

Human Security and Humanitarian Trends in Gaza: Looking at the Past Decade

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Between 2005 and 2017 the Gaza Strip underwent a series of major upheavals and crises, including the unilateral Israeli disengagement in 2005; the post-Hamas electoral victory in-fighting between Fatah and Hamas, culminating with the latter's takeover of Gaza in 2007; and three rounds of active hostilities with Israel. Moreover, in the decade since 2007, the Gaza Strip has been largely closed off from the external world, with the entry and exit of both goods and people restricted or prevented entirely. Taken together, these circumstances resulted in a worsening of humanitarian and economic indicators in the Strip, and took a severe toll on both the civilian population and civilian infrastructure. This essay provides a brief account of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, highlighting some of the most relevant trends and contextualizing them within the broader framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general, and Israel-Hamas hostilities in particular.

While commonly thought of as a means by Israel to combat legitimate security threats, the closure of Gaza was in fact also implemented as a means of imposing pressure on the civilian population and the de facto ruler of Gaza – Hamas. While some changes were made on access to the Strip, remaining restrictions, ongoing hostilities, and successive military operations as well as the Palestinian political divide have resulted in continued intense suffering. Ten years since the Hamas takeover, civilians continue to pay the price for the current predicament – while Gaza's isolation and separation grows steadily.

Gaza: Between Isolation and Restricted Access

The current humanitarian landscape in the Gaza Strip has been profoundly shaped by the Strip's isolation – from Israel, the West Bank, and the rest of the world. While in the first two decades of the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip movement of people to Israel and the West Bank was largely unrestricted, subsequent years witnessed a gradual imposition of restrictions on the movement of people and goods. Gaza's current predicament is the culmination of restrictions that began in the early 1990s and intensified at various intervals including, but not limited to, the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, the aftermath of the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, in which Hamas won a majority of parliamentary seats, and the 2007 Hamas takeover of the Strip.

After the 2006 elections, both Israel and the international community implemented a policy of isolation and economic pressure against Hamas. Israel placed greater restrictions on movement of goods and people, and international aid was diverted away from the Hamas-majority government. Israel also stopped the transfer of tax and customs revenues collected on behalf of the PA.¹ The policy was expanded in the aftermath of Hamas's takeover of the Strip in 2007, with Israel pursuing a policy of "economic warfare," banning the marketing and export of any goods from Gaza and severely restricting the type and quantity of civilian goods that could be imported into the Strip. While described by an Israeli senior official as having the goals of "no prosperity, no development, no humanitarian crisis,"² the policy aimed at placing the maximum extent of pressure on Gaza to weaken and isolate Hamas, with Israel going as far as using mathematical formulas to calculate the amount of food products it allowed into Gaza.³

The policy of economic warfare was implemented in full force between 2007 and 2010, failing, however, to lead to a weakening of Hamas, politically or militarily. On the contrary, Gaza's isolation further entrenched Hamas's role and influence over Gaza's economy, while crippling the private sector and making the civilian population more dependent on governmental and international aid to survive. In tandem, the sealing of Gaza favored the development of a parallel, tunnel-based economy on the Gaza-Egypt border, which allowed Hamas to generate revenue, both for its government and for its military wing.

Failure to deliver and in the wake of international pressure, the policy was ostensibly abandoned following the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla affair in 2010, when a Turkish civilian-led attempt to break the naval blockade of Gaza led to both a violent confrontation with the Israeli naval forces and a diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Israel. In the aftermath of 2010, Israel partially eased the restrictions in place, lifting the limitations on the entry of foodstuffs and instead regulating the inflow of a wide array of goods designated as “dual-use,” so defined because in addition to their civilian use, they can be used for military purposes as well.⁴ These items include cement, x-ray machines, wood planks, and many types of pipes and other items required for industry and the reconstruction and maintenance of Gaza’s water, sewage, and electricity infrastructure.⁵

Since 2010, discussions over further revisions to the policy and easing Gaza’s isolation have taken place repeatedly, especially in the aftermath of the 2012 and 2014 rounds of conflict between Hamas and Israel. In both escalations, the ceasefire negotiations were reported to include discussions of various elements of Gaza’s isolation, with senior Israeli officials citing the need to pursue an alternative course of action. For example, the 2012 ceasefire stipulated that “opening the crossings and facilitating the movement of people and transfer of goods” needed to be addressed.⁶ While some restrictions were indeed lifted, these changes were not extensive enough to reverse Gaza’s isolation and hardship.⁷

After the summer of 2013, Gaza’s predicament took a sharp turn for the worse, when the ousting of the Mohamed Morsi government in Egypt resulted in dire restrictions on the Rafah border crossing and, consequently, the severe crackdown on the tunnel economy. Eventually, the combination of isolation and pressure resulted in yet another round of hostilities, in the summer of 2014.

During the 2014 military operation in Gaza, Israel began discussing yet again the possibility of another “relaxation” of the Gaza policy. Inter alia, this led, for the first time since 2007, to the lifting of some restrictions on marketing Gaza-grown and Gaza-manufactured goods in the West Bank and Israel. However, remaining restrictions continue to undermine growth and contribute to the high unemployment rate in the Strip. Moreover, Israel has continued to regulate tightly the movement of people from and into Gaza,

restricting movement primarily to commercial dealers, medical patients, and “exceptional humanitarian cases.”

Following the 2014 conflict, at Israel’s insistence, the Palestinian Authority agreed to establish the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM), which was to be supervised by the United Nations. The GRM allows Israel to control the pace of entry of construction materials into Gaza and to have oversight and veto power over each individual construction project and all its components. As of July 2017, over 10,000 types of items were submitted for Israel’s approval under the GRM.⁸ In parallel, Israel has continued to restrict the fishing zone in Gaza’s waters to six nautical miles and maintain a buffer zone along the fence with Gaza. The zone is at least 100 meters deep and includes a large share of Gaza’s agricultural land. The Israeli army deters the entry into this buffer zone with live fire.

Finally, in 2016, after an initial trend from late 2014 that seemed to point toward an easing of the closure, Israel switched course and reverted to tighter restrictions, particularly as regards movement of people.⁹ In late 2015, Israel also expanded the dual-use list to include 61 additional line items, including wood planks and heavy lifting equipment.¹⁰ In September 2016, COGAT issued a new regulation penalizing attempts to import dual-use items into Gaza without prior approval. The regulation levies a fine of over NIS 1 million (more than \$280,000) on suppliers of such goods.¹¹ Due to the murkiness surrounding the list and items that are actually broad categories, such as “communications equipment,” Gaza traders often struggle to understand which items require prior approval as a dual-use item and which do not. This produces a chilling effect across Gaza’s economy, as traders and businesspeople hesitate or altogether forgo attempts to order items that could expand their businesses.

The Humanitarian Impact

Although Gaza’s dire humanitarian predicament has been studied and documented in the past decade, it is worth reviewing some of the consequences of a decade of isolation and restrictions.

At the economic level, the past decade saw a drop in the annual GDP per capita from \$1,096 to \$970 in 2014;¹² and a rise in unemployment from 29.7 percent in 2007 to 41.7 percent in 2016, along with a drop in daily wages.¹³ As discussed in the following chapters, this data is especially striking when

compared to economic indicators in the West Bank. For example, according to the latest data, the share of food insecure households in the Gaza Strip is 2.5 times that in the West Bank, with 47 percent of households suffering from food insecurity.¹⁴

Gaza's civilian infrastructure and public services have also deteriorated over the past decade. The recurring rounds of hostilities have devastated Gaza's infrastructure, including essential energy facilities, and contributed to the crippling of Gaza's economy. Electricity supply falls far short of demand. On the best days, when the three sources of Gaza's electricity supply are functioning at maximum capacity, Gaza residents receive eight hours of electricity followed by eight hours of power outages in rolling blackouts. In 2017, even this meager supply was undermined by a political dispute over payment of services between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, the *de facto* ruler of Gaza. This was exacerbated by a decision of the Israeli cabinet to abide by the request of the Palestinian Authority to reduce the power supply to Gaza.

For over a decade, critical civilian infrastructure has come under attack, whether deliberately or through some measure of concerted negligence. In 2006, following the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Israel targeted six of the transformers of the Gaza power plant and its fuel reservoirs.¹⁵ The damage has not been fully repaired since, due to the ban on entry of certain parts required for repairs, which Israel labels as dual-use. After only partial repairs, the plant is capable of producing 80 to 90 megawatts at most. During the 2014 conflict, Israeli shelling damaged fuel tanks at the power plant once again, and also hit the al-Montar water reservoir in the Shujaiya neighborhood. The water reservoir was constructed as part of a project aimed at incorporating water purchased from Israel into Gaza wells to increase the supply of potable water available in the Strip. Power lines, roads, and water and sewage networks were also destroyed in each of the rounds of fighting. Repairs of much of this civilian infrastructure were severely delayed by restrictions on the entry of the necessary equipment and insufficient funding.¹⁶

The frequency of military operations and the extent of the damage to civilian infrastructure have contributed to the international community's reluctance to initiate and support the building of infrastructure facilities in the Gaza Strip. Lacking guarantees for the protection of such facilities, it

is difficult to secure willingness or funding to build them – in addition to the uncertainty surrounding permits to bring in the materials and equipment necessary for construction. These recurring conflagrations and the destruction they engender, in addition to the system of restrictions on the entry and exit of goods from Gaza, also discourage private sector investment in the Strip.

The pace of Gaza's reconstruction since the 2014 round of fighting has been lethargic due to a combination of limited funding, intra-Palestinian tensions between Hamas and the PA, and Israel's insistence on approving every reconstruction project and the individual items and materials required for it. Insufficient funding by donors and the poor state of Gaza's economy prevent many residents of Gaza from purchasing construction materials and rebuilding their homes. As of May 2017, more than 30,000 Gazans were still living in temporary dwellings after their homes were destroyed or severely damaged in the 2014 conflict.

Looking Ahead

A brief review of the culmination of recurrent conflict, continued economic restrictions, and international isolation explain why the past decade has seen the deterioration of virtually all human security indicators in the Gaza Strip: from access to health and education to availability of drinkable water, and from food security to employment. Gaza's predicament has declined steadily from an environmental, economic, infrastructural, and governance point of view. The current state of affairs is likely to have a prolonged and pervasive long term impact on both Gaza's future trajectory as well as that of the region as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Benedetta Berti, "Non-State Actors as Providers of Governance: The Hamas Government in Gaza between Effective Sovereignty, Centralized Authority, and Resistance," *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 1 (2015), <https://goo.gl/uWnZFW>.
- 2 Tim McGirk, "One Year Since Israel's Offensive, Gaza Still Suffers," *Time*, December 28, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1950180,00.html>.
- 3 "'Red Lines' presentation released after 3.5-year legal battle: Israel calculated the number of calories it would allow Gaza residents to consume," Gisha, October 17, 2012, <http://gisha.org/press/1264>.
- 4 See "Information Sheet: Dark-Gray Lists" at <http://gisha.org/publication/4860> and the dual-use list on COGAT's website, <http://www.cogat.mod.gov.il/en/services/>

- Documents/List%20of%20Dual%20Use%20Items%20Requiring%20a%20Transfer%20License.pdf.
- 5 “Let it Flow: How the Israeli Blockade has Brought Gaza to the Brink of a Water and Sanitation Catastrophe,” *EWASH*, March 21, 2016; and “Information Sheet: Dark-Gray Lists.”
 - 6 “Text of Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Agreement,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 21, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Text-of-Israel-Hamas-cease-fire-agreement>.
 - 7 See “The Monthly Humanitarian Monitor | February 2013,” Occupied Palestinian Territory, March 25, 2013, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/monthly-humanitarian-monitor-february-2013>.
 - 8 See GRM Report at <http://grm.report/#/DualUse/List>.
 - 9 “New Factsheet: ‘Security Blocks’ Restricting Exit from the Gaza Strip Disrupt the Lives of Thousands,” Gisha, December 2016, <http://gisha.org/publication/5551>.
 - 10 “Information Sheet: Dark-Gray Lists.”
 - 11 COGAT, “Regulation on Imposition of Fines on those Illicitly Transferring Dual-Use Items to the Gaza Strip,” September 2016, <http://www.gisha.org/UserFiles/File/LegalDocuments/procedures/merchandise/190.pdf>.
 - 12 “Per Capita GDP by Region and Quarter,” http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/a-PercapitaCon2000-2015.htm.
 - 13 “Gaza’s Unemployment Rate almost 42% in 2016,” Gisha, <http://gisha.org/updates/5927>.
 - 14 “Socio-Economic & Food Security Survey 2014: State of Palestine,” Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, May 2016, http://fsccluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/sefsec2014_report_all_web.pdf.
 - 15 See “Fact Sheet: Gaza’s Electricity Crisis | May 2010,” Occupied Palestinian Territory, May 17, 2010, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/fact-sheet-gazas-electricity-crisis-may-2010>.
 - 16 “Treading Water: The Worsening Water Crisis and the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism,” Oxfam, March 2017, <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-treading-water-gaza-reconstruction-mechanism-220317-en.pdf>.