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Research Report

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Ending the Gaza Blockade – But How?

Muriel Asseburg

At the end of May 2010, the Gaza blockade – having been in force for some four years – finally received the appropriate international attention, albeit in a tragic way. The blockade has led to a disastrous situation for the local population, which has become entirely dependent on international aid and Hamas. At the same time, Israel has not succeeded in effectively weakening Hamas or even bringing about regime change by way of the blockade. Rather, Hamas has proved successful in entrenching its control. Moreover, Israel was neither able to free soldier Gilad Shalit – kidnapped in June 2006 – nor to stop arms transfers into the territory. The blockade has thus proven to be counterproductive. A mere relaxation of the blockade, as announced by Israel, or a (temporary) opening of the border crossings by Egypt will not remedy the situation. In order to make economic development possible and to liberate the Gaza Strip's population from the collective imprisonment it has been subjected to, its border crossings will need to be permanently opened and reliably managed in order to guarantee the steady movement of persons and goods. This will hardly be possible, however, without engaging the de-facto government in Gaza.

Israel imposed the blockade of the Gaza Strip after the June 2006 kidnapping of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and intensified it after Hamas seized power there in June 2007. The policy has brought about a next to complete collapse of the economy in the Strip and a humanitarian tragedy that continues to date. Even though the donor community pledged generous financial support (of some US\$4.5 billion) after the 2008/2009 Gaza War, neither any significant reconstruction nor a substantial improvement of the socio-economic situation have taken place. The main reason being that after the fighting stopped, Israel and

Egypt kept the crossings into the Gaza Strip predominantly closed; except for a minimum of humanitarian aid, no imports or exports were allowed through.

According to the United Nations, the levels of approved imports were far below the needed minimum. Israel has composed lists of goods – of quite an arbitrary and unreliable nature – that have been allowed to pass the border crossings. Not included were, for example, paper, books, and certain food items. In particular, Israel has prevented construction materials (especially cement and steel) from entering the Gaza Strip. Moreover, imports of capital

goods, spare parts and raw materials were allowed in only to minimal degrees, as were exports – leading to the breakdown of Gaza’s export-oriented economy.

To date, the availability of drinking water and electricity is severely limited. Power cuts of up to 12 hours a day occur frequently. Around 60 percent of the population suffer from acute shortages in food supplies. Hence, the Strip’s population has become ever more dependent on international emergency assistance and on the goods that enter Gaza via the tunnels from Egypt.

The blockade and the Hamas regime

The 2008/2009 war and the blockade were supposed to primarily target Hamas. Indeed, the Strip’s Hamas government did lose some of its popularity due to the war and the blockade. Nevertheless, Israel’s policy – implicitly backed by the Middle East Quartet’s “West Bank first” approach – has not worked out. Israel had calculated that the Gazans, collectively imprisoned and deprived of economic development, would jealously eye progress in the West Bank and then revolt against the Hamas government and depose it. Actually, the opposite happened: Since its assumption of power in June 2007, Hamas has managed to consolidate its control over Gaza’s territory, political institutions, and society. Also, by overseeing and taxing the tunnel trade, Hamas has extended its control over the local economy and acquired additional sources of revenue.

As a result, the aim of power consolidation has forced two other of Hamas’ objectives into the background: military “resistance” against Israel’s continued de-facto occupation and the reform agenda on which Hamas campaigned in the 2006 elections. Hamas – in its election and government programs, with its support of the February 2007 Mecca Agreement, and in statements of its leadership in Gaza and Damascus – has clarified that it is ready for a long-term truce with Israel based on

the 1967 borders. Since 2005 Hamas has proved time and again that it is in a position to adhere to a ceasefire – if it is also respected by the other side. Also, since assuming power in the Gaza Strip, Hamas has shown that it is capable of enforcing such a ceasefire among other militant groups in the Gaza Strip.

At the same time, governance in the Gaza Strip has – incidentally in parallel with political developments in the West Bank – become increasingly authoritarian. The political opposition has been all but completely silenced; the institutions (administration, schools, courts) have increasingly been staffed with loyal employees. In addition, Hamas has aimed at an intensified Islamization of legislation and society. This, however, has been a balancing act for Hamas. On the one hand, it has come under pressure from extremist groups that condemn Hamas’ rule as “unislamic.” On the other hand, the population of the Gaza Strip, even if quite conservative, is hardly inclined to let its few remaining personal freedoms be further curtailed.

Next to the Israeli blockade, it is also the policies of the Hamas government that have contributed to the increased isolation of Gaza’s population – from the West Bank and Jerusalem, from its Arab neighbors, and from the rest of the world. In reality, there is no realistic chance for the population to rid itself of Hamas’ rule. Rather, the regime is becoming ever more consolidated the longer the blockade lasts – it is therefore not without good reason that the Hamas minister of health referred to the blockade as a “gift.” At the same time, the division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank continues to widen – another stumbling block on the way to Palestinian statehood.

The blockade has therefore proved counterproductive in many respects. It has also not served Israel’s security interests as it has not ended arms smuggling via the tunnels from Egypt. After the May 2010 attack against the Gaza flotilla in the Eastern Mediterranean, this conclusion was

drawn, among others, by the EU, the Middle East Quartet (United States, EU, UN, Russia) and the Secretary-General of the United Nations. As a consequence, the international community urgently requested Israel to fundamentally change its policy toward the Gaza Strip and to lift the blockade so as to allow for unimpeded access of humanitarian aid, goods, and persons. However, how an end to the blockade should be realized has not been thought through and spelt out in detail.

No progress without ending the blockade

Under international pressure, the Israeli security cabinet decided on 20 June 2010 to relax the blockade, to increase operating hours at the crossings and the number of truck loads that are permitted to enter the Gaza Strip, and to introduce a “negative list” – i.e., a list of those goods that are not allowed to be imported. On 5 July 2010, the list was finally made public. Among the goods not to be imported are weapons and war materials as well as “dual-use” goods. The import of construction materials will be permitted only for projects approved by the Ramallah government and under international supervision. In addition, the Israeli government announced that it will facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations as well as the treatment of humanitarian entries and exits in the future. Still, Israel has made it clear that the blockade – and in particular the naval blockade – will remain in force.

The mere easing of the blockade or a temporary opening of the crossings to Egypt is no solution to the problem. For the answer is not to allow more humanitarian aid and consumer goods in. Rather, it is necessary to abolish the collective punishment against the population of the Gaza Strip and to liberate it from dependency and isolation, to enable comprehensive reconstruction, and to restart the local economy. For that to happen, though, a permanent and reliable opening of the

border crossings is required. The number of truckloads allowed to enter the Strip under the new policy remains far below the numbers foreseen in the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access. Also, the crossings need to be opened not only for construction materials, aid, and consumer goods, but also for raw materials, spare parts, and – most important – exports. For only if it is possible to export will it be worthwhile to invest in Gaza’s textile, furniture, agriculture, and food industries again. Only after the population is no longer dependent to such a large degree on emergency aid will it be possible to make much more effective use of international support. Moreover, effective measures against the flow of arms will only be possible when a regular border traffic is secured – and therefore the tunnel economy can be stopped without endangering the supply of provisions to the population and economic activities in the Gaza Strip.

The EU – with a special mandate as third party under the Agreement on Movement and Access – has already offered to contribute to a regular opening of border crossings by resuming its monitoring role at the Rafah border crossing (EUBAM Rafah). The mission was suspended after the Palestinian government of national unity failed and Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007. In addition, the EU should offer to play an oversight role at the personnel and commodities’ crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip. This is most relevant with regards to the Erez and Karni crossings. As the de-facto occupying power, not only does Israel have a special responsibility for the well-being of the population of the Gaza Strip. These crossings with Israel are also of primary importance for maintaining the land connection between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

In view of a substantial part of Gaza’s exports being oriented toward Europe, it would then also make sense to embark on the reconstruction of the local airport, which was destroyed during the Second Intifada. Moreover, Gaza’s seaport would

need to be considerably enlarged so that cargo ships can access it. In the medium term, the EU could then also assume an oversight function with regards to persons and goods that arrive and leave by ship or airplane in the Gaza Strip. To the contrary, deploying a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission to monitor Gaza's coastal waters and prevent arms smuggling by sea, as has been discussed in Brussels, makes little sense. The EU should engage to find ways for permanently lifting the blockade and supporting a stable border regime rather than taking on a role in enforcing the naval blockade.

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Inclusion of the de-facto government

The regular opening of the border crossings will not only have to be coordinated with Israel, Egypt, and the Ramallah government. It is indispensable to also include the Gaza government. For it is quite unrealistic to assume that Hamas would allow the Ramallah government to staff border crossings or carry out reconstruction projects without its consent. Also, an arrangement that only allows reconstruction by the United Nations or under its supervision will hardly lead to success. Although such an approach might help in improving the humanitarian situation, it would not remove the obstacles for private sector activities. It would also increase the friction in relations between the de-facto government and the United Nations, which are already under strain.

Certainly, Hamas will try to score points over bringing the blockade to an end. In the medium term, however, it will not benefit more from the opening of border crossings and from ending the peoples' isolation than from a continuation of the blockade. Rather than gradually eroding the ban on initiating contact with the Hamas movement – as has been the case over the last few years by quite a number of European politicians, some of them high-ranking – it would make sense to utilize such contact

more strategically. In this sense, contact with the de-facto government should aim concretely at finding solutions to the practical challenges linked to border management. Even though Hamas is on the EU's list of terrorist organizations, this does not make contact with Hamas illegal. The aim of such contact should be to hold Hamas to account and – together with the Ramallah government – to agree on concrete arrangements. Such contact can at first take place on a non-official level. In view of the challenges on the ground, a continuation of the isolation policy – as determined by the Middle East Quartet after the 2006 Palestinian elections – does not make sense. Anyhow, this policy has increasingly been considered as being a mistake by European public opinion and among political elites.

In the short term, there is little chances of Fatah and Hamas agreeing on a comprehensive power-sharing arrangement, despite renewed efforts at reconciliation being exerted after the incidents in the Eastern Mediterranean – too diverging are the interests of Fatah and Hamas, too diametrically opposed the positions of external actors (in particular Israel, the United States, and Iran). In this regard, Europeans will not be able to have much of an impact. Hence, also in this regard, it is advisable to first focus on the concrete challenges of opening and regulating the crossings. In order to reach a common Palestinian position, the EU can build on the demands of the governments in Ramallah and Gaza, which are – at least officially – in agreement with regards to ending the blockade completely. A common Palestinian position, however, will only be reached if the EU and the United States signal without ambiguity that they are willing to accept an arrangement that includes Hamas.