



BULLETIN

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The International Community and Gaza Strip Isolation

by Patrycja Sasnal

The three-year old isolation imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel has led to an economic and humanitarian crisis in the enclave and a strengthening of Hamas rule. Despite a flurry of reports by international organizations, it was only the Israeli attack on the so-called Freedom Flotilla that triggered widespread condemnation of the blockade. Under pressure from the international community (members of the Middle East Quartet), Israel eased constraints on the movement of goods into the enclave, in what is little more than an image-boosting exercise. The EU's diplomatic effort towards solving the problem has revealed a dispute over external-action competences, this time resolved in favor of the presidency.

Gaza Strip Isolation. Israel pulled back its troops from Gaza, inhabited by some 1.5 million Palestinians, back in 2005, but in the light of international law it still occupies the territory by controlling its land, air and sea border. When Hamas, seen by the U.S., the EU and Europe as a terrorist organization, took over power in Gaza in June 2007, the Israeli government imposed restrictions on the movement of goods and people (only rarely are departure permits issued) to and from the Gaza Strip.

The border blockade, effected in collaboration with Egypt (which closed the border crossing in Rafah), was aimed to weaken Hamas and force it to free Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, kept captive since 2006, and also to counter the shelling of Israeli territory from Gaza. But the actual outcome of the isolation is an opposition of what was sought, with Hamas strengthening its control of Gaza. At the same time, humanitarian aid to the territory has diminished, smuggling through a network of Egyptian-border tunnels has intensified, and the proportion of people living below poverty line has grown to some 70%—reflecting economic devastation, joblessness, and shortages of food, drinking water, electricity and fuel. An unlawful nature of the isolation and its consequences were many times highlighted by international organizations, with some of them—the International Committee of the Red Cross, B'Tselem, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch—describing the border blockage as “collective punishment” imposed on the civilian population. The isolation also prevented a reconstruction of Gaza's basic infrastructure in the wake of the Israeli Cast Lead operation at the turn of 2008-2009.

In its Resolution 1860 of January 2009, the UN Security Council called on all member states to intensify efforts towards easing the humanitarian crisis and opening the borders. It was later cited by the Middle East Quartet (EU, U.S., UN, Russia), which described conditions in the Gaza Strip as “unsustainable.” But Israel's major ally, the United States, did not exert any pressure to remove the blockade (other than lip service), because weakening Hamas was in keeping with the U.S. policy line. It was also in the interest of Egypt and the authorities of the Palestinian Autonomy, run by Hamas' rival, the Fatah party. A universal condemnation of Israeli actions and criticism of its policies only came in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla carrying humanitarian supplies for Gaza, an attack in which nine Turkish citizens were killed.

European Reaction. The European Union has frequently demanded that Israel open Gaza's border crossings, and—after the Cast Lead operation and the formation of Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government—the bloc made of that demand a condition for further development of relations with Israel. In 2009, the EU suspended a previously planned formal deepening of relations with Israel. After the Freedom Flotilla attack, the EU's Spanish presidency and High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton demanded a removal or easing of the blockade. And European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek, in a statement issued together with a group of MEPs

who had been in the Gaza Strip in April 2010, called on Ashton “to take steps within the Quartet to force Israel to lift the siege on the people of Gaza immediately and unconditionally.”

With Ashton refraining from firm engagement, and given the scarcity of her office’s resources, it was the Spanish presidency that took over the initiative in the diplomatic action to ease Gaza isolation. Supported by Portugal and Ireland, Spain’s Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos (previously, an EU envoy for the Middle Eastern peace process) proposed that the EU monitor the movement of goods from the enclave to Israel (at Karni, Kerem Shalom and other border crossing), Egypt (through reactivation of EUBAM Rafah mission) and Cyprus. The project was consulted with Palestinian Autonomy President Mahmud Abbas and the Obama administration. Similar initiatives were then taken by France and the United Kingdom. The office of high representative initially denied having consulted the Spanish initiative, but in a subsequent address to the European Parliament, Ashton proposed similar arrangements, adding a sea-mission option under the Common Security and Defense Policy.

Reactions from the U.S. and the Quartet. After the 31 May incident, the Obama administration also described Gaza isolation as “unsustainable” and the plight of its inhabitants as a “humanitarian tragedy.” Although in the UN forum the United States worked to ease a Security Council resolution whose original draft had been highly critical of Israel, it simultaneously took diplomatic action, in agreement with the Quartet’s envoy, Tony Blair, to weaken the Gaza Strip isolation. This may indicate a major change in Obama’s policy towards Gaza. Mediating in direct Israeli-Palestinian talks, the United States does realize that the isolation of Gaza and Hamas has the effect of preventing reconciliation among Palestinians, which is among conditions for the success of the peace process.

Particularly active in negotiations with Israel on easing the border blockade was Blair—probably a reflection of the need to reconcile the demands and proposals of the U.S. with those of the EU. Israel’s reaction to the EU’s ideas on border-crossing control was one of skepticism, although it promised to give them consideration.

Consequences and Conclusions. On 20 June, Israel eased the rules governing the movement of goods and people across Gaza Strip borders, introducing a list of banned articles (weapons and material that could be used in making weapons) which replaced the previous, oft-revised list of permitted goods. The move came primarily in response to pressure from the international community, especially the U.S. and the EU. Another factor was Israel’s desire to change its image, much tarnished as a result of the Netanyahu government’s successive political blunders in the aftermath of the Cast Lead offensive (the killing of Hamas member Mahmoud al-Mabhouh and the Freedom Flotilla attack, which discredited the Israeli security forces). The recent decision introducing new border control rules for the Gaza Strip is—in its present shape—just an exercise in Israel’s image burnishing internationally. It denotes neither a removal of the blockade nor a change in Israel’s policy towards Hamas. But it has sparked a debate on the subject within Israel, making possible a continuation of direct Israeli-Palestinian talks.

On a broader plan, the blockade of Gaza Strip borders reflects a deeper problem related to the status of Hamas, which is the Palestinian Autonomy’s second political force, alongside Fatah. The United States and the European Union shun contacts with that organization, while realizing the need for Palestinian reconciliation, i.e. for Hamas to join the Palestinian Autonomy government as a prerequisite for the success of the peace process. A debate on changing the policy towards that organization is currently underway in the EU, similar opinions can be heard in the U.S., while Russia, a Quartet member, already has contacts with Hamas. Not inconceivably, further changes in U.S. and EU policies towards Hamas may result in the latter’s more balanced attitude towards Israel.

As for the European Union, yet another confirmation can be noted of a polyphonic nature of its external action, which undermines the bloc’s impact. And the latest reaction to Gaza Strip isolation additionally demonstrates that when it comes to matters of priority importance for the state holding the presidency (such as the Middle East for Spain), that state is capable of taking over diplomatic initiative in rivalry with the office of high representative for foreign affairs and security policy.