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Palestine's human insecurity: a Gaza report

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To enter Gaza from Israel you have to cross at Erez where the Israelis have erected a huge new terminal made of glass, steel and Jerusalem stone (it is actually 1.7 km inside Palestinian territory - even at the moment of withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005, the Israelis couldn't resist taking a little bit extra). To get inside the terminal compound, you show your passport at a barrier, then cross a big empty space and enter the terminal. In a glass booth, a pretty Israeli soldier sits high above you, asks severely what you plan to do, and checks your name in the computer.

This is a digest of a report written by Mary Kaldor & Mient Jan Faber for the human-security study group at the [Centre for Global Governance](#) [1], London School of Economics, based on a visit to both parts of the Palestinian territories (Gaza and the West Bank) in 2007

Once through passport control, you follow arrows through several gates that close behind you before the one in front opens. There is nobody to be seen. You come to several turnstiles but only one has a green light. You pass through a corridor with high wire on each side and a steel corrugated roof, then through more turnstiles until you reach an enclosed room with walls on all sides. For a moment you think you must have followed the wrong arrow but all the turnstiles have closed behind you and you can't go back.

There is not a soul to be seen. You feel all the walls but they seem completely impregnable. And then, mysteriously, one wall slides open. You are through to yet another wired corridor and through yet more turnstiles until, recognisably, you are in a Palestinian corridor with concrete walls and a canvas roof. Suddenly there are people talking very loudly. On the way, you pass two very dirty toilets - the squatting sort. At the end of the corridor there are two small booths - one for women and one for men - where your names are written down by hand in a big book.

Returning is even worse. But the point is made. This, moreover, is how it is experienced by a foreigner: it is far, far worse for Palestinians. The crossing is only one example of the daily harassment and humiliation, the fear and intimidation, which are the consequence of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Very few Palestinians actually succeed in crossing - the names of those who manage the journey each day can all be handwritten on half a page of the book. Among the names on the day we crossed were most of the new (post-Mecca agreement) Palestinian cabinet including the president, Mahmoud Abbas. Permission for cars to cross is almost impossible to obtain and so many Palestinians we saw were dragging bags and trolleys through the long corridors. The loss of dignity is etched on people's faces.

The lack of human security for people living in Palestine is, first and foremost, caused by physical insecurity. It is the result both of the occupation and the lack of internal security, which are linked. Restrictions on movement, shelling from afar, periodic Israeli invasions, arrest and imprisonment, crime and gang or factional warfare are all part of the daily life of Palestinians. Palestinians experience economic, environmental and food insecurity as well; but fundamentally, these forms of insecurity cannot be disentangled from the lack of physical security, the situation of fear in which most people live.

The European Union does a lot to alleviate suffering and ease restrictions, through aid and through missions like police training or through the monitors at Rafah on the border with Egypt. But there is a big gap between what is done on the ground and what happens at the political level, through the "quartet" (European Union, United States, Russia and United

Nations) and top-down relations with Israel and Palestine. If human security is a guiding principle for what is done on the ground, geopolitics shapes relations at the level of governments - and the consequence is that geopolitics constrains what is done on the ground. The sanctions imposed on Palestine as a consequence of the election of Hamas in January 2006 greatly complicate and indeed subvert local EU efforts. Moreover, the pressure is one-sided; little or no leverage is exerted on Israel.

In what follows, we elaborate this argument by exploring the insecurity in Gaza in more detail, before addressing the role of the international community, especially the European Union.

A state of indignity

Occupation is exercised in different ways. Before the Oslo agreement, occupation was direct and therefore Israeli control was implemented through a range of methods - military, civil (policing), economic and political. Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, occupation is primarily exercised indirectly and from a distance. The use of conventional military in these circumstances entails that resistance is punished collectively rather than (as is the case with civil control) individually.

In Gaza, several people told us that they feel free as a result of the Israeli withdrawal. Nevertheless, they are not free to leave.

The Israelis control all the crossing-points except the one at Rafah, on the border with Egypt. Under an agreement in November 2005, the Rafah crossing was opened on the understanding that a European mission would monitor the border. However the presence of the European monitors is dependent on Israeli permission so Israel continues to exert indirect control. Since 24 June 2006, when an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was kidnapped and two Israeli soldiers killed, the border has been practically closed. It is totally closed 81% of the time. For the remainder of the time, only certain categories of people are allowed to cross. Palestinians with a Palestinian IDs are allowed to cross provided their names have been approved by the Israelis. The other crossings are mostly closed or operate "haphazardly" according to the World Bank (see World Bank Technical Team: *Potential Alternatives for Palestine Trade: Developing the Rafah Corridor* [14]r, 21 March 2007).

The restrictions on movement and access prevent most Palestinians from leaving Gaza and have devastated trading opportunities, which are the main source of income for Gaza. In other words, the narrow Gaza strip is a kind of Palestinian prison-camp in which there are no guards inside the camp.

Israel watches Gaza from the skies and through informers. From time to time - as in the past few days, when alongside infighting between Fatah and Hamas there have been rocket-attacks on the Israeli border-town of Sderot - Israeli forces invade or shell houses. Israel has declared buffer-zones along the border no-go areas, and in them has destroyed houses, uprooted orchards and made land unusable.

Both sides always claim that what they do is retaliation. But the Israeli response is often disproportionate. For example, in response to the abduction of Corporal Gilad Shalit on 24 June 2006, Israel four days later bombed and destroyed the Gaza power plant. The lack of electricity meant a significant decline in the level of medical services provided by clinics and hospitals in the strip. The urban population received two-to-three hours of water a day; the sewage system was on the verge of collapse; everyone in Gaza was punished for the behaviour of one group of militants.

The occupation is compounded by the lack of internal security. Indeed, polls show that this is the main security concern [15] of most people living in Gaza. The different official security forces are competing for political power rather than trying to maintain law and order. At the same time, attempts by different sides, supported by outside patrons, to boost official and informal security forces have squeezed one of the main instruments of law and order - the

Palestinian civil police. In the vacuum created by the absence of law and order are political factions, criminal gangs and armed families. The latter may consist of tens of thousands of people, using their weapons as a source of income, through protection, or kidnapping or hostage-taking, or merely to ensure the survival of the family.

Gaza is much poorer than the West Bank, with a per-capita income (some \$700 per year) at about half. Three quarters of the 1.4 million population of Gaza are refugees. Of these, some 500,000 are living in camps, where the population density (according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East [UNRWA]) is the highest in the world. The last few years have witnessed a decline in manufacturing and construction and a dramatic deterioration of public services, especially education and health. Indeed, the World Bank and the IMF estimate [16] that in the first three quarters of 2006 alone there was a decline of 8%-10% in per-capita GDP in the West Bank and Gaza as a whole (with a steeper decline in Gaza). In addition to the loss of trade, there has been a huge reduction in the number of Palestinians working in Israel; at least half the fall in GDP is attributed to restrictions on movement.

Europe's responsibility

The quartet is responsible for high-level negotiations about the political future of Israel and Palestine. It operates within a top-down geopolitical framework laid down in the so-called "roadmap", initiated by the United States, in which the notion of a "global war on terror" is central. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is viewed through this prism. The biggest problem is considered to be terrorist actions, i.e. violence by non-state actors. Rockets and suicide-bombers are regarded as the primary impediment to peace and the occupation is treated primarily as a method of ensuring Israel's security.

This explains why, after the election of Hamas, a boycott was imposed on the Palestinian authority. Despite the fact that the international community had called for elections, and that outside observers certified the elections as free and fair, the US announced that it would blacklist any bank doing business with the Palestinian Authority, which has restricted funds paid into the Arab League bank account by Arab donors. The European Union and the US halted the flow of direct aid to the authority, and Israel withheld some \$50-\$60 million collected in taxes and duties on its behalf. The quartet imposed three conditions on the new government: non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations including the roadmap.

In these conditions, the role of the European Union is potentially crucial. The European Union is the largest aid donor in Palestine and plays an active role through missions like EU-BAM (the Rafah monitors) or EU-COPPS (police training). At the political level, however, it is very weak because it is constrained by its own internal structure and the difficulty of reaching agreement among member-states.

This has constrained its ability to improve the situation in Gaza. The Rafah monitors, for example, are paralysed by Israeli decisions to keep the crossing closed for most of the time. At present they are living in temporary headquarters in Ashkelon in Israel; the military compound constructed for them in Rafah lies empty. Indirect payments by the EU civil servants and social security beneficiaries undermines the authority of the Palestinian Authority, While EU-COPPS is hamstrung by the boycott. Meanwhile the Americans are arming the presidential guard and Iran and Syria are arming the special executive force, established by Hamas, to counter the Fatah-dominated security forces.

There are five things the EU could do to encourage progress - which can be understood as closing the gap between a state perspective and a human perspective:

- play a more active and proactive role in the quartet and in the US-sponsored bi-weekly meetings between the two bodies. The EU could, for example, press for a broadening

of discussions to human-security concerns and then also to the so-called "destination map", where the final status of a two-state solution will appear

- apply the Rafah model (that is, finding ways to ease restrictions on Palestinians while recognising legitimate Israel security concerns) in a more serious way. Comparable improvements in the human-security situations may be possible in northern Gaza (where an international presence, perhaps on the model of Unifil in Lebanon, could protect the local population from Israeli incursions while taking measures to prevent rocket attacks) and in Nablus and other main Palestinian cities (where an international security presence could prevent Israeli incursions while providing an enabling environment for internal security)
- give primacy to the establishment of a legitimate political authority in Palestine. This would mean recognising the new government implicitly or explicitly and talking to the government as a whole, not selectively to those members of the government of which they approve, while pressing for a mutual ceasefire and recognition between Israel and Palestine
- encourage a more bottom-up approach. Despite the fragmentation and brutalisation of Palestinian society, there is still an active intelligentsia and civil society whose members are more likely to press for democratisation and internal security
- focus more broadly on the regional dimension. Saudi Arabia played a critical role in the Mecca agreement, which led to the present government. The Arab League peace initiative could be a fruitful starting point to start serious discussions between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas on the so-called destination map.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is in essence a conflict between state security and human security. For most Israelis, state security, i.e. the delimitation of borders, the protection of territory and the preservation of the Jewish character of the state, is crucial. For most Palestinians, human security is the principal concern. Many of them are refugees, living in camps in the occupied territories or neighbouring countries. They are denied freedom of movement, humiliated at checkpoints, facing arbitrary arrest. Understandably, their dream is to return to their homes (to be distinguished from their land) and to live and die in peace. The bridging of the gap between these two realities is fundamental to progress towards a settlement. The European Union could - if it chooses - do much to achieve this historic and essential goal.

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