


London Review of Books

1 January 2009
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If Gaza falls . . .

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Israel's siege of Gaza began on 5 November, the day after an Israeli attack inside the strip, no doubt designed finally to undermine the truce between Israel and Hamas established last June. Although both sides had violated the agreement before, this incursion was on a different scale. Hamas responded by firing rockets into Israel and the violence has not abated since then. Israel's siege has two fundamental goals. One is to ensure that the Palestinians there are seen merely as a humanitarian problem, beggars who have no political identity and therefore can have no political claims. The second is to foist Gaza onto Egypt. That is why the Israelis tolerate the hundreds of tunnels between Gaza and Egypt around which an informal but increasingly regulated commercial sector has begun to form. The overwhelming majority of Gazans are impoverished and officially 49.1 per cent are unemployed. In fact the prospect of steady employment is rapidly disappearing for the majority of the population.

On 5 November the Israeli government sealed all the ways into and out of Gaza. Food, medicine, fuel, parts for water and sanitation systems, fertiliser, plastic sheeting, phones, paper, glue, shoes and even teacups are no longer getting through in sufficient quantities or at all. According to Oxfam only 137 trucks of food were allowed into Gaza in November. This means that an average of 4.6 trucks per day entered the strip compared to an average of 123 in October this year and 564 in December 2005. The two main food providers in Gaza are the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the World

Food Programme (WFP). UNRWA alone feeds approximately 750,000 people in Gaza, and requires 15 trucks of food daily to do so. Between 5 November and 30 November, only 23 trucks arrived, around 6 per cent of the total needed; during the week of 30 November it received 12 trucks, or 11 per cent of what was required. There were three days in November when UNRWA ran out of food, with the result that on each of these days 20,000 people were unable to receive their scheduled supply. According to John Ging, the director of UNRWA in Gaza, most of the people who get food aid are entirely dependent on it. On 18 December UNRWA suspended all food distribution for both emergency and regular programmes because of the blockade.

The WFP has had similar problems, sending only 35 trucks out of the 190 it had scheduled to cover Gazans' needs until the start of February (six more were allowed in between 30 November and 6 December). Not only that: the WFP has to pay to store food that isn't being sent to Gaza. This cost \$215,000 in November alone. If the siege continues, the WFP will have to pay an extra \$150,000 for storage in December, money that will be used not to support Palestinians but to benefit Israeli business.

The majority of commercial bakeries in Gaza – 30 out of 47 – have had to close because they have run out of cooking gas. People are using any fuel they can find to cook with. As the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has made clear, cooking-gas canisters are necessary for generating the warmth to incubate broiler chicks. Shortages of gas and animal feed have forced commercial producers to smother hundreds of thousands of chicks. By April, according to the FAO, there will be no poultry there at all: 70 per cent of Gazans rely on chicken as a major source of protein.

Banks, suffering from Israeli restrictions on the transfer of banknotes into the territory were forced to close on 4 December.

A sign on the door of one read: 'Due to the decision of the Palestinian Finance Authority, the bank will be closed today Thursday, 4.12.2008, because of the unavailability of cash money, and the bank will be reopened once the cash money is available.'

The World Bank has warned that Gaza's banking system could collapse if these restrictions continue. All cash for work programmes has been stopped and on 19 November UNRWA suspended its cash assistance programme to the most needy. It also ceased production of textbooks because there is no paper, ink or glue in Gaza. This will affect 200,000 students returning to school in the new year. On 11 December, the Israeli defence minister, Ehud Barak, sent \$25 million following an appeal from the Palestinian prime minister, Salaam Fayad, the first infusion of its kind since October. It won't even cover a month's salary for Gaza's 77,000 civil servants.

On 13 November production at Gaza's only power station was suspended and the turbines shut down because it had run out of industrial diesel. This in turn caused the two turbine batteries to run down, and they failed to start up again when fuel was received some ten days later. About a hundred spare parts ordered for the turbines have been sitting in the port of Ashdod in Israel for the last eight months, waiting for the Israeli authorities to let them through customs. Now Israel has started to auction these parts because they have been in customs for more than 45 days. The proceeds are being held in Israeli accounts.

During the week of 30 November, 394,000 litres of industrial diesel were allowed in for the power plant: approximately 18 per cent of the weekly minimum that Israel is legally obliged to allow in. It was enough for one turbine to run for two days before the plant was shut down again. The Gaza Electricity Distribution Company said that most of the Gaza Strip will be without electricity for between four and 12 hours a day. At any given time

during these outages, over 65,000 people have no electricity.

No other diesel fuel (for standby generators and transport) was delivered during that week, no petrol (which has been kept out since early November) or cooking gas. Gaza's hospitals are apparently relying on diesel and gas smuggled from Egypt via the tunnels; these supplies are said to be administered and taxed by Hamas. Even so, two of Gaza's hospitals have been out of cooking gas since the week of 23 November.

Adding to the problems caused by the siege are those created by the political divisions between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas Authority in Gaza. For example, Gaza's Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU), which is not controlled by Hamas, is supposed to receive funds from the World Bank via the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) in Ramallah to pay for fuel to run the pumps for Gaza's sewage system. Since June, the PWA has refused to hand over those funds, perhaps because it feels that a functioning sewage system would benefit Hamas. I don't know whether the World Bank has attempted to intervene, but meanwhile UNRWA is providing the fuel, although they have no budget for it. The CMWU has also asked Israel's permission to import 200 tons of chlorine, but by the end of November it had received only 18 tons – enough for one week of chlorinated water. By mid-December Gaza City and the north of Gaza had access to water only six hours every three days.

According to the World Health Organisation, the political divisions between Gaza and the West Bank are also having a serious impact on drug stocks in Gaza. The West Bank Ministry of Health (MOH) is responsible for procuring and delivering most of the pharmaceuticals and medical disposables used in Gaza. But stocks are at dangerously low levels. Throughout November the MOH West Bank was turning shipments away because it had no warehouse space, yet it wasn't sending supplies on to Gaza in

adequate quantities. During the week of 30 November, one truck carrying drugs and medical supplies from the MOH in Ramallah entered Gaza, the first delivery since early September.

The breakdown of an entire society is happening in front of us, but there is little international response beyond UN warnings which are ignored. The European Union announced recently that it wanted to strengthen its relationship with Israel while the Israeli leadership openly calls for a large-scale invasion of the Gaza Strip and continues its economic stranglehold over the territory with, it appears, the not-so-tacit support of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah – which has been co-operating with Israel on a number of measures. On 19 December Hamas officially ended its truce with Israel, which Israel said it wanted to renew, because of Israel's failure to ease the blockade.

How can keeping food and medicine from the people of Gaza protect the people of Israel? How can the impoverishment and suffering of Gaza's children – more than 50 per cent of the population – benefit anyone? International law as well as human decency demands their protection. If Gaza falls, the West Bank will be next.

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