunnel Industry

Unemployment remains one of the highest in the world and is currently around 31%, while the monthly income of a family of 7-9 is recorded to be less than US\$250. With the restrictions on food items, tens of thousands of children have iron and vitamin deficiencies. According to Save the Children "the consequences of this include stunted growth of bones and teeth, difficulty fighting infections, fatigue and reduced capacity to learn." With the current closure of the territory, a vast network of around 1000 tunnels employing 7000 people have developed to meet the population's needs. The tunnels have developed under the Philadelphi corridor, the buffer zone between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, and supply Gaza with a spectrum of smuggled items from food stuffs and medicines to weapons and people. The tunnels are poorly built, and hundreds have died in the smuggling process, yet it remains the only way in

Situation Update: The Gaza Strip

which Gaza can import materials such as urgently-needed construction items. Most are denied entry through the Israeli-monitored crossings, despite the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) stipulating that 500 trucks per day (around 15,500 per month) are required to supply the people of Gaza through the legitimate crossings.

However since President Morsi's removal the Egyptian army has closed or destroyed around 80% of the tunnels, in an attempt to regain control of the hostile Sinai region. Until recently the tunnels were thought to supply about 60% of Gaza's needs and roughly 40% of the government's revenue. Their closure, along with the restrictions on the Rafah crossing - the main route out of Gaza - have dramatically heightened the crippling effects of the blockade.

Although the Rafah crossing was reopened after a brief closure in early July, this is only on a limited basis and the daily average of exits from Gaza for July was less than a third of the daily average earlier in the year. Palestinians continued to receive harsh treatment in transit and are forced to wait for hours or sometimes days before either being instructed to return to Gaza or being escorted by security personal to Cairo International Airport to be deported. Of particular concern are those in need of medical care for whom delays can be life threatening. The importing of medical supplies has also been greatly affected: the WHO reported that 'Since 2007, the percentage of drugs at zero level stocks in Gaza's CDS (Central Drug Store) has been growing.'

Hamas Government

Since its takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, and despite being a target of Operation Cast Lead, Hamas has largely managed to consolidate a working



“If the aim of the blockade policy was to weaken the Hamas administration, the public employment numbers suggest this has failed. But it has certainly been highly successful in punishing some of the poorest of the poor in the Middle East region.”

UNRWA spokesperson

government, retain control of the territory and sustain financial support. From its birth as an Islamist movement, Hamas has secured itself as a political party in Gaza and is becoming increasingly sophisticated when it comes to governance. Institutionally, its governance is supported by 20,000 civil servants as well as a network of NGOs and community-based organisations, including universities. Typical of Hamas' approach as an Islamist movement, many philanthropic social ventures are maintained, covering a variety of sectors including education, healthcare and aid to poor sections of the refugee communities. To many in the Gaza Strip, this operational sophistication often contrasts with the ineffectiveness and corruption witnessed during Fatah's time in office.

Since its election in 2007, Hamas has endeavoured to consolidate order within the Gaza Strip through its 15,000-strong police force, security service and through strict border controls. Ghazi Hamad, the Director-General for the Gaza Strip Borders and Crossings, stated that part of his role involved protecting the ceasefire through policing the buffer zone. Careful patrols are carried out to stop-and-search cars suspected of carrying militants who aim to fire rockets into Israel. The UN confirms that harsh punishments were delivered to those who violate the ceasefire.

Many resent the level of control Hamas exercises over the people in the Gaza Strip. In recent years controversies have included its violent objection to UNRWA's Summer Games, the closing of Sharek Youth Forum because of mixed gender activities, and the ban on women smoking shisha in public. Hamas has also interfered with US aid organisations in Gaza by insisting that they undergo audits and searches by Hamas authorities. In January 2011, the Ministry of Interior confiscated copies of certain novels such as

Situation Update: The Gaza Strip

Chicago and Banquet for Seaweed, claiming that they violate Shari'a Law. Most recently in 2013, al-Aqsa University in Gaza announced that all female students must wear the burka, and the annual UNRWA marathon in the Gaza Strip was cancelled when Hamas announced females would not be allowed to take part. During the unrest in Egypt in February 2011, hundreds rallied in non-violent protest in solidarity with those in Tahrir Square. Some students used this as an opportunity to protest against the Hamas Government and many were involved in the March demonstrations for Palestinian unity. Such moves were not welcomed by Hamas, who arrested many who attended the protests and issued criminal records at will. Such moves violate the Palestinian Basic Law, which ensures the right to freedom of opinion, expression, and publication.



Radicalisation in Gaza

Support for jihadi Salafism (a movement practicing a very conservative form of Islam) is on the rise in Gaza. They do not agree with the ceasefire and have claimed responsibility for a sizeable proportion of the rockets launched into Israel. While jihadi salafis remain a small minority within Gaza, they have often come into conflict with Hamas, whom they view as too moderate and willing to compromise Islamic principles. Hamas believes that they 'misunderstand Islam' and should be carefully controlled.

Hamas' reaction to their activities has been harsh. In August 2009 Salafists declared an 'Islamic Emirate' in the southern Gaza Strip, which was met with direct force from Hamas, leaving 22 dead in a gun battle. In April 2011, the same group kidnapped the pro-Palestinian activist Vittorio Arrigoni and threatened to execute him unless Salafist prisoners in Hamas jails were released. Vittorio was hanged and a video was posted on YouTube. Hamas security forces found the three Salafists responsible; two were killed in a gun-battle, one was arrested.

Recently tension between Hamas and Salafis has increased, since Hamas has been increasing its efforts to prevent Salafis firing rockets into Israel. Hamas has warned Salafi jihadist groups in the Gaza Strip that those who fire rockets at the current time will be arrested and that the firing rockets should not occur "without a general national consensus" on the issue.

Looking to the Future

Long term, the situation in Gaza is not sustainable. According to a UN published report in 2012, by 2020 Gaza will no longer be viable. The report says that the population of the Gaza Strip will increase from 1.6 million people to 2.1 million people in 2020, resulting in a density of more than 5,800 people per square kilometre. Infrastructure in electricity, water and sanitation, municipal and social services are not keeping pace with the needs of the growing population.