

Israel's power cuts to Gaza: Collective punishment with tacit US approval

Chris Marsden
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Israel's decision to begin cutting power to the Gaza Strip is a collective act of punishment that violates international law. It brings to a new stage the efforts made to starve the Palestinian population into submission since Israel imposed an economic embargo on Gaza after Hamas seized control in June from Fatah, now headed by the pro-Western President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak approved plans drawn up by the defence establishment on October 25. On Sunday, it was reported that the Israeli energy company Dor Alon had confirmed it had received instructions to begin reducing supplies.

Gaza's 1.4 million population uses about 200 megawatts of electricity, of which 120 are provided directly from Israel and 65 are produced at a local Palestinian plant that is itself dependent on Israeli fuel. This leaves only 17 megawatts that come from Egypt.

In the first phase, Israel will disrupt electricity to various areas in the strip. Israel's supplies to Gaza are routed through five electric lines, of which four deliver power to an army base in the area and cannot be shut down. The fifth line transmits power from Israel to Beit Hanun in eastern Gaza, which is expected to be worst hit by the plan.

Israel also supplies all of Gaza's fuel, including diesel, gasoline and natural gas, which will be limited even further than it is already.

On Saturday Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai said the courts had given final authorisation to the plan under which Israel is to "dramatically reduce"—by about two-thirds—the power it supplied to Gaza over the coming weeks. Initially power is to be cut every time that militants fire a rocket into Israel.

Vilnai described the plan as a "gradual disengagement from Gaza in matters to do with electricity." He made clear that Israel is intent on eventually cutting all power,

declaring with utmost cynicism a "hope that the Gazans will produce their own electricity and won't be dependent on us."

He justified the move by referring to Gaza as a "hostile entity," the term first employed to justify the plan to withdraw supplies in September. This term and references to "disengagement" are utilised by Israel to claim that it no longer has an obligation as the occupying power to supply utilities to the civilian population under international law.

But despite withdrawing its forces from Gaza two years ago, Israel controls its borders, airspace and territorial waters and is using this to strangle economic life on the coastal strip.

The Abbas-led Palestinian authority described Israel's decision as a "war crime" and "collective punishment against our people in the Gaza Strip." But its protestations were exposed as wholly insincere by the fact that two hours of discussions took place between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert over lunch the next day in preparation for the Bush administration's upcoming summit at Annapolis Maryland.

The PA is directly participating in the ongoing Israeli offensive against Hamas, but fears that so overt an attack on the entire Gazan population might lead to Fatah also losing control of an increasingly restive West Bank population.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat has appealed for international intervention by the Middle East quartet—the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia—to prevent Israel from cutting electricity and fuel supplies to Gaza. But there has been a deafening silence, particularly from Washington, which controls Israel's purse strings and could stop the action with little difficulty if it were not in tacit agreement with Tel Aviv. Fatah spokesmen were left to complain how the collective punishment of Gaza makes it difficult for them to sign an

agreement with Israel.

The pretext for Israel's actions has been provided by the Qassam rocket attacks fired by Palestinian militant groups from Gaza, of which an estimated 1,000 have been fired in the past four months.

However, Israel's response is neither legal, nor proportionate.

Qassam rockets are small, crude and unguided missiles that have been employed for years. They have killed a total 13 people and injured around 200—though one recently injured more than 70 Israeli soldiers. The Israeli Ministry of Defence has described Qassams as “more a psychological than physical threat.”

Israel has tried to talk up the threat of larger and more sophisticated Katyusha rockets, but only three have been said to have been found thus far.

The rockets are in fact only a somewhat pathetic response in a glaringly unequal military contest.” At least 4,274 Palestinians have been killed since September 29, 2000, compared with 1,024 Israelis. Less than a third of Israeli casualties have been civilians, compared with the 2,023 Palestinian non-combatants killed.

This discrepancy has widened as Israel has tightened its grip on the Occupied Territories. A total of 660 Palestinians were killed during 2006, including 141 minors, compared with the 17 Israeli civilians and six members of the security forces killed by the Palestinians. In Gaza alone, the Israeli military attack in June last year killed 405 Palestinians, including 88 minors, with a total of 205 being non-combatants. Israel also destroyed over 300 Palestinian homes.

Even these appalling figures do not take into account the impact on life expectancy, especially for babies, children, the sick and the aged, of Israel's siege.

Israel's sealing of Gaza's borders to nearly everything but humanitarian food and medicines has all but destroyed what little remained of its economy.

Even before this blockade, Israel illegally withheld the tax and customs it collects on behalf of the PA, which makes up approximately 50 percent of its revenues. It has since released funds only to the Fatah-dominated West Bank. The Quartet—the US, EU, Russia and the UN—also cut off all but humanitarian assistance to Gaza.

Fully 51 percent of Palestinians now depend on food assistance and malnutrition is the main public health problem. In addition, 64 percent of Palestinians fell below the poverty line in 2006, with around 80 percent of Gazans now living on less than \$2 a day and dependent on UN food parcels.

According to a World Bank report last month, 90 percent of Gaza's industrial production has ceased and agricultural output has fallen by 50 percent in 2007.

Israel allows almost no finished goods or produce to enter or leave the Gaza Strip. Almost all building has stopped, including \$90 million worth of projects allocated by the UN for homes, schools and sewage treatment. Unemployment is over 75 percent. Gaza's winter food produce—such as strawberries and cherry tomatoes—is expected to rot. The costs of basic commodities have risen by 30 percent over the last six months. The price of 50 kilogramme sacks of flour has risen by 80 percent.

Israel is arbitrarily blocking, delaying and harassing people with emergency medical problems who need to leave the Gaza Strip, as well as students wanting to take up university courses overseas. The UN states that an average of just five patients per day now enters Israel from Gaza, compared with 40 per day in July. Gaza's own medical facilities face a shortage of drugs and functioning laboratory equipment.

Walter Fust, head of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), described the situation in Gaza as “untenable” and “shocking” at the end of a recent four-day visit. He said the food situation had deteriorated “considerably,” with 30 percent of children undernourished, and described the situation in hospitals and health centres as precarious.

Top Israeli military figures have called for a full-scale incursion into Gaza, but the government has held off in an effort to seen as going through the motions of seeking peace in the run-up to the US-backed Middle East conference in Annapolis, Maryland scheduled for later this month.

Nevertheless, repeated raids have taken place across Gaza's border, including one on October 17 and another larger incursion on October 25—the day Barak approved the power cuts—near Khan Younis in the southeast. Bulldozers levelled agricultural lands for one kilometre in al-Fukhari neighbourhood to east of Khan Younis and soldiers raided several houses and made arrests.



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