



Gaza
Policy
Forum

Summary

Introduction

About the event and key takeaways

On November 21, 2018, Gisha gathered more than 100 Israeli, Palestinian and foreign stakeholders - including diplomats, academics, and representatives of international organizations and local civil society organizations - for the Gaza Policy Forum. The objective of the event was to distill recommendations for actions needed to improve living conditions and safeguard protection of human rights in the Gaza Strip. The following document is a compilation of the recommendations made by participants at the forum, which we hope policy-makers will take forward.

The forum consisted of two panels and a keynote speech. The first panel examined the “top-down” roles and responsibilities of local and international actors while the second panel focused on “bottom-up” recommendations from civil society actors and others working on the ground for immediate steps needed in order to shore up infrastructure, the economy, and civil society space, as well as enhance protection of civilians. We have clustered the recommendations into three broad categories to reflect the main themes and areas of discussion at the event: 1) The approach towards Gaza, 2) The economy, and 3) Infrastructure and public health.

The forum took place on the backdrop of ongoing Great March of Return protests and in the immediate aftermath of one of the most intense escalations in hostilities since the 2014 military operation Protective Edge, with nearly two dozen Palestinians killed, one Israeli killed and extensive damage to property, mainly in Gaza but also in Israel. A precarious ceasefire had been reached between Israel and Hamas, facilitated by the United Nations, Egypt and others.

In that light, many participants at the forum spoke about the importance of taking advantage of the fragile calm, and perhaps backchannel negotiations related to changes to policy vis-à-vis Gaza, to shore up more long-term, strategic interests for stability and protection of civilians. There was consensus about the fragility of the ceasefire and little hope for maintaining it absent more drastic action to reverse worrying trends in humanitarian indicators like food insecurity, lack of access to basic services and unemployment.

Participants spoke about the fact that Gaza is already an unlivable place and that the humanitarian crisis in the Strip is “man-made,” or the result of political failings. This would mean that only political and policy changes can substantively alter the situation, rather than the technical fixes sought by projects or other micro-level interventions. At the same time, much more can be done in the short-term to protect civilians and create a more hospitable environment for political progress. In order to encourage a candid dialogue, we assured participants that for the purpose of this

summary, their comments would be shared without attribution. The recommendations compiled below are directed at a variety of actors and institutions and reflect comments by speakers, panel moderators, and members of the audience. In some cases, they have been edited for clarity. The recommendations that were echoed throughout the event and by multiple participants and speakers included the following:

- Allocating responsibility based on each actors' actions and accountability
- Prioritizing greater movement and access, mainly via Israeli-controlled crossings but also via Egypt; as access is the most significant factor that would improve living conditions
- Reversing the isolation of Gaza and recognizing that annexationist goals in the West Bank rely on the continued split between Gaza and the West Bank
- Talking to Hamas and/or acknowledging Hamas's role in the Palestinian political landscape
- Prioritizing Palestinian political reconciliation and the reversal of Palestinian Authority sanctions
- Recognizing the interconnectedness between the economy and infrastructure, health and well-being
- Noting that humanitarian aid is a symptom of failed politics but cannot serve as a substitute

1.

The approach towards Gaza: Political realities and the actors who shape them

The discussion at the forum tackled many of the pressing political and policy questions of the day: whether Gaza is still occupied and what provisions of international law remain in effect, the internal Palestinian political rift, steps by the United States to reduce aid and potentially advance a peace plan unlike those presented prior, as well as dwindling consensus in the European Union about how to approach the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its component parts.

A general consensus can be said to have prevailed among forum participants about the urgency of the current moment and the need to take advantage of the “quiet” to change the approach towards Gaza. There was consensus about the need to open the Strip in order to shore up well-being and create a more advantageous climate for longer-term stability or even peace. In discussions related to relevant political actors and their roles - among them Israel, Hamas

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authorities, the Palestinian Authority, the United States, the European Union, Egypt and other members of the international community – speakers noted that while Israel remains the primary influencer of reality in the Strip, the actions and behaviors of other actors also have immense ramifications for day-to-day life and their agency should not be ignored.

Recommendations about the approach that these actors should take to Gaza were as follows:

Israel:

- Gaza is the most extreme manifestation of a process which has been taking place in the Palestinian territory as a whole since 1993: The process of maintaining control, without having the responsibility that comes with that control. This has in some ways created an even more “lethal” form of control in that Israel gives itself permission to use more excessive force on what it claims to be a hostile force rather than a population under occupation resisting that occupation. Making the situation look less like a traditional occupation has caused legal confusion which makes it more difficult to enforce accountability. We must get out of the circular debate about whether Gaza is occupied or not. We should focus instead on what responsibilities are created for Israel based on areas of life where self-governance has been taken away and people are thus suffering. We must stop thinking about control in a binary way and instead ask how we can facilitate better protections of rights and normal life for civilians.
- Humanitarianism should not absolve Israel of its role as an occupying power, and though we should support humanitarian infrastructure and intervention, the conversation always needs to come back to the one policy decision that Israel can make to reverse the need for aid – ending the closure.
- The international community needs to acknowledge that Hamas is a player and can't be ignored. Everyone knows that Israel is negotiating with Hamas; its negotiations should come out of the back rooms.
- People focus on the fact that Hamas and Fatah can't come to an agreement, but we need to acknowledge the role of Israel and the international community in preventing reconciliation. The converse of this is that if the parties (Israel and the international community) were interested in reconciliation, they could take steps to encourage it or, at the very least, guarantee that they will not block progress or shun a Palestinian government that included representation of various factions.
- There is Palestinian agency, which shouldn't be denied. At the same time, seeing the PA or Hamas as mostly responsible for Gaza's predicament is wrong. Israel alone determines whether someone from Gaza can reach Ramallah and Hebron and could decide to radically alter the situation by lifting the closure if it wanted to. We mustn't lose sight of this, even if the other actors are also important and bear responsibility.

International community:

- People in Gaza want to be seen as human beings. People don't want to be treated as charity cases. They already have the skills needed to succeed, but cannot utilize them without the right chances and opportunities.

- The EU hasn't spent enough time looking at the no-contact policy. It's still mostly taboo to question engagement with Hamas. We should take a look at the Quartet in the current moment, the body that issued the Quartet principles which are preventing engagement with Hamas. Who is actually maintaining the no-contact policy with Hamas? Russia and the UN are engaging, and Israel is engaging so maybe it's time to revise the principles.
- The Quartet principles can be revised but they don't need to be revoked entirely. It's important to maintain a means of leverage over Hamas.
- We shouldn't go for an unconditional engagement with Hamas, but set some more workable conditions that will meaningfully influence their behavior and support those in the movement on the more programmatic side. This in the end would support the Palestinian national project.
- The U.S. administration's current approach is to try to push Gaza off the table. Europe needs to put it back on the table and make it front and center of international discourse. It can do this by focusing on the dependence on its aid money. International donors, and the EU in particular, contribute millions to Gaza. Israel relies on this to avoid a further implosion of the Strip. This should be used as leverage. The EU should consider how to couple its financial assistance with a meaningful strategy to see the implementation of its own political aspirations and interests - its aid is undermined by the situation, as is its goal of reaching a two-state solution.
- The EU can and should be using its funding of the PA as leverage, but given the fragility of the PA, it should also engage in diplomacy.
- We should see the situation in Gaza and the situation in the West Bank as two sides of the same coin, not isolating their issues but seeing them as part of the same project of prolonged occupation and possibly annexation.
- Do not build a port in Cyprus - it shifts responsibility abroad and therefore reinforces the separation between Gaza and Israel and the West Bank. We need to beware of solutions that pretend to address the humanitarian issues in Gaza but really just further the divide. The two are inextricable.

Palestinian authorities: the PA and Hamas:

- The majority of the Palestinian street believe that reconciliation is the key to moving forward and that the PA should reverse its sanctions on Gaza. The PA should reverse its sanctions and commit itself to reconciliation. The PA should be willing to pay the price of Hamas's and other factions' political inclusion, which can take place under the auspices of the PLO. The PLO's political legitimacy is tied to the fact that it should be the representation of the Palestinian political body and aspirations of the Palestinian national project as a whole.
- Punitive sanctions are not only morally reprehensible for a leader (Mahmoud Abbas) to enforce on two million of his own people, but they are also strategically flawed.

2.

The economy:

Approaches and policies to improve economic activity and development

When addressing the current economic reality of the Strip, three main areas of discussion and related recommendations emerged: Waning humanitarian aid, movement and access restrictions, and Palestinian Authority sanctions. Speakers and participants cited the devastating impact of the closure of the Strip on all aspects of the economy and civilian life, as well as more recent decisions which have compounded economic strife in Gaza, namely the United States' reduction of funding for UNRWA and its own programs and the Palestinian Authorities' reduction of salaries and other benefits for Gaza residents. Participants also noted the relationship between economic hardship and instability, again citing the current quiet as a window of opportunity to make needed and drastic changes to policy in order to prevent further escalation. They also noted that absent significant job creation, sustainable development will not be possible.

The recommendations related to improving economic conditions in Gaza were as follows:

- Normalizing the operation of the crossings would yield the most significant economic benefits for the Strip. Allowing laborers to enter Israel for work would dramatically boost the economy, as basic wages in Israel are about seven times higher than average salaries in the private sector in Gaza.
- The following six measures would increase GDP, purchasing power, and trade and reduce unemployment: restoring salary and humanitarian payments from the PA, increasing electricity supply, facilitating movement and access via Egypt, expanding agriculture and fishing, advancing reconstruction and housing, and allowing laborers to work in Israel.
- The closure hollowed out the productive base of Gaza's economy. In the short-term, cash-for-work programs can get more liquidity into the economy but in the long-term, there is no substitute for job creation.
- In the short term, we need to continue service delivery in the areas of energy, water, health and education but aid is unsustainable and things like civilian infrastructure can only be maintained with a thriving economy. Humanitarian efforts need to be accompanied by structural changes to allow freer access and movement of goods.
- Things that can be done quickly include: expanding the fishing zone, facilitating movement of businesspeople, and freeing up the telecom sector. Such changes would have an impact

beyond numbers, they would help restore hope to people in Gaza. Major infrastructure projects like a seaport in Gaza are important in the long-term, but will not have any economic impact in the short-term.

- Limited economic growth and recovery could happen in the short-term without reconciliation, but long-term recovery requires reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.
- The solutions that have been raised are already within the consensus, and have been raised many times at AHLC meetings. People now need to actually make these decisions and start to implement them.

3.

Infrastructure and public health: The interconnectedness of politics, economics, and well-being

The recommendations for improving the functioning of critical civilian infrastructure like water and electricity provision, sanitation, and physical and mental health services centered around a critical analysis of the political and economic reality of the Strip. Speakers noted that without reconciliation between the divided Palestinian authorities, an end to movement restrictions by Israel and also Egypt, and a longer-term political resolution to the conflict, attempts to shore up civilian infrastructure would continue to be like applying a band-aid to a gaping wound. Projects, while needed, are by their nature isolated actions and cannot replace a holistic approach to Gaza's interconnected needs. For example, one cannot hope for a fix to the chronic electricity shortage without a functioning economy in which residents can pay their bills or the authorities are empowered to collect payments. Each of the issues that Gaza faces are interconnected and require all-inclusive approaches and solutions. That said, participants recommended the following approaches and concrete steps to facilitate change in the short-, medium- and long-term:

Civilian infrastructure

- The system should be seen in a holistic way: For example, many donors are focusing on desalination, but desalination on a large scale is resource-intensive, requiring energy and thus funds to purchase or produce energy. It won't be a sustainable solution if the economy isn't also functioning in a way that allows people to pay their energy and water bills.
- Collection efficiency from water bills must be improved. Currently only 30% are collected.

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- In addition to big projects like a large desalination facility, donors should also support smaller scale and localized technical and practical solutions for Gaza's infrastructure needs as well as development of solar power to ensure the continuation of services. Smaller, multi-sectoral projects that are inspired by (existing) community coping mechanisms function well and are desirable because they have a scale that is manageable by the community with its existing resources.
- Water and sanitation facilities require consistent and regular access to materials, for regular maintenance and development, particularly in a fragile system like the one in Gaza where systems are old and also exposed to risk of damage from bombardments. It doesn't work to ship in individual goods slowly (as under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism or the dual-use item process). The water system needs regular access to spare parts and goods. The water and electricity sectors should be exempt from the GRM.
- The GRM system that was imposed after the 2014 war needs to be cancelled or reformed drastically because it prevents important material from entering in a timely way, if at all, for critical civilian infrastructure, such as water provision.

Public health, well-being and promotion of human rights

- Need to focus on what protections are vital for civilians now while there is still no political solution. But also need to begin marking a path that will make political solutions more feasible and easier to sustain. It's important that recommendations come from the ground-up, from people who live the reality in Gaza and work on a day-to-day basis to meet the challenges at hand.
- Need to acknowledge the rise in mental health issues brought on by continuous exposure to trauma, frequent bombardments and the difficult economic situation in the Strip. We should also build mental health centers for struggling women that provide psychosocial and economic support. There is only one domestic violence shelter in Gaza. More safe houses should be built for women fleeing violence.
- Human rights organizations need to insist on the freedom of movement of people to go through Erez Crossing, especially those who suffer from cancer and other diseases.
- Reconciliation is key. People in Gaza will not be able to secure their rights until they have a unified leadership that can speak with one voice.
- Women need more job opportunities and to be decision-makers in society. Women's organizations and civil society in general should have a more important role in society and a seat at the table of any negotiations. They need access and should be included in the criteria for movement of people.
- We need to measure the real suffering Palestinian people are going through by initiating qualitative studies (based on people's daily experiences). These qualitative studies should utilize quality of life instruments that have already been developed in order to measure the accurate level of suffering people are experiencing.

List of participants

Diplomats from:

Australia
Belgium
Canada
Denmark

Egypt
European Union
Finland
France

Ireland
Netherlands
Norway
Spain

Sweden
Switzerland
United Kingdom
United States

Representatives from the following organizations and agencies:

Action Against Hunger

AISHA Association for Women and Child Protection

B'Tselem

Carter Center

Coastal Municipalities Water Utility

Diakonia

Drosos

ECOPEACE

European Middle East Project (EUMEP)

Forum for Regional Thinking

Gaza Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Gaza Sky Geeks

Haaretz

HaMoked Center for the Defence of the Individual

Hebrew University

Human Rights Watch

International Committee of the Red Cross

International Crisis Group

International Monetary Fund

IPCRI

New Israel Fund

Office of the Quartet

Oxfam

Palestine Children's Relief Fund - PCRf

Peace Now

Physicians for Human Rights Israel

Policy Working Group

Tel Aviv University

Trocaire

UNOPS (Access Unit)

UNSCO

USAID

World Bank

World Health Organization

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."



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