

Israeli electricity shutoff deepens social crisis in Gaza

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Palestinians in Gaza have suffered a catastrophic decline in living conditions, largely ignored by the world's media, because of Israel's drastic cut in June of the territory's already precarious supply of electricity.

The 2 million Palestinians living in Gaza are now able to access electricity for as little as two hours a day, and this during the sweltering heat and humidity of an East Mediterranean summer.

Last week, United Nations General Secretary Antonio Guterres, speaking after a three day visit to Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, described it as "one of the most dramatic humanitarian crises" he had ever seen. He called for the opening of Gaza's borders with Israel and Egypt.

Guterres made no mention of Israel's responsibility for the current disaster. However, the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem has been more forthright, saying Israel has condemned the people of Gaza to live "in abject poverty under practically inhuman conditions unparalleled in the modern world."

B'Tselem declared that failure to provide power to the Gazan population is "primarily a direct result of official Israeli policy." It describes how Israel "prevents the repair and restoration of [Gaza's only] power station it bombed in 2006, keeping it from operating at full capacity." It added that Israel "compels Gaza residents to purchase Israeli fuel exclusively, and to do so for the same price paid inside Israel," despite immense disparities between the two economies, and "delays or prevents repairs to the power grid and imposes restrictions on bringing spare parts into Gaza."

Gaza relies almost entirely on Israel for its electricity supply—either directly via power lines or through the supply of diesel to run its power station. A small amount of electricity comes from Egypt. The Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) under President Mahmoud Abbas, not Hamas-ruled Gaza, is responsible for paying for the supplies.

The already terrible situation was exacerbated in April, when the PA, in an attempt to pressure Hamas into relinquishing its control of Gaza and "reconciling" with the PA, suspended electricity payments to Israel. It also reinstated unaffordable taxes on diesel destined for Gaza, which had been suspended following mass protests in January, forcing the power plant to shut down.

By May, the International Committee of the Red Cross was already warning that Gaza was on the brink of "systemic collapse" as operating surgeries, as well as water and sanitation systems, ceased to function.

On June 19, Israel cut its electricity supply via its power lines to Gaza by more than half, ostensibly at the request of the PA, which is itself desperately short of cash.

These measures, on top of PA cuts to civil servants' salaries and funding for hospitals and clinics in Gaza, have only served to increase the hostility of the Palestinian people towards Abbas. By nakedly siding with Israel against Hamas at the expense of the Palestinians in Gaza, Abbas has lost all semblance of political legitimacy. At the same time, the PA's security apparatus is widely hated for its increasingly draconian actions, including the shutting down of 11 web sites with alleged links to Hamas or multimillionaire Muhammad Dahlan, a longstanding rival to Abbas.

The combined measures of Israel and Abbas have reduced Gaza to 19th century conditions. With only a couple of hours of water being supplied a day due to power cuts, people are forced to store it or buy water from private suppliers at 25 times the normal price.

Without electricity, sewage, water treatment and desalination plants are unable to function effectively. Much of the coastline is now heavily contaminated. The pollution claimed its first victim last July, when a five-year-old boy died after swimming in the sea.

Basic health care services, including sterilisation and cleaning, have become almost inaccessible, leading to

soaring rates of infection. Diagnostic services have been curtailed and sensitive equipment such as MRI machines have been damaged.

Medical supplies have become scarce, with the Ministry of Health reporting it had less than a month's supply of essential medicines, including cancer and cystic fibrosis drugs, and medical disposables.

While the UN forecast in 2012 that Gaza would become "unliveable" by 2020, another report published in July stated that the deterioration had accelerated "further and faster" than anticipated. It drew attention to Israel's refusal to allow construction material and equipment into Gaza to complete the necessary reconstruction, after Israel's massive bombardment of Gaza's basic infrastructure and housing in 2014.

Even before this latest crisis, the situation was dire. According to a recent report by the European Union-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, more than 65 percent of Gazans live in poverty, 72 percent are food-insecure, and 80 percent are dependent on international aid, while unemployment reached 43 percent at the end of 2016.

This catastrophic situation flows inexorably from the deliberate and criminal actions on the part of Israel, which as the occupying power is fully responsible under international law for the welfare of Gaza's population. This flagrant breach of international law is passed over in silence by the imperialist powers, the US and the European Union. Not only is this an implicit endorsement of Israel's ever tightening blockade of Gaza but an advance warning that they too will carry out similar measures against their enemies.

If Abbas retained any lingering hopes that his subservience to Washington, Israel's paymaster, would bring about either talks on a Palestinian statelet or an end to further Israeli settlements, the recent visit to the Middle East of US President Donald Trump's adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner should have put paid to such fantasies. Kushner was reported to have said in off-the-record comments that there may not be a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Last week, Trump's ambassador to Israel, David Friedman—a long-time supporter of Zionist settlements in the West Bank—referred to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories as only "an alleged occupation."

Israel has been aided and abetted by the regional elites, which have refused to lift a finger to defend the Palestinians in Gaza against Israel's murderous assaults in 2008-2009, 2012 and 2014, and in the ongoing

blockade. Egypt too has largely kept its border with Gaza closed, particularly following the seizure of power in 2013 by General Abdul Fattah el-Sissi, who viewed Hamas as an offshoot of the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood.

Nevertheless, in a marked policy shift, Hamas has now managed to secure some fuel supplies from el-Sissi's military junta as it makes a desperate attempt to break the ever-tightening siege imposed by Israel and Abbas.

Hamas has also apparently reconciled itself with Dahlan, a former Fatah member widely viewed as an Israeli agent, who fought a civil war with Hamas in 2006. Dahlan was expelled from Fatah by Abbas in 2011, alleging his involvement in corruption and the murder of PLO chairman Yassir Arafat. Israel's preferred candidate to succeed the 82-year old Abbas, he is close to both the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where he lives in self-imposed exile, and Egypt, which brokered the rapprochement.

Earlier this year, Hamas agreed a new charter, stressing its role as a national liberation movement, omitting any mention of the Muslim Brotherhood and effectively repudiating its links with the organisation. Hamas's officials also left Qatar last June, after the Saudi-led alliance imposed its embargo on the country, accusing it of supporting terrorism.

There have been indications that Egypt may reopen Gaza's Rafah crossing into the Sinai Peninsula, where Egypt has been fighting Islamic State, if Dahlan's men oversee the crossing and create a security buffer zone.

There are also pledges from the UAE to fund humanitarian projects in Gaza worth \$15 million a month. The UAE now seems set to take over Qatar's role as Hamas's patron, in return for Gaza's acceptance of some leadership role for Dahlan.



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