

Gaza report finds major powers complicit in Israel's collective punishment

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To mark one year since Israel's military assault on Gaza, a report by 16 aid agencies has strongly condemned the major powers for failing to end Israel's illegal and inhumane blockade of Gaza.

While the report holds Israel primarily responsible for the appalling conditions under which the Palestinian people are living (see "Aid report details social devastation in Gaza"), it holds the European Union, the United States, Russia and the United Nations (known collectively as the Quartet) responsible for allowing the situation to continue.

Jeremy Hobbs, Oxfam's director and one of the sponsors of the report, *Failing Gaza: no rebuilding, no recovery, no more excuses*, said, "World powers have failed. They have betrayed Gaza's ordinary citizens."

After years of closing Gaza's borders and restricting the movement of people and goods, Israel began blockading Gaza in June 2007. This was after Hamas, which won the parliamentary elections against Fatah in January 2006, took control of Gaza in order to pre-empt a Fatah coup backed by Israel, the US, Jordan and Egypt.

Tel Aviv allowed in only the most basic foodstuffs and some medical provisions. It justified the blockade as its response to Qassem rockets fired into Israel. These are crude, home-made rockets that, since 2000, have killed 13 Israeli civilians, including three children. Defence Minister Ehud Barak said, "Our aim right now is the weakening of Hamas and the strengthening of [Palestinian Authority prime minister] Salam Fayyad".

At the end of last December, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, a 22-day aerial bombardment of Gaza and a large-scale ground invasion of its tanks killing 1,393 Palestinians, 347 of them children, and pulverising much of Gaza's civilian and public infrastructure.

Not only has it been impossible to repair the damage, but even the rubble remains, due to Israel's refusal to

allow in bulldozers, building materials and equipment. Unable to rebuild their lives, the overwhelming majority of Gazans are living in conditions of utter poverty, penned in and denied access to the basic needs of everyday life.

As the report points out, "This not an accident: this is a matter of policy."

Israel's blockade, backed by Washington, is a collective punishment of the entire population and is prohibited under international law. It is in flagrant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1860, passed at the height of the hostilities earlier this year, calling for unimpeded access for humanitarian aid and the sustained reopening of the crossings. It also breaches the Agreement on Movement and Access signed between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2005.

The aid agencies focus their attention on the EU, in part because most of them are from Europe, but also because the EU funds humanitarian and development programmes in the West Bank and Gaza and is Israel's largest export market.

The report notes that Europe's sole action has been to send letters to Israel calling for humanitarian access to Gaza. But this is neither an accident, nor a new departure.

The EU supported the fraudulent Oslo Accords that led to the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, making a supposed "two state solution" impossible. It provided a multibillion dollar grant to train the new Palestinian police force that would police the Palestinians, suppress all opposition to Israel and work with Israel to secure its defence.

After Hamas's election victory in January 2006, the European powers bowed to pressure from Tel Aviv and Washington that designates Hamas as a terrorist organisation and refused to have any contact with Hamas. The European observers charged with monitoring Gaza's border with Egypt at Rafah pulled out in June 2007 when Hamas took control of Gaza, leaving Egypt,

Washington's client state, to seal the border.

Despite calling for a new approach to Gaza in March 2008, the Quartet did nothing and allowed the blockade to remain in force—even though Hamas stopped firing rockets from June to November 2008, when Israel broke the ceasefire.

The European powers did not rebut the lies put out by Israel that it was Hamas that had broken the ceasefire. Instead, they provided crucial cover for the blitzkrieg by justifying Israel's war crimes as legitimate acts of self-defence. They worked to secure a cease fire acceptable to Washington and Tel Aviv that would involve Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak policing Gaza.

The European powers did not insist that the UN take any sanctions against Israel for refusing to implement resolution 1860. It did not seek compensation from Israel for damage done to EU-funded projects during Operation Cast Lead, valued on the basis of only partial information at €12.35 million, nor for the €56 million in damage since 2000.

The European powers went along with the US when Washington insisted that the \$5.2 billion pledged in aid at an international conference in Sharm el-Sheikh last March—mostly old money pledged at the Paris donors' conference in December 2007 and never honoured—be channelled via its stooge, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank.

They did nothing to ensure that the aid could be delivered when Israel refused to let reconstruction goods and materials into Gaza.

While opposing the blockade, the EU has bowed to pressure from the US, Britain and others and refused to call it illegal collective punishment. Both Spain and Belgium have pulled back from prosecuting Israeli leaders in relation to other war crimes, under pressure from Israel and the US. When British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and German Chancellor Angela Merkel met Israeli Premier Binyamin Netanyahu, the press statements said nothing about Gaza or the blockade.

Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Spain and Poland either opposed the Goldstone report, which provided evidence of Israel's war crimes and crimes against humanity, abstained or absented themselves when it was considered by the UN's General Assembly in November.

Goldstone called for states to use their powers under "universal jurisdiction" to bring Israel to court, the European powers have refused to do so. The British government prostrated itself before Israel when some Palestinians sought an arrest warrant for Tzipi Livni,

Israeli foreign secretary and leader of Kadima party at the time of the Gaza onslaught, calling for "universal jurisdiction" to be revoked.

The record shows the EU has no more interest than the US in challenging Israel to reach a settlement that will secure the legitimate social and democratic aspirations of the peoples of the region. Israel is as much the tool of the Europeans in pursuit of their strategic interests in this resource rich region as it is of the US.

The EU's political and economic ties with Israel have strengthened over the past few years. Israel has become one the EU's biggest trading partners in the EuroMed area. In 2007, EU exports to Israel totalled €14 billion and its imports from Israel €11.3 billion, making the EU second only to the US as the destination for Israel's exports. Within the EU, Germany became Israel's major financial backer.

Earlier this month, the EU backed down from its earlier proposal, drafted by Sweden, to back a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem, which Israel illegally annexed days after the 1967 war, in response to opposition from Israel. The new version of the text omits any mention of Jerusalem as the capital of any future Palestinian state.

Javier Solana, who stepped down as the EU's foreign affairs leader last November, recently remarked that Israel is an EU member state in all but name. Just last month, the EU and Israel signed an agreement on agriculture whereby 80 percent of Israel's horticultural goods and 95 percent of its processed foods can be exported to the EU without incurring import duties.

Europol, the EU's police office, has also finalised an agreement with Israel, still to be rubber-stamped by the EU's member states, despite numerous reports from human rights organisations that detainees in Israel are routinely tortured, and despite rules in force since 1998 that oblige Europol not to process evidence obtained by cruel methods.



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