



Gaza Policy Forum

Summary

September, 2020

Introduction

“Spend your time finding solutions, not talking about why it can’t be done. It’s always impossible until it’s done.”

*UN Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Humanitarian Coordinator,
Jamie McGoldrick*

All too often, Gaza is seen from outside through the prism of conflict and humanitarian needs, rather than as home to two million people entitled to dignity, safety, human rights, and sustainable development. In September, Gisha convened the second Gaza Policy Forum, gathering 115 Israeli, Palestinian and foreign stakeholders to discuss the situation in Gaza and make policy recommendations to all the actors with influence over Palestinian lives in the Strip. This report distills the analysis and recommendations made at the forum for long-term remedies for the Strip, despite the political stasis on all sides, which we hope policy-makers will take forward.

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, the forum met virtually over two sessions, available [here](#). The first session took a broad political perspective on the Strip, examining Gaza in the context of the de facto, and possible de jure, annexation of the West Bank and normalization between Israel and the Gulf states. The second session analyzed the corrosive impact of decades of closure and conflict on Gaza’s economic and humanitarian situation. Existing vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by movement restrictions imposed by Israel during the pandemic, and internally by Hamas authorities, as well as by the suspension of coordination with Israel by the Palestinian Authority. Both sessions explored the policy and political changes necessary to protect well-being and human rights in the Strip.

In order to encourage a candid dialogue, we assured participants that for the purpose of this summary, their comments would be shared without attribution. In some cases, the recommendations have been edited for clarity. Key suggestions included:

- Promote greater movement and access to and from Gaza, via Israel and Egypt. This is essential for facilitating economic activity, as well as countering the separation of Gaza from the West Bank, and supporting Palestinian political reconciliation.
- Support Palestinian political reconciliation and national elections.
- Support job creation in the private sector and preservation of public sector jobs, in recognition that these salaries are vital to economic activity.
- Fund long-term development projects for the Strip rather than just short-term humanitarian responses. Aid is a band-aid, not a remedy.

Isolation and Annexation: Gaza in the Regional Context

Earlier in the year, the Netanyahu government made explicit its intention to formally annex parts of the West Bank, sparking the Palestinian Authority's decision to cut its security and civilian ties with Israel in protest. Some in the international community were shaken out of their inertia on the conflict, forced to recognize that Israel's goals are diverging from their own. The European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), and in the past the United States, have invested significant financial and diplomatic capital into the idea of a two-state solution. However, successive Israeli governments have established 'facts on the ground' that exacerbate the conflict, including separating Gaza from the West Bank. Rather than meaningfully opposing Israel's violations of rights, the international community has deepened bilateral relations with Israel.

With the signing of the normalization agreement between the United Arab Emirates and Israel in August, de jure annexation was quietly dropped. Several participants in the forum remarked that there is now a risk that the international community will breathe a collective sigh of relief at arguably the most critical moment of all. Normalization could remove the last vestiges of restraint on Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, allowing Israel to escalate its de facto annexation of the West Bank, and to tighten its closure of Gaza. International intervention – not just rhetoric – will be vital to hold Israel accountable for protecting the rights of Palestinians across the territory. Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership remains deeply divided, in spite of some recent gestures towards reconciliation. This divide obstructs the provision of services and prevents a coherent and cohesive political strategy from emerging. The recommendations in the first panel were as follows:

Government of Israel

- **Remove restrictions on mobility of Palestinians imposed by Israel (and by Egypt).** Movement restrictions harm millions of civilians, stifle the Palestinian economy and entrench the internal division between Hamas and Fatah, preventing a political resolution to the conflict.
- **Allow civil society organizations to move freely,** particularly between Gaza and the West Bank, to meet with partners, government bodies, and with their colleagues.
- **Seek a resolution to the conflict, instead of sustaining it.** The world is increasingly cognizant of the apartheid conditions Israel is creating. Israel must choose between democracy and total demographic control.

Palestinian authorities (Hamas, Palestinian Authority)

- **Palestinian leaders should advance reconciliation and national elections.** Elections are a priority to produce a leadership that represents the Palestinian people and has popular legitimacy. This will be essential for finding a just solution to the conflict.
- **The PA should address democratic deterioration,** by reviving institutions.
- **Both Palestinian authorities must refrain from coercing opposition groups,** including the use of excessive force.

International community

- **Pursue a rights-based approach, the EU could lead on this.** There's a perception that raising the issue of rights violations is a distraction to what's happening on the political front, but rights are the building blocks for a sustainable solution to the conflict.
- **Pursue accountability and respond in accordance with obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.** The de facto annexation of the West Bank and the separation between Gaza and the West Bank violate international law and Palestinian human rights on a mass scale.
- **Do not lend credence to the Trump 'Peace to Prosperity' plan,** which might be revitalized following the Abraham Accords. Regardless of whether Trump is re-elected, it could become the assumed starting point for a return to negotiations, if the EU and others don't intervene more actively.
- **Do not reward Israel for the "achievement" of normalization with the UAE and Bahrain.** Opening diplomacy between countries is a good thing, but these countries were not at war.
- **Do not deepen the relationship with Israel without conditions.** In the EU's case, it should not revive the Association Council or the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan unless Israel reverses negative trends, including human rights violations, on the ground.
- **Challenge Israel about the political and economic drivers behind its movement restrictions and also about its seemingly impenetrable security claims.** Continued movement restrictions are not conducive to fostering security, which even Israel's own security establishment has recognized, particularly in relation to the closure of Gaza.
- **Revisit the no-contact policy with Hamas.** No contact entrenches the separation of Gaza and the West Bank, and even drives it. The policy has reinforced de-democratization trends in Gaza and the West Bank, hindering reconciliation and national elections.
- The decision to boycott the 2006 Palestinian election result was a strategic mistake. **Against the backdrop of discussions between Fatah and Hamas about possible elections, the international community must be ready to support and to recognize the election results.**

Double Lockdown: Reversing Gaza's Humanitarian and Economic Crisis

Many speakers and participants noted the acute socioeconomic distress inside the Strip, and the severe hardship endured by Gaza residents. Years of closure, compounded by recurrent hostilities, have eroded basic infrastructure, the delivery of services, and the economy itself, and regular escalations have resulted in mass casualties and extensive destruction. The pandemic meets Gaza already vulnerable, and hanging on by a thread.

The dual nature of international assistance was also discussed. On the one hand, international aid has prevented the total collapse of the Strip, but it has simultaneously bred dependency and reduced political pressure to end the conflict. Now, the Palestinian territory faces unprecedentedly low levels of international funding, in particular because of the decision by the US to terminate funding to the Palestinians and in light of the pandemic. Gaza needs sustainable solutions, not just cash injections.

Participants also analyzed the implications of the PA decision to suspend coordination. Several speakers noted that the primary obligation for ensuring mobility and well-being in the Strip lies with Israel, as the occupying power, and that the PA decision should not be license for Israel to renounce responsibility for the deteriorating situation in Gaza. In early September, the two parties agreed upon a temporary alternative mechanism to allow access for medical patients, while others, including those with serious humanitarian needs, remain blocked from travel.

Government of Israel

- **Expand the criteria for people able to exit the Strip during the pandemic, and beyond.** Access for medical patients alone is insufficient.
- **Radically increase the number of permits for Gaza laborers to work inside Israel.** Pre-pandemic, thousands were already entering, accessing higher salaries than those available in the Strip.
- **Remove restrictions on the exit of goods and on entrance of raw materials, otherwise known as 'dual-use goods.'** Goods from Gaza need to be marketed in the West Bank and Israel, and exported to the rest of the world.
- **Refrain from collective punishment of Gaza residents.** The closure as a whole is punitive in nature, but on many occasions, Israel uses its control to 'step up' punishment in response to actions over which civilians have no control (e.g. the firing of rockets). Measures such as the total closure of pedestrian crossings, blocks on the entry of goods, including fuel, and arbitrary limits on the fishing zone, including those imposed recently, demonstrate that movement restrictions as a whole are about applying pressure rather than legitimate security needs.

Palestinian authorities and other Palestinian actors

- **The PA should resume taking clearance (tax) revenue payments from Israel**, which it stopped in response to the threat of formal annexation. There are more constructive ways for the PA to oppose annexation. Clearance revenues comprise around 65 percent of total Palestinian revenue. Without them, the PA has been unable to make salary payments to its staff in full, including in Gaza. Public sector salaries, both from the PA and Hamas, are drivers of the economy and allow people to pay for critical infrastructure services. Qatari aid has helped to compensate for some of the gaps but it only postpones collapse, it does not avert it.
- **Find innovative ways to support the private sector and create opportunities for young people.** Young Palestinians make up the vast majority of population but face many obstacles when trying to establish themselves professionally and financially. They should surround themselves with supportive networks, seeking solutions for their community's needs.

International community

- **Shift from short-term humanitarian assistance and crisis management to sustainable development projects**, so that Gaza residents can live with dignity rather than dependency.
- **Strengthen Gaza's private sector.** The Palestinian economy is dependent on the public sector, a vulnerability that has been revealed by the latest standoff over clearance revenues. There should be a renewed emphasis on major private sector projects, for instance a large industrial zone in northern or southern Gaza.
- **Continue to financially support UNRWA** to provide critical services to the population in the short-term and other important **infrastructure projects** such as water and wastewater treatment facilities and solar power capacities.
- **Formulate a short-term contingency plan for if the Palestinian Authority collapses altogether.** The UN, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, or another organization would have to step in to keep Gaza's public sector functioning.
- **Revisit the economic relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Authority** in the long-term, as set down in the Paris Protocol, so that the PA can collect its own taxes and customs fees independently. That would require political will from Israel.

List of participants

Diplomats from:

Belgium	Finland	Japan	Switzerland
Canada	France	Mexico	United Kingdom
Denmark	Germany	Netherlands	United States
European Union	Ireland	Sweden	

Representatives of the following organizations and agencies:

ACRI	J Street
AECID	J Link
AHP Aid and Hope Program for Cancer Patient Care	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Ramallah
AIDA	MATTIN Group
ALLMEP	Mitvim
Broederlijk Delen	New Israel Fund
Brookings	Norwegian Refugee Council
B'Tselem	Office of the Quartet
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Other Voice
Carter Center	Palestine-Israel Journal
Catholic Relief Services	Pal-Think for Strategic Studies
Center for Strategic and International Studies	PHRI
Christian Aid	Portland Trust
CIDSE	Queen Mary University of London
Columbia University	Trocaire
DROSOS FOUNDATION	University of Edinburgh
Economic Cooperation Foundation	UNDP
ECHO	UNOCHA
The Elders	UNOPS (Access Unit)
FMEP	UNRWA
Geo-Political Advisory Services	UNSCO
Geneva Initiative	Washington Institute
Global Affairs Canada	Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility
Hebrew University	Yachad UK
Human Rights Watch	Other Palestinian private sector and civil society actors

* As required by law, Gisha is proud to share that as a result of our partnerships with countries and international organizations that support our work to promote human rights, the majority of our funding comes from "foreign governmental entities."



Gisha, 42 Harakevet St. Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Israel 6777008
Phone +972-3-6244120 | Fax: +972-3-6244130
gisha.org | info@gisha.org