

Ending the Gaza blockade

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Summary:

The blockade has proved counterproductive with regard to all the major policy aims of the international community. The Quartet powers should encourage Israel to think about a better way to safeguard its security interests

Proximity peace talks between Israel and the Ramallah based Palestinian Authority (PA) have started. However it is rather improbable that these talks will develop into a serious peace process leading to a two-state settlement in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, one thing is already clear: ending the blockade of the Gaza Strip is not a priority on Israel's agenda, or that of the PA or the international community.

This blockade creates an inhumane existence for Gazans and has proved counterproductive with regard to all major policy aims. Therefore – and independent from progress in the peace process – US and European efforts should be directed at attaining a fast and permanent opening of the border crossings to the Gaza Strip – as stipulated in the Agreement on Movement and Access negotiated in 2005 under the auspices of then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The almost complete blockade of the Gaza Strip – imposed by Israel following the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006 and further tightened after Hamas seized power in June 2007 – has destroyed the Strip's export-oriented economy and subjected the population to a next-to-complete dependency on international aid and the tunnel economy. It has also prevented any meaningful reconstruction occurring after the 2008/2009 war, in spite of some five billion US dollars pledged by the international community at the March 2009 Sharm al-Sheikh donor meeting.

The blockade has furthermore contributed to entrenching Hamas' control over the Strip's territory and population as Hamas controls and taxes the tunnel trade and as the population has become ever more isolated from Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem and from its Arab surroundings. Even if Hamas has lost popularity among Gazans, the latter are in no position to rid themselves of their rulers. Last but not least, the blockade has added to deepening the split between the two Palestinian entities and has thus increased the obstacles on the way to Palestinian statehood.

In stark contrast, the blockade has done nothing to secure the well-being or the release of Shalit or to effectively prevent arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip. It has therefore not served Israeli security interests. The blockade has been strongly criticized by the Europeans (as well as by the international community in general) and efforts have been made to overcome it. Thus, Germany has tried – without success –

to support Egyptian efforts at securing a prisoner deal between Israel and Hamas. But Europeans have been reluctant to forcefully pressure Israel to open Gaza's border crossings and allow reconstruction to finally take place and for economic development to pick up again.

A major reason for that reluctance has been that Europeans have had a hard time arguing with Israel, Egypt and the PA who have all been in support of the blockade (albeit to different degrees, due to different motives and in part in contradiction with their official stances) while at the same time upholding its isolation policy towards Hamas.

However, as the collective punishment of Gazans has proved counterproductive, US and European efforts should be directed at attaining a fast and permanent opening of the border crossings to the Strip. Europeans who prided themselves on contributing substantially to making Israeli withdrawal from Gaza a success story by deploying a European border assistance mission (EU BAM Rafah) should now contribute to ending the blockade and push for a renewed agreement to allow for the crossings to resume their full operation. This should not be made dependent on Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. And, while it will have to include contacts with Hamas on a technical level, it will hardly serve Hamas more than the current situation.

Europeans should therefore think creatively with their Quartet partners and Israel how to ensure Gaza's inclusion into the world economy, allow for reconstruction to take part and at the same time safeguard Israeli security interests better than today – this, however, will only be assured when regular imports and exports can resume, stopping the smuggling through the tunnels.

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