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The Keys to the Gaza Strip

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The blockade of the Gaza Strip, labeled by the Palestinians as a “siege,” is ostensibly one of the fundamental reasons behind Hamas’ barrage of rockets that led to Operation Protective Edge. Yet while the Palestinians claim that Israel’s purpose in imposing the “siege” is to overpower Gaza economically, this charge has no basis in reality. Rather, the terrorism emanating from the Gaza Strip is the root cause of Gaza’s abject economic state, and until it is eradicated from the area, the prospects for economic growth and development are slim.

The economic prosperity of the Gaza Strip is a clear Israeli interest. Even after the disengagement in 2005, Israel tried to allow normal economic relations between the Gaza Strip with its neighbors. This was manifested both in a government decision and in the Agreement on Movement and Access of November 2005. However, the upsurge of terrorism in Gaza, including attacks on the border crossings, required heightened security measures, which in turn led to a reduction in the transport of goods to and from the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Hamas – for which anti-Israel terrorism is part and parcel of its existence – forged military and political alliances with Israel’s enemies, including Iran and Hizbollah, both of which, like Hamas, publicly declare their intention to destroy Israel. These circumstances necessarily preclude normal trade relations Israel and Gaza.

Since the implementation of the 1994 “Gaza and Jericho first” agreement, the Palestinians have violated every condition necessary for a proper economy in the Gaza Strip, including security (during its control of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority did not disarm either Hamas or Islamic Jihad), political stability, and proper governance. The economic situation deteriorated under Hamas’ rule, and the organization’s terrorist activities harmed foreign investment and damaged Gaza’s relations with Egypt. Hamas, like the PA before it, failed to manage the Gazan economy because of its focus on the confrontation with Israel and due to the rampant cronyism, which gave short shrift to the welfare of the population at large.

A Security Blockade is not a Siege

While the security blockade Israel imposes on the Gaza Strip has obvious economic implications, it is not an economic siege. Its purpose is security-defense, and it is not designed to overpower Hamas. At the same time, political factors also underlie the blockade. In 2007 Hamas canceled the agreements with Israel, expelled PA personnel from the border crossings, and maintained relations with hostile political and military elements; other practical factors are likewise involved. In all, it is hard to maintain viable commerce when a terrorist organization governs the area.

Despite the terrorism from Gaza, Israel still allows the movement of a range of goods and materials, while preventing or limiting the transit of dual-use goods, such as construction materials (which were, in fact, used to build the attack tunnels). Figures from the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories indicate that in the week preceding Operation Protective Edge, 1,366 trucks carrying 32,740 tons of goods – fruits and vegetables, beef and chicken, wheat and flour, rice, dairy products, construction materials, clothing, cooking gas, animal feed, and more – entered Gaza from Israel. From January 2014 to the start of the operation, some 536,000 tons of goods were ferried from Israel to Gaza via 22,700 truckloads. In addition, Israel is the Gaza Strip's major provider of electricity and also supplies it with water. Furthermore, Israel actually eased the shipping of goods to the Gaza Strip since the *Marmara* affair in 2010. For security reasons, exports from the Gaza Strip to Israel are minima, while most movement of people routinely occurs through the Rafah crossing to Egypt.

Israel does not encircle Gaza on all sides; the Gaza Strip shares a border with Egypt. However, Hamas is embroiled in a conflict with the Cairo regime because of the spillover of terrorist activity into Egypt. Indeed, the latest deterioration in the Gaza Strip's dire economic straits is mainly the result of Egyptian measures. Egypt closed the Rafah crossing and blocked most of the tunnels underneath its border, which led to a sharp reduction in the influx of building materials into the Gaza Strip, which in turn left thousands of Palestinian construction laborers unemployed. For its part, the PA refused to transfer salaries to Hamas in the framework of the Palestinian unity government as long as the governing institutions remained in Hamas hands.

A legal analysis based on international law carried out by the IDF Military Advocacy also supports the claim that Israel does not maintain an economic siege of the Gaza Strip, rather a blockade motivated by security concerns. The human rights group Gisha – the Legal Center for Freedom of Movement – has also expressed reservations about the use of the word “siege” and defines Israel's activity as a blockade, although it does call the limits on free movement created by the blockade a violation of Palestinian rights.

The Hamas Interest

The organization is keen on maintaining its control of the Gaza Strip as a base for its military and political struggle against Israel. While it is interested in the welfare of the population, it does not necessarily seek economic prosperity. Hamas is highly interested in perpetuating Palestinian refugeehood, which is supported by UNRWA, as a basis for future population transfers to Israel as part of its mission to establish an Islamic state in place of the Jewish state. Hamas' interest in the Palestinian unity government derived mostly from its own urgent needs – to finance the salaries of its operatives in the Gaza Strip and to continue developing the military wing.

Political Significance

Expanding the movement of goods from Israel and paying the salaries of Hamas activists are conditions that will allow the continued Hamas rule in the short and intermediate terms. Insofar as the situation in Gaza returns to what it was or improves, it will become increasingly difficult to realize the notion of “reconstruction for demilitarization,” a vested interest of Israel, the PA, Egypt, and other Arab states, and also supported by the United States and EU member nations. Hamas' continued rule of the Gaza Strip reduces the possibility of restoring the PA to full control there.

Recourse to the PA as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, particularly at the border crossings, will not solve Israel's security and political problems, and may even heighten them. It is in Israel's supreme interest to dismantle the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and rehabilitate the Palestinians currently there, and to endorse any international program toward economic prosperity. In the future, Israel will have an interest in a seaport in Gaza that is subject to security regulations in order to decrease Gaza's dependence on Israel. Finally, in any agreement, Israel must insist that the border crossings be considered Israeli sovereign territory and that movement through them be conditional on their not being used to compromise Israel's security.

