

Blockade on Gaza Strip: A Living Hell on Earth

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Abstract

Since the imposition of Israeli blockade on Gaza in 2007, a humanitarian crisis has emerged in the region. Gaza has turned into a vast 'Human Cage' on the eastern Mediterranean where 1.8 million human beings have been trapped, seems, they have no chance of escaping from their grave condition. Israeli occupation along with its prolonged and comprehensive blockade has been associated with numerous violations International Humanitarian Law. By restricting trade and people's movement, the blockade has ruined spectrum of civilians' basic rights and is halting the essential rehabilitation efforts. The blockade has led to extensive erosion of livelihoods, and a destruction of infrastructure and other essential social services. The repercussion for the civilian population is intense, pervasive and difficult. The blockade put big question mark on the responsibilities of Israel as an occupant to look after safety and well-being of civilians in Gaza. The International Community is of the view that the blockade amounts to a collective punishment of people in Gaza. On the other hand, Israel upholds that the blockade is lawful and is required to stop Hamas's hostile activities and rocket attacks on its cities and to check Hamas arms supply from abroad. However, because of this situation the common citizens of this thin strip find themselves caught between the fusillades of two uncompromising, hard-headed opponents and paying the excessive cost in their blood. At present, the issue has become very complex and intractable in the Arab world and can cause threats to its peace and security. In this crucial state, the International Community including the United Nations, the European Union and Organization of Islamic Conference seem unable to take effective steps to resolve this prolonged conflict.

Key Words: Blockade, Human cage, Gaza, Operation Cast Lead, Operation Pillar of Defence, Operation Protective Edge, Collective Punishment, International Community, Hamas, Fatah, Tunnel economy, Rafah crossing

Introduction

In International Law, blockades are defined as aggressive actions carried out in warfare, so that one state may officially blockade the enemy state simply if it is taking action in personal or collective self-defense, the customary requisition for setting off war, or if the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has declare the act essential to preserve global peace and has granted

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special authorization for imposing a blockade. "Some legal scholars, however, view the aged and restrictive laws governing blockades as being out of step with modern conflict. They argue that, under Article 51 of the U.N. Charter, countries have broad rights to interdict and inspect any ships that may be carrying weapons into their territory, and such actions should not be interpreted as formal acts of war" (Palmer, 2010). Whatever may be the situation, it is undeniable that when a party to an armed conflict imposes blockade on a country, it is the civilian population in the blockaded area that suffers the most. A blockade always have adverse effects on the supply to the civilian populace like food items, medicines, drinking water, fuel and other basic needs vital for its survival. "The practice of the two World Wars gives evidence that the blockading powers did not consider themselves to be obliged to provide for the free passage of relief consignments to the blockaded area, even if the civilian population was threatened by starvation" (Oxford Public International Law, 2015, "Blockade"). Inevitably, blockades inflict harm on blameless civilians, and in extreme cases they may violate International Humanitarian Law (IHL) which generally means deaths of innocent people, severe affliction and senseless devastation.

In 2007, when the *Hamas* government took control of the Gaza Strip, Israel has enforced an unparalleled blockade on Gaza Strip from land, sea and air. "Many consider Israel's blockade to be on very shaky legal ground. Its status in the West Bank and Gaza is widely viewed as a belligerent occupation, despite the 2005 disengagement. Belligerent occupation is different from a true state of war and may not confer the technical right to form a blockade" (Palmer, 2010). Despite, the blockade on Gaza by Israel is still very much in place and it has 'locked in' the Gazans in one of the dense lands on earth, causing a prolonged humanitarian disaster with severe outcomes. The blockade has had terrible impact on the well-being of Gazans and it is crippling the economy of Gaza, restricting the movement of Gazans and excessively limiting the delivery of essential goods like food, medicines, fuel, and other supplies. Over the years, the blockade has taken on many shapes and dimensions. It has been stiffened, eased and again stiffened, but the changes were typically made due to international pressure and have been mainly superficial.

The Israeli blockade which is reinforced by Egypt has diverse and complex repercussions especially from a humanitarian stand point. At the heart of the crisis is the deprivation of basic rights of Gazans and degradation in their living standards because of continuous economic decay which further enhance poverty and reduction of incomes; the steady decline in the condition of infrastructure and in the areas of healthcare, education, and sanitation. The Gaza Strip has also faced three wars in seven years; most recent hostility took

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place in 2014, which further intricate civilian populace sealed off with a malicious blockade and isolated them economically, politically and socially from the world. At the same time, this blockade which is faraway from the legal justification of attacking military targets, amounts to a collective punishment of the blocked population of Gaza which is an infringement of the most fundamental obligations to guarantee freedom of movement to Gazans, ensure normal civilian life and public and social order, and uphold basic human rights, as provided in Fourth Geneva Convention 1949 and IHL.

Background of the Issue

“The term ‘Gaza Strip’ dates from the last stages of the 1948 war between Israel and the Arabs. It received political validity in the 1949 Armistice Agreement between Israel and Egypt, when it was recognized as a separate entity under Egyptian supervision”(Efrat, 2006, p. 166).According to Karl Vick,“Gaza is a stepchild of history. It has been ruled by both Egypt and Israel and is beloved by neither, which is a problem for all” (Time, 2015,“The Problem of Gaza”).For almost twenty years Gaza remained under Egyptian control, until the Six Day War of 1967which brought it under the control of Israel. The war terminated the political existence of the Gaza Strip whenIsrael took over Gaza as an occupying power. For nearly four decades this settlement of Israel remained in place.“The process of setting Gaza apart was gradual. Until 1991, after the first *intifadeh*, or uprising, Palestinians could move freely between Gaza and West Bank. Starting in 1991, and accelerating following the signing of the first of the Oslo Accords in 1993, Israel began to restrict the movement of Palestinians in Gaza, requiring a difficult to obtain permit to travel or work inside Israel. Israel also began building a fence around Gaza.In 2000, when the far more violent second *intifadeh* began, Israel closed the gate and many people who had traveled daily work in Israel found themselves locked in the enclave”(Vick, 2012, p.20). These restrictive measures limited Gazans to work, to study and to seek medical assistance in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Further to this, “the Israeli Army committed series of aggressions to terror and scare the Palestinians, massive killing, genocide, bombing civilian cars, bombing houses, bombing compounds, white phosphorus bombs, and other practices, which caused thousands of causalities among the civilian uncombatants” (Shriteh, 2015, p. 292). Even the peace accord of Oslo could not save the Gazansby the genocidal practices of Israel.

The Israeli government made its ultimate decision regarding the future prospect of Gaza Strip and decided that an entire disengagement of Israel from the Gaza will be carried out by 2005.“In September 2005, Israel completed implementation of its Disengagement Plan from the Gaza Strip,

which included dismantling all the settlements there, evacuating the settlers to Israel and withdrawing the military. After plan was fully implemented, Israel issued an order declaring the end of its military rule in the Gaza Strip, indicating it was no longer responsible for the safety and well-being of the population in Gaza” (B'tselem, 2015, “Background on the Gaza Strip”). Although Israel declared its official withdrawal from Gaza, in practice it continued control over many aspects of life in Gaza.

In January 2006, the scenario changed as *Hamas* won the parliamentary elections and became a predominant force in domestic politics of Gaza after driving out secular *Fatah*. *Hamas's* involvement in politics sharpened its enmity with *Fatah*. *Hamas* was against the peace process with Israel in line with its pledge to fighting and it launched rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel. This situation flustered Israel and the Quartet, and they insisted *Hamas* to agree to all prior settlements, abandon all violent activities and accept Israel's right to exist. However, *Hamas* refused consequently and they imposed international sanctions on Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the Palestinian territories. With this Israel also limited the supply of food to Gaza. “The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet but not to make them die of hunger, Dov Weisglass, an Israeli official told the Israeli media” (Peterson, 2015, p. 205). Further to this, “through the three summer months of 2006, Israeli strikes killed 250 Palestinian civilians, many of them through artillery shelling from Israel. Despite, IHL strictly forbidden it, bridges, roads, electric stations, agricultural assets and other civilian infrastructure in Gaza were destroyed by Israel. Starting at this time, subsistence conditions began to be imposed on Gaza by Israel, including some of the following statistics: 70 percent of Gazans were unable to cover their daily food needs without assistance; only 30 percent of Gazans had regular income; most Gazans only had 6-8 hours of electricity per day, and six hours of water every two days”(CJPME, 2008, Factsheet). In this state, *Hamas* was not able to handle the financial and administrative issues in Gaza and could not get recognition from the European donor states and international organizations. In early 2007, *Hamas* and *Fatah* attempted to form a unitary setup in hope of getting international recognition of their rule and consequently alleviating the affliction enforced on the civilians of Gaza. However, the international community declined to ease its aid embargo. This situation led to internal strife and the severe clashes between *Hamas* and *Fatah* began.

Israel's Blockade on Gaza Strip

Following an internal military conflict between two factions, *Hamas* and *Fatah*, in Gaza Strip in June 2007, known as ‘Battle of Gaza’, *Hamas* took over the security apparatuses in Gaza by force. Consequently, the unitary government

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was dismantled. On the other hand, the Quartet voiced concern for the humanitarian situation in Gaza and finally the international sanctions were ended. However, this led to the beginning of a terrible crisis as Israel started punishing the Gazans in its dispute with *Hamas* administration by imposing a range of brutal measures. For example, the Security Cabinet of Israel declared Gaza a 'hostile entity' in September 2007 and stressed that because of their declaration, Israel is not legally bound to provide services to Gazans under international law. Thus a comprehensive blockade was imposed on Gaza. "Israeli officials described the closure as 'economic warfare' designed to exert pressure on the civilian population in the hope that this would have weakened the Gaza authorities" (Sampford, Zifcak, & Okur, 2015, p. 69). Under the blockade, following measures were taken by Israel:

- "The closure of *Karni*, the largest and best equipped commercial crossing with the exception of a conveyor belt used for the transfer of grains.
- Sweeping restrictions on the import of industrial, agricultural and construction materials.
- The suspension of almost all exports.
- A reduction in the amounts of industrial fuel (used to operate Gaza's sole power plant), benzene, diesel and cooking gas allowed entry.
- A general ban on the movement of Palestinians through *Erez*, the only passenger crossing to the West Bank, except for limited numbers of 'humanitarian cases'.
- The closure of the *Rafah* Crossing, directly controlled by Egypt, except for intermittent openings.
- A significant reduction in the fishing areas and farming land accessible to Palestinians.
- Restrictions on the transfer of cash to banks in Gaza" (UNOCHA occupied Palestinian Territory, 2009, p. 2).

Cycles of Violence

Since its so-called withdrawal from Gaza, "Israel has done all sorts of landscaping in Gaza" ranging from cruel blockade to three rounds of violence which included bombing civilian infrastructure, air strikes on missile launch crews and military incursions in populous areas. "What the rest of the world regards as war—Israeli officials prefer to call it an 'operation'—has become a chore, more than a little dangerous but not to be avoided" (Vick, 2012, p. 19) and the most pitiable dilemma is that there has always been a next time in the never ending aggressive policy of Israel when dealing with Gaza.

Operation Cast Lead

In 2008, Israeli army re-entered Gaza and launched a major military offensive, known as 'Operation Cast Lead' (OCL), to overthrow *Hamas* which was devastating and caused global concern. Israel officially justified this military offensive on the grounds of self-defense against increasing rocket attacks by *Hamas*. The operation appeared to be a systematic demolition of much of Gaza's infrastructure, buildings, homes, factories, shops, and farms and resulted in numerous deaths of Gazans. After the operation ended in 2009, the blockade was tightened by Israel. While briefing to the UNSC on the effects of Israel's offensive, Abu Zayad said, "Every Gazan projects a sense of having stared death in the face [...] every Gazan has a tale of profound grief to tell" (United Nations, 2015, "Every Gazan has a tale"). According to UN Fact Finding Mission, "the operation was a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population, radically diminish its local economic capacity both to work and to provide for itself, and to force upon it an ever increasing sense of dependency and vulnerability" (Horowitz et al., 2011, p. 327).

Israel's Attack in International Waters and Easing the Blockade

In May 2010, Israeli forces attacked in international waters on the humanitarian aid convoy of six ships, called the 'Gaza Freedom Flotilla' intended to break the inhuman blockade against Gaza. Following this incident, international calls against Israel and Egypt to ease their restrictions or lift the blockade were mounting. In view of international pressure, "on June 1, 2010, the Rafah border crossing from Egypt to Gaza has been partially opened. Egypt's foreign ministry has made it clear that the crossing will remain open mainly for people, not for aid, to go through" (Self Gutenberg, 2015, "Blockade of the Gaza Strip"). On the other side, Israel's security cabinet announced a package to ease restrictions. "The four main components of this package were: the relaxation of import restrictions; the gradual approval of building projects funded by certain international organizations; the expansion of the capacity of commercial crossings (Kerem Shalom and Karni conveyer belt); and the 'streamlining' of the permit policy regarding movement of people to and from Gaza. A follow-up announcement issued two weeks later, presented two lists of goods that were classified by Israel as 'dual civil-military use' items, the import of which would remain restricted. ... Under the new regime, any item not included in either of these lists would be allowed into Gaza, subject only to prior coordination with the crossings' authorities." (UNOCHA Occupied Palestinian Territory, 2011, p. 4). Despite the partial lifting of restrictions, the remaining measures were of crucial nature. Thus the relaxation in the blockade could not significantly improve the lives of Gazans which were

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ruined, and their resources which were exhausted during the three years of severe blockade. The situation further became worst when in 2013 after the coup d'état in Egypt its military destroyed the majority of tunnels used for smuggling armaments, food and additional supplies to Gaza. Yet another blow to Gazans was the closing of borders by Egyptian government following the *Rabba* Massacre.

Operation Pillar of Defence

The military assault of Israel on Gaza did not end with the 'Operation Cast Lead' and once again in mid November 2012 Israel launched another operation against Gaza strip known as 'Operation Pillar of Defense' (OPD) conducted completely from air. "Over the course of the eight days of the operation, the Israeli military attacked approximately 1,500 targets, including underground rocket launchers, arms-smuggling tunnels and weapons storage facilities. According to B'Tselem's figure for the operation, the Israeli military killed 167 Palestinians, including at least 87 who did not take part in the hostilities, 31 of whom were minors"(B'Tselem, 2013, p.3). After more than a week of fighting, Israel and *Hamas* concurred to establish a ceasefire in Gaza. Under the terms of the agreement, both parties agreed to halt all hostilities. Israel showed its willingness to ease all restrictions gradually, while *Hamas* committed to stop rocket attacks from Gaza against Israel. The truce came into effect, but Gaza's land blockade remained largely intact.

Operation Protective Edge

In 2014, 'Operation Protective Edge' (OPE), Israel's latest military escalation, has been initiated by Israel which is the third war on Gaza in less than six years and involved intense Israeli aerial and naval bombardment. Prior to this military offensive, Gaza was already suffering from a detrimental crisis in all facets of life. It was suffering from a terrible energy crisis, reduction in medical supplies and equipment, reduced access to clean water, the cessation of essential construction imports, increasing poverty and unemployment, and lack of access to lively hoods. This new operation further aggravated an already precarious condition, which is the outcome of a chronic crisis. The aim of Israel during this operation has been to destroy underground tunnels, and prevent *Hamas* from launching rockets from Gaza into Israel. The conflict de-escalated following a temporary ceasefire which entered into force in August 2014 yet it has not prevented further violence and even after this operation, "Israeli forces continue to fire on farmers and shepherds, and on agricultural lands in border areas in the Gaza Strip. There have been more than 400 incidents of border and naval fire by Israeli forces since the ceasefire until 31 March 2015"(AIDA, 2015, p. 13). This volatile situation considerably worsened

the humanitarian crisis and has contributed to more damage and heightened tension in Gaza.

Effects of Blockade

As the blockade enters its eighth year, socio-economic conditions of people in Gaza are worsening with every passing year. Following the recent violence, Gaza is facing a worst crisis of dysfunctional infrastructure like water treatment plants, sewerage system and health services severely disrupted and damaged. Due to the prolonged blockade, the civilians in Gaza Strip continue to suffer from the dire socio-economic and humanitarian effects. Many reports by different international organizations have been highlighting the effects of this blockade showing how the siege is not only a strategy of collective penalties on the people of Gaza, but also a punitive policy of demolishing Gaza. In 2012, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) observed, "the blockade on Gaza violates arrange of basic human rights, including their right to life, health, education, food, water, standard of living and adequate housing." The group explains further, "the government of Israel contends that the closure of the Gaza Strip forms part of a policy of legitimate 'economic warfare' against the authorities in Gaza. International law is unequivocal however: the closure constitutes a form of collective punishment of the entire civilian population of Gaza and is in clear violation of international humanitarian law" (Electronic Intifada, 2015, "Gaza Siege enters Six Year").

The humanitarian condition has worsened further as a result of the closing of the majority of tunnels between Egypt and Gaza in 2013 and more significantly by the 2014 military operation of Israel with serious consequences on an already vulnerable population. According to the figures provided in 2015, "More than 100,000 people (more than half of these children) have had their homes destroyed and are still displaced. Most of the water supply is unsafe to drink and there are power cuts of 12 hours a day. ... More than 40% of people in Gaza - 67% of youth - are now unemployed and 80% of people are in need of aid" (Oxfam International, 2015, "Crisis in Gaza"). In March 2015, the UN Humanitarian office reported, "the living conditions of nearly 2 million Palestinians residing in the Gaza Strip have been undermined by the enduring blockade against the enclave" (UN News Center, 2015 "Gaza: UN humanitarian arm"). Thus the policy of Israel is enormously affecting the daily lives of Gazans. Following are some of the effects of Israel's blockade and its systematic violence on Gaza.

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Economic Deterioration

As an urban economy Gaza is much dependent on trade and people's movement. In the course of its decade-long occupation, "Israel had imposed on Gaza a uniquely explosive regime of 'de-development' that, in the words of Sara Roy, deprived the native population of its most important economic resources—land, water, and labor—as well as the internal capacity and potential for developing those resources"(Finkelstein, 2010, pp. 15-16). Since 2007 the blockade added fuel to the fire and massively destroyed the economy of Gaza. The severe limitations on import and export have constantly deteriorated Gazan economy and have brought it to a state of collapse.

"Prior to 2007, Israel and the West Bank consumed more than 85 percent of Gaza's outgoing goods. Today, Gaza is allowed to export less than 2 percent of that amount"(AIDA, 2015, p. 10).Further to this, the blockade which is also shared by Egypt has destroyed the once-thriving tunnel economy in Gaza and caused rising poverty, unemployment and inflation together with food and fuel crisis."The blockade has reduced Gaza's GDP by 50%. The unemployment rate in Gaza during 2014 stood at 43% on average: the highest in the world. Youth unemployment exceeded 60%" (OCHA, 2015, "The Gaza Strip: The Humanitarian Impact of the Blockade").Currently, the economy of Gaza is mainly surviving because of international aid and the illicit tunnel trade. Thus the blockade remains the foremost reason for the destruction of Gaza's once strong vibrant economy.

Industrial Demise

Besides industries, agriculture, fishing, manufacturing and construction that have traditionally been a chief pillars of Gaza's economy, have affected from the closure and the restrictions on trade between West Bank and Gaza by Israel. The blockade has prevented many industries from marketing their goods abroad thus several factories and industries have closed, and others have had to cease operations. At present, "farmers cannot access 35 percent of their agricultural lands as these are located in the Access Restricted Area, at an annual cost of approximately \$50m to the economy in Gaza. Approximately 1,400 metric tons of catch are lost each year due to restrictions on the number of nautical miles that fisherman can go out to sea, costing the economy \$26m annually. Ninety-five percent of Gaza's 3,500 fishermen receive international aid"(AIDA, 2015, p. 10).This way the long standing blockade has impaired the capacity of majority of Gazans, dependent on farming and fishing industry to earn their living and has denied them essential food sources. Moreover, Gaza's 'construction industry', which is vital to its

economy and of great significance in the frequent post-war restoration efforts, has been seriously hampered because of broad limits on construction imports. “The limits on building materials mean that schools in Gaza are running on double or triple shifts, while 16,200 families are living with relatives, in shelters or in makeshift accommodation amid the rubble of their damaged or destroyed homes.”(Shelter Cluster Factsheet, 2015).

Caging the People

The restrictions on people’s movement imposed under the blockade have disturbing effects on the routine life, since it prevents Gazans from visiting family, seeking employment within Palestinian territory; restricts people’s access to vital services like healthcare and education in West Bank and abroad and cuts the people of Palestine off from each other. “Most of the Gazans who wish to escape the Gaza Strip will run up against the iron wall of Israel’s siege as the northern and eastern borders are controlled by a system of concrete walls and fences that are lined with intermittent pillboxes mounted with remote control machine guns, surveilled by high-tech cameras and patrolled by trigger-happy soldiers”(Mondoweiss, 2015, “Trapped in Gaza”). This complex condition has become further intricate by the restraints imposed by the Egypt at *Rafah* Crossing, the main crossing point used by Gazans after given Israel’s land blockade. In his recent visit to Gaza, Robert Serry, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process, noted that “the prolonged blockade against Gaza had rendered it more isolated than ever due to the many restrictions still in place at Israeli crossings and with the *Rafah* crossing practically closed” (UN News Center, 2015 “Gaza: UN humanitarian arm”). Thus the inhuman limitations on the movement have restricted the access of populace to livelihoods, disrupted routine life, and eroded the hopes of Gazans for a safe and prosperous future.

Deepening Health Crisis

After years of dire socio-economic situation due to Israel’s frequent attacks and its blockade, the condition of Gaza’s health sector has been strained. There is alack of sufficient infrastructure, medical supplies, operational equipments and training opportunities for medical practitioners. In March 2013 a report of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) noted, “the Gaza Strip suffers from a severe shortage of medicine, medical supplies and qualified medical professionals as a result of the blockade imposed by Israel and its allies”(Occupied Palestine, 2015, “OIC report says end of blockade”). The restrictions on movement by Israel have prohibited Gazan patients from travelling and getting medical treatment outside Gaza, and have barred medical staff from obtaining training. Currently, “Palestinian health

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facilities are overstretched. Service is frequently interrupted by power cuts and insufficient supplies of drugs and disposables. This further threatens the health of the population, which is already at increasing risk. Many, including children, suffer from long terms physical effects of war trauma, many with concomitant anxiety, distress and depression. Most health facilities in Gaza are unable to provide safe and adequate services and need to be rehabilitated or upgraded”(Gilbert, 2014, p. 3).

Lowering Level of Education

Due to Israel's ongoing blockade, the condition of education in Gaza has largely been in terrible situation. The blockade has strangled the education system by restricting the movement of people and items that are needed to meet the requirements of the students in Gaza. “Among the goods denied entry into the Gaza Strip were supplies and materials for classroom use — pencils, stationary and paper and ink to produce textbooks” (United Nations, 2008, p.3). It is because of severe restrictions of Israel that most of the students from Gaza do not have the basic and necessary learning requirements. Due to the recent military operation by Israel, more damage has been done to education sector. “Eight schools completely destroyed and 250 damaged during the conflict ... Three universities and colleges destroyed and another three severely damaged. Over 559,000 students affected by damaged schools and universities. Damage to education sector estimated at over \$27m”(AIDA, 2015, p. 8).Moreover, due to the ongoing blockade, the chances for Gazan youth to obtain higher education have been strictly restricted. The UN and many other agencies have shown their concerns regarding the future generation of Gaza which according to them might be less educated and possibly more radical since the siege of Israel has severely limited educational prospects and employment opportunities for them.

Shortage of Food

Since the imposition of blockade, in 2007, Israel has banned the access of numerous basic food commodities into Gaza, in accordance to a list that alters every now and then. In addition, Israel's punitive restrictions on import continue to choke Gaza's agriculture sector and straightly contribute to increasing food scarcity. Due to ease in restrictions announced in July 2010 by Israel, food products are somewhat available in Gazan markets; however these products are unattainable for several Gazan families due to increased poverty resulting from extensive unemployment, which is partly due to strict restrictions by Israel on movement of people, as well as inflation and economic distress.“The economic effects of the blockade are such that 80 per cent of the people in Gaza are dependent on food aid provided by the

international community”(Occupied Palestine, 2015, “OIC report says end of blockade”).According to a UN report 2012,“Many Gazans are food insecure, due primarily to a lack of economic means, rather than a shortage of food. More than half of the households in Gaza are either food insecure (44%) or vulnerable to food insecurity (16%) even when taking into account UN food distributions to almost 1.1 million people.”At present,“ in Gaza, food-insecurity levels remained at 57 per cent”(UNRWA, 2015, “Food Insecurity in Palestine”) and the majority of Gazans spend nearly all their income on food. Many families in Gaza are not able to acquire sufficient food and are barely capable of producing healthy food themselves. Therefore, malnutrition-related conditions are on the rise in Gaza due to inadequate diet. For as long as this severe siege of Israel continues, food scarcity in Gaza will remain high.

Massive Energy Crisis

Before the blockade, nearly all of Gaza’s industrial fuel and diesel and almost half of its electricity were provided by Israel. Due to the prolonged blockade, Gaza is facing irresistible deficiencies in the energy sector. This situation has become more critical since 2014 when Gaza’s only power plant was damaged by Israel’s airstrikes. “Despite having been repaired, it was recently forced to shut down as a result of a lack of funds to replenish fuel reserves, and now runs on half capacity on a system of eight hours on and eight hours off”(OCHA, 2015, “Humanitarian Update”).The energy crisis has become a main reason for the existing miserable state affecting arrange of vital services in Gaza and has caused far-reaching consequences, even to the point of endangering human lives. With a partial supply of electricity and fuel rates skyrocketing, house-holds have been forced to get other resources for carrying out their routine activities.“The energy crisis also posed increase dangers of occupational risks and home accidents due to poorly controlled use of private generators, open fire and other sources of energy for heating, cooking and lighting. Children are in particular vulnerable and cases of burns, scolding and electrical shocks are increasingly common”(Gilbert, 2014, p. 8). Israel’s on going embargo on importing spare parts for the electrical system causes further breakdowns and deficiencies.

Diminishing Water Supply and Sanitation

Due to the electricity crisis resulting from the blockade policy, water supply system and waste treatment systems are affected badly and have been deteriorating due to military intrusions and the limitations on imports of essential materials needed to make routine repairs. The sewage system is also broken down, much of it damaged during OCL and treatment plants are overloaded or need fuel. In 2012, the UN predicted in one of its reports that

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“Gaza’s Aquifer will become unusable as early as 2016” (UN Country Team in the occupied Palestinian territory, 2012, p.11). According to UNRWA report of 2014, “Fifty percent of the Gaza Strip’s population receive running water supply for six to eight hours once every four days only; 30 % receive water for six to eight hours once every three days only. Water desalination units have reduced their operation levels by approximately 40 % since the beginning of 2014” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 7). In February 2015, John Gatt-Rutter, an EU representative, noted, “The needs in Gaza for fresh water are huge. Nearly 95% of water in Gaza is considered unfit for human consumption. Enormous efforts are needed to ensure that Gazans can access fresh water. This is both a fundamental human right and an urgent humanitarian need for Gaza’s population.” (UNICEF, 2015, “EU and UNICEF mark completion”). So unless effective steps are taken as matter of urgency to deal with the water crisis, the problem will reach disaster situation.

Response of International Community

The UN and other organizations have expressed concerns towards the situation of Gazans and have long called on Israel to stop its brutal policy. Various states are abetting Israel’s punitive policies yet are not playing an assertive role as the conflict demands. In 2009, former US President Jimmy Carter said, “The responsibility for this terrible human rights crime lies in Jerusalem, Cairo, Washington, and throughout the international community. This abuse must cease; the crimes must be investigated; the walls must be brought down, and the basic right of freedom must come to you”(UNWRA, 2015, “Eemarks of President Jimmy Carter”). The blockade has been ongoing for eight years but the world states are clearly not doing enough to help Gazans out of their miseries. In a 2015 report, Tony Laurance declared, “The world is shutting its eyes and ears to the people of Gaza when they need it most. Reconstruction cannot happen without funds, but money alone will not be enough. With the blockade in place we are just reconstructing a life of misery, poverty and despair”(AIDA, 2015, p. 8).

United Nations

While the UNSC expresses profound regret over the loss of lives and injuries of Gazans from time to time, it has failed to condemn Israel’s cruel actions and policy in public and could not take any effective measure against Israel to end the blockade. In 2009, UNSC adopted resolution 1860 which expressed deep concern over the intense humanitarian crisis in Gaza. It called for “sustained delivery of humanitarian aid” and also urged world states “to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation”(UN Security Council, 6063rd Meeting,

Resolution 1860, SC/9567). However this resolution could put pressure as it was ignored by Israel.

Many other UN agencies and officials have recognized the inhuman conditions in Gaza while stressing on the effects of Israeli siege and have repeatedly called for a lift of the blockade. John Holmes, UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, noted, "The people of Gaza continued to exist in what was effectively a giant open-air prison, without normality of dignity"(United Nations, 2015, "Every Gazan has a tale").In 2008, the UN Human Rights Council called for an immediate international action against Israel. Their resolution demanded that "the occupying Power, Israel, lift immediately the siege it has imposed on the occupied Gaza Strip, restore continued supply of fuel, food and medicine and reopen the border crossings and to end its grave violation in Palestinian territory"(UN News Center, 2015, "Human Rights Council").In 2010, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon declared that "the blockade of Gaza is causing unacceptable suffering and that Gazan families were forced to live in unacceptable, unsustainable conditions."(United Nations, 2015, "Off-the-Cuff"). During the same year, Robert Serry, the UN special envoy for Middle East peace process, in his briefing to the SC said, "The situation in Gaza is unsustainable and the current policy is unacceptable and counter-productive, and requires a different, more positive strategy. The closure and blockade of the Gaza Strip needs to come to an end. There is now a welcome international consensus on Gaza"(Serry, 2010, p.3).

In 2014, Filippo Grandi, Commissioner General of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), said, "the siege on the Gaza Strip which has been imposed on the Gaza Strip for more than half a decade is considered the longest in history; longer than that of Sarajevo, Berlin and Leningrad."Insisting that plight of about 1.8 million people in the Strip also needs to be considered Grandi stated, "I think the world should not forget about the security of the people of Gaza ... Their security is worth the same as everybody else's security so we appeal to the humanitarian sense of all."He further said, "Israel's blockade is illegal and [it] must be lifted"(MEM, 2015, "UN official: Israeli blockade").

United States

In making this condition a nightmare for Gazans, Israel did not act alone, it had the backing of the global super-power and its closest ally, the U.S. Many of the arms used by the Israel in their brutal assault against Gaza were supplied by the U.S. Moreover, the U.S., which opposes the *Hamas* and officially supports the blockade, provided crucial diplomatic support, making

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sure that no resolution would come from the UNSC that could hamper the Israel's agenda. The U.S. never let SC resolutions condemning Israel to go forward. It was also abstained when the SC passed resolution 1860. However, in February 2010, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton criticized the humanitarian situation in Gaza and urged Israeli Minister of Defence Ehud Barak to ease the blockade. While talking about the Gaza flotilla raid, Clinton noted that Gaza's condition is "unsustainable and unacceptable"(Tribune, 2015, "UN adopts resolution"). In August 2014, Secretary of State, John Kerry said that "Palestinians in Gaza need to be able to ... move freely and share in the rest of the world, and to lead a life that is different from the one they have long suffered"(Human Rights Watch, 2015, "Gaza: Donors, UN should press Israel"). In his statement of 2014, President Obama called the situation in Palestine 'a tragedy' and affirmed the importance of searching ways to create peace between Gaza and Israel and to deliver humanitarian aid to Gazans without endangering Israel's security. However, any attempt of end this siege of Israel is pittance as long as the U.S. flings its diplomatic and economic support behind Israel's actions in Gaza.

United Kingdom (UK)

British governments have explicitly criticized the blockade of Gaza at many occasions. In June 2010, David Cameron during PM's Questions, stated, "Friends of Israel –and I count myself a friend of Israel –should be saying to the Israelis that the blockade actually strengthens Hamas's grip on the economy and on Gaza, and it's in their own interests to lift it and allow these vital supplies to get through. ... We should do everything we can through the UN, where resolution 1860 is absolutely clear about the need to end the blockade and to open up Gaza"(BBC, 2015, "Gaza flotilla: British activists released"). Then in July, Cameron called on Israel to ease its restrictions and said, "Humanitarian goods and people must flow in both directions. Gaza cannot and must not be allowed to remain a prison camp" (Hsiao & Lim, 2010, p. 325). During a speech to the House of Commons, William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, said that it was "the view of the British government, including the previous government, that restrictions on Gaza should be lifted, a view confirmed in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1860..."(GOV.UK, 2015, "Foreign Secretary's Statement"). Despite the UK claims that it is trying everything it can to end the Israeli blockade, so far, its efforts have failed to produce any fruitful result. This is partially because the government of UK has never pushed this issue as forcibly as they should, in part for fear of upsetting the powerful pro-Israeli lobby, both in UK parliament and in the US Congress, and partially because it has the idea that Israel may simply refuse to remove the blockade, as it has done on many occasions.

European Union (EU)

For years the EU had consistently called for an end to blockade and highlighted the fact that Gaza was an important part of a future Palestinian State. In 2010, EU foreign minister Micheál Martin after visiting Gaza concluded that the blockade is “inhumane and unacceptable” and called on the EU and other states to force Israel to remove the blockade. Following the 2010 meeting in Luxembourg, the EU called for “an immediate, sustained and unconditional opening of crossings for the flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons to and from Gaza”(ISS Analysis, 2010, p.3). Then again in a 2014 meeting on Middle East, the EU demanded a fundamental improvement in the living conditions of Gazans through the removal of blockade. In August 2014, the EU commission stated, “Israel needs to remove its blockade on Gaza and allow the besieged city to develop its sea port. It’s very important that the blockage of Gaza is lifted so that there can be movement of necessary goods, materials” (EU Observer, 2015, “EU commission calls on Israel”). Following the 2014 war, the EU had stepped up its humanitarian efforts and increased its contributions to UNRWA to help address urgent needs of Gazans. However, despite providing a consistent support to Gazans, the EU could not take any meaningful steps essential to make certain that the blockade is immediately and fully lifted and has failed to result in a tangible plan to end the blockade.

Organizations of Islamic Conference (OIC)

The OIC invariably condemn Israel for its policies and treatment of Gazans. In a statement of 2008, the OIC foreign ministers denounced the blockade as ‘a blatant violation of international law’. Furthermore, they held Israel liable for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, an aggravation that is the outcome of Israel’s unending violence, the closing of border crossings and the disruption of the flow of vital supplies. In 2010, the OIC Group stated that “the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip constitutes collective punishment on a massive scope and scale and is tantamount to a war crime against the Palestinian people. The group also reiterates its firm and unwavering demand for an immediate end to this inhuman Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip and the opening of all crossing points to allow for the freedom of movement of persons and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip and to allow for unfettered humanitarian access” (Gerstenfeld, 2010). OIC has stressed that for improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza, lifting the Israeli blockade is more important than the aid provided by international donors. In its first Islamic Ministerial Conference held in 2014, the OIC urged the world states, and the UNSC as well, to stand up to their obligations and put an end to the belligerence of Israel against the

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people of Gaza and see to it that Israel conform to the norms of international law and the provisions of IHL(OIC, 2014, p. 6).

Conclusion

The prolonged and entrenched nature of the Israeli occupation together with the eight year long comprehensive blockade have resulted in the long term denial of the most basic human rights of Gazans. The repeated shocks resulting from three major and destructive military assaults on Gaza have made the condition further critical. The reflection of Gaza's present situation is found in the description of an Israeli journalist, who wrote in 1993 that in Israeli local idiom "go to Gaza means go to hell" (Hass, 1996, p.9). These words have been written long before the lethal blockade imposed on Gaza, and prior to the rounds of savage hostilities that the world has witnessed in last eight years, making Gaza a 'Living Hell' on the earth in reality. While Israel maintains that the blockade is required for its security and protection of people. Indeed such policy of Israel is responsible for increasing human insecurity in Gaza and has contributed to exacerbate the crisis.

Presently, the blockade of Israel seems has increased manifold socio-economic vulnerability of Gazans which is clearly leading towards a coercive environment creating as heer scale of agony and pain in Gaza. The population is currently more vulnerable and situation may become more volatile if there would be any further rise in violence .Israel's responsibilities as an occupant power to provide well-being and security of Gazans as described in 4th Geneva Convention. Following are some recommendations regarding the issue that may be considered for the resolution of this prolonged confronting situation and for the realization of lasting security that may benefit Israelis as well as Gazans.

Recommendations

Humanitarian Aid and Rehabilitation

At present, the humanitarian situation in Gaza is getting bad to worse and humanitarian needs remain massive as the blockade is preventing states and humanitarian organizations from delivering effective aid. So, humanitarian supplies should be allowed to reach vulnerable people. Egypt should fulfill its responsibility as a neighboring state under IHL and facilitate the humanitarian support. Therefore, immediate and sufficient humanitarian aid is required and for that matter international donors should work to make holistic efforts for rehabilitation of Gaza. The UNSC and donors should compel both Israel and Egypt to permit the import of materials required for the repair of infrastructure

which have been partly or completely damaged or destroyed by Israeli air attacks. Moreover, rehabilitation and improvement must not be held captive to political advances.

Israel's Responsibility under International Law

While stick to its argument that after the execution of 'Disengagement Plan' in 2005 Israel is no longer responsible of the people of Gaza. However, International law imposes some compulsions on Israel, including the observance and protection of the basic rights of the people asit holds power on Gaza. These compulsions are mainly based on the scope of Israel's real control over key facets of the lives of Gazans that this occupying power holds even after its withdrawal and from nearly absolute reliance of Gaza's economy on Israel. Thus Israel should observe international law which prohibits Israel from enforcing punitive measures which are purely detrimental to the rights of the civilian people and for their survival. Certain provisions of IHL further bounds Israel in times of warfare in Gaza; 'distinction and proportionality' are the two core principles which firmly forbid liberate attacks on civilian population. Moreover, during military operations, special protection should be provided by Israel to certain vulnerable groups, including the children, the aged and disabled persons, the sick and the wounded. Israel should allow medical supplies and vital food items to reach Gaza without hindrances and facilitate medical personnel to help the sick and wounded. Additionally, the measures Israel takes for its legitimate national security should remain in accordance with the norms of international law.

Negotiations

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a complex political issue which should be solved through negotiations and killings and oppressions of innocent people should be stopped. Both sides should observe a durable and lasting ceasefire so that the bloodshed and suffering of people may come to an end. There is rigidity on both sides but unless both parties talk to each other, they may not be able to find solution. If not considered seriously, thousands of innocent civilians may expose to permanent insecurity and the never-ending terror of bombing, both in Gaza and Israel. Ultimately, all parties involved in this issue should find a permanent mean to stop this cycle of aggressions for the peace and future generations. It would take a long time but they have to start from somewhere. Both sides should remember that the way out of this brutal impasse, even if it is tough and difficult one, could soon appear less costly and demanding than the existing acceleration which is getting worst with every passing day. The hostility between Israel and *Hamas* is the key hurdle to solve the problem of Gazans. A win-win arrangement can be attainable in this

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deadly conflict but it demands large heartedness and rational decisions from both sides. Durable peace always requires a long-term solution; to reduce tension between them therefore both parties should solve their disputes through composite dialogues process which is possible only by undertaking effective 'Confidence Building Measures'(CBMs) through which both Israel and *Hamas* can peacefully resolve their long standing issues.

Flexible Approach by Hamas

The *Hamas* government should think rationally and review its rigid policy; and have to give up its missile attacks on Israeli civilians and check all violent activities because people of Israel also have right to live. It would not be easy as on the Palestinian side, there are some rigid leaders at the helm of affairs who want status quo and will prefer to fight Israel than a peaceful region. They may argue that according to the *Hamas* charter the eradication of the Jewish state (Israel) must be the first goal of all good Muslims and anything else including the well-being of the people of Gaza, is irrelevant. However, this approach should be reviewed as it is clearly not useful for the life and survival of Palestinians. The ordinary Palestinians who are living in dreadful isolation do not represent *Hamas* and are not combatants or rocket shooters so they have a right to live peacefully without being subjected to brutal Israeli blockade and attacks. Thus *Hamas* government should show some flexibility and adopt a policy of co-existence towards Israel for the sake of Gazans and peace in the region. They should learn to live in peaceful coexistence with Israel as they do not have any other possible choice. Lessons should be learned from the country like Egypt who eventually made peace with Israel through 'Camp David Accord'. Though it was disliked by the Arab World yet the peace between Egypt and Israel has clearly proved beneficial for the Egyptians in many respects. Similarly, after decades of international isolations, Iran finally has realized that its rigid policy towards West has not been proven in its national interests thus signed an agreement with the US. Nevertheless, continuation of a rigid and violent policy by *Hamas* while accepting the isolation of Gaza from the world caused by the blockade, is committing a political as well as economic suicide. Therefore sense should prevail and *Hamas* should accept Israel's right to exist in order to start an effective peace process which can bring a better life for Gazans.

Easing of Blockade

Keeping in mind the security concerns of Israel, instead of completely removing the blockade some CBMs could be taken to ease the restrictions. For example, in the beginning certain limited humanitarian exemptions can be provided like import of essential medicines and food items. Subsequently,

import of essential material for reconstruction and rehabilitation should also be permitted. This policy could only be workable if *Hamas* should show its willingness to soften its policy towards Israel. Lifting of the blockade of Gaza should be parallel to the ceasing of hostility by *Hamas*. Similarly, Israel must also understand that the imposed blockade against Gaza for the past eight years is not very successful to stabilize its southern border. For lasting security, Israel should not put the people of Gaza Strip into a situation of permanent insecurity they have the right to build their future. Unless the blockade is practically removed movement of people and goods are eased any lasting solution will be impossible to attain. Thus there will be no fundamental change in political and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. The ease of blockade is a precondition for any improvement in the situation and for the current widespread unemployment and extensive poverty. Later on, Israel should eventually lift the blockade and open the crossings into and out of Gaza for the long-term economic revival and rehabilitation of Gaza.

Role of International Community

Currently, the hopes for the solutions of Gaza problem are bleak and it seems that concerns of International Community are diminishing due to rigid stance of both parties. Nonetheless, the present critical situation of Gazans demands renewed and effective efforts of International Community for an enduring solution to this issue. The UN and the EU should use their good offices to deal with the root-cause of this prolonged issue and clear hindrances for the resumption of dialogue. They ought to propose a time-bound strategy to end the siege of Israel, which can be executed and monitored through permanent UN machinery. The UN should also pursue its resolutions calling for the deletion of unfair limitations on Gaza that Israel has largely ignored.

The IC should press Israel to end its restrictions which are not only affecting the rights of Gazans but are also denying many sovereign states the right to trade with Gaza. For this purpose, a mediation group comprising UK, China, France, Russia etc should compel US to use its influence on Israel for amending its policy towards Gaza. Same time the OIC should also play an active role in resolving this issue and convince *Hamas* to change its rigid policy towards Israel. In this regard a peace-making 'Contact Group' comprising some neutral and acceptable Islamic countries should be formed by OIC for persuading *Hamas* to follow a policy of flexibility and coexistence. Furthermore, a permanent observer mechanism should be made to monitor violations from either side. The OIC should also exert pressure on the UN to take urgent action to solve the issue. The UN should also provide diplomatic help to mediation groups for facilitating the conciliation process between the two rigid parties. Instead of blaming either party, the IC and UN should back

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the mediation efforts to put pressure on both the conflicting parties to make them flexible for a solution. Thus a win-win situation should be created for both Israel and *Hamas* to avoid zero sum game.

The IC must play an effective role to make certain that repeated demands by different states and humanitarian agencies to ease or end the blockade should be observed. In fact the solution lies with the IC having the collective efforts to make Israel to follow international norms. In this way the IC will also make it harder for *Hamas* to carry on war against Israel. In this regard OIC should also put pressure on *Hamas*.

Though policy of Israel against Gaza has stopped missile shelling of *Hamas* into its territory yet Israel has accumulated lots of criticism from various countries and been regarded follower of inhuman and irresponsible policies. Following the recent military operations and the continued series of aggression by Israel, the humanitarian situation in Gaza has become further critical. As the tragedy continues in Gaza, International Community feels the heat of this conflict and this is the time to put concerted, serious and sincere efforts for such offensive war games otherwise it would be too late. Unless the IC steps up its efforts and bring meaningful changes, the ongoing blockade would continue to destroy the lives of Gazans and worsen this human crisis.

It is essential that with everyone else in the world, Gazans should be given the full range of basic human rights, free of indiscriminate and extended suffering. They should be enabled to have peaceful lives; get essential social services; and have access to the globe beyond the boundaries of Gaza Strip. In short the Gazans should be freed from the inhuman Israeli restrictions so that they could enjoy healthy, productive and most importantly dignified lives in tranquility. The lives of Gazans should be improved through remedial steps by lifting of blockade that would usher human development and prosperity of Gaza and for adorable peace in the region.

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