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ARAB LEAGUE

WORKING TOWARDS THE ECONOMIC
INDEPENDENCE OF GAZA

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Basic Overview of the Issue

For years, the State of Palestine has existed in two, unconnected parts, those being the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. While for the last decade, the former has been controlled by a Fatah government, the latter has been governed by Hamas, with this divide made difficult to overcome due to the territorial divide. With Hamas employing a more offensive and militant strategy against Israel for what they claim to be an illegal occupation, they have also faced harsher responses and measures from Israel, both militarily and economically. With Israel being the more powerful of the two states by a considerable margin and being led by a nationalistic and conservative government for the last decade, they have used this advantage to manipulate the internal and external affairs of Palestine, putting a blockade on the Gaza Strip and additional economic restrictions. The blockade and endless fighting in the Gaza Strip, housing 1 million people in a region smaller than 400 km² in what has often been called “the largest open air prison in the world”, surrounded by walls and the blockaded Mediterranean sea, has had a significant economic impact, with the inter-territorial tensions of Palestine only serving to make matters worse, causing secondary damages to all other aspects of life in the Strip. The Arab League has been a supporter of Palestine’s interests even since its inception, and this topic has also been the subject that the League has proved itself to be the most effective in. It falls upon the delegates to come up with solutions that will ensure the economic freedom of Gaza in the future, as it will be a crucial step in securing the future of the State of Palestine as a wholly independent state.

Explanation of Important Terms

Blockade

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a blockade is “the isolation by a warring nation of an enemy area (such as a harbor) by troops or warships to prevent passage of persons or supplies”, in this case being applied to the Gaza Strip, with fishery, import and export, and aid restrictions, enforced also with the land border crossings, by the Israeli government ¹.

Paris Protocol of Economic Relations

Known by a variety of different names, this protocol between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the precursor of the PNA, and Israel created a customs union between the two parties for five years after the protocol took effect ⁷. Using their



disproportionate economic power, however, Israel extended this period indefinitely, allowing revisions to the protocol only when the said changes favor its own interests. The protocol also gives the sole authority to collect customs and internal taxes to the government of Israel, the fair share of PLO from which it is supposed to return, yet this has largely been used as a political tool recently ^{3,7}.

Detailed Background of the Issue

In this section, first the geography and politics of the Gaza Strip will be explained as necessary background information for the rest of the report. Then, the blockade will be explained using a historical perspective, with its present nature also elaborated upon. Finally, the economy of Gaza will be elaborated on in detail.

On Gaza

Gaza Strip is one of the two components that make up the Palestinian Territories, which are in theory, governed by the Palestine National Authority (PNA), alongside the West Bank. While PNA is led by an elected Fatah movement government that takes a more moderate approach to relations with Israel, the more extreme and militant Hamas is in control in the Gaza Strip.

The Gaza Strip is demarked by the Mediterranean on its west, the Egyptian border on its south (with one border crossing), and a border wall with Israel in the rest (with two border crossings, one in the deep southeast and the other one on the northern border). The Strip contains around 1.8 million citizens, by a 2015 estimate, most of whom live around the northern city of Gaza, with Khan Yunis and Rafah, both in the southern part of the country, being the two other cities in which the population is concentrated. With the Strip's population being young, a high population growth rate is expected, with the State of Palestine itself putting the population estimate at 2.1 million for 2020. It must also be mentioned that most of the population in Gaza are actually registered refugees, rather than natives of these cities. Measuring at just 365 km², it is believed that the Gaza Strip is the most populated location in the whole world ¹⁸.

On the Blockade

While Israel long had implemented policies to isolate Gaza Strip from the rest of the world, except via through Israel itself, with the 2007 takeover of the Strip by Hamas forces,



these policies culminated in the form of a full-on blockade. With mutual fighting occurring along the years, mostly provoked by Hamas yet returned in indiscriminate and much greater fashions, without any regard for civilian life, the blockades took harsher and harsher forms. The fishing sector had long been a key part of Gazan livelihoods, for example, with the fishers being able to enjoy just 6 nautical miles of fisheries (compared to the international law limit of 20 nautical miles) due to Israeli naval pressure, but in 2009, this was reduced to just 3 nautical miles, causing great damage to the sector and overall Gazan economy. It must be noted that the major fisheries are actually located 9 nautical miles from the shore ²⁰.

In 2010, Israel took another similar step, this time targeting the traditional agricultural sector, by prohibiting approaching the border wall more than 300 meters, seemingly for security purposes, but prohibiting access to 35% of all farming land in the Strip, by OXFAM (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief) estimates. This year would also be marked by the (in)famous “Mavi Marmara” flotilla, which attempted to arrive at Gaza with humanitarian aid, despite the naval blockade, before it was intercepted by the Israeli military, with the killing of numerous human rights activists. Possibly in response to the severe and harsh international backlash over this operation, Israel would ease the blockade and Egypt would open the Rafah crossing, providing access to Egypt for the first time in a long time, through legal means ²⁰.

2012 would see the extension of the fishing zone back to 6 nautical miles, as well as increased fighting between the two sides. In 2013 the Egyptian government would conduct military operations against the Gazan tunnels and close the crossing for goods’ transfer, working to isolate the Strip once more, before another round of fighting in 2014 and the complete closure of the Rafah crossing. The war would see the major power plant in the strip destroyed, making the very significant deterioration of the electricity crisis in the region, which would be a major humanitarian and economic scourge, especially for the industrial sector, leaving the country reliant on generators and imports and aids of fossil fuels ²⁰.

In the years following the 2014 war, the blockade, which was previously only allowed to be bypassed (via Israel) for humanitarian aid in health and nutrition, mostly, was eased for construction, though this could not be taken advantage of properly with merely 44% of the needed cement and 16% of overall materials entering the Strip ²⁰.

Currently, the fishing zone that has been reduced back to 3 nautical miles in 2018, has been expanded to 12 nautical miles in the mid-section of the shore, and 6 nautical miles



elsewhere, (though this is evidently not the 20 agreed upon by the parties in Oslo) and the electricity supply has been cut to just a few hours each day ⁶.

On the Local Economy

As a result of economic isolation and near-constant fighting in the Strip, accompanied by an ever-growing population and increasing restrictions on economic opportunities and rights, the economy of Gaza, has recently stagnated, with predicted decline coming as soon as the end of 2019 (likely having arrived, in the case of the delegates reading this report). In fact, the Tony Blair Institute predicts based on their research that the status quo would result in an 8 percent decrease in employment, 5 percent decrease in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 3 percent in purchasing power, and a worsening thereof (with the scenario being based on current political trends) could result in a reduction of 35 percent in purchasing power, 29 percent in employment and 12 percent in GDP, showing how dire the situation is, for a region which already has access to only 4% of its potable water needs, 42% or 55% of its citizens unemployed (by different figures), and 47% of them malnourished ¹⁷.

As already mentioned, the traditional agricultural and fishing sectors, which provided the key sources of nourishment for the region, have shrunk considerably under increased Israeli regulations (which violate international law blatantly), with both the fisheries (though as noted above, a recovery may be coming in the near future) arable land being reduced greatly ^{5,18}. This, combined with the ever-growing population, has left the locals needy for foreign aid in providing sustenance for them, as well as exerting undue pressure on the few who are employed, with cases of as many as twenty persons being dependent on a single person's income not being uncommon. (Delegates should note that the unemployment rate gives the percent unemployed only of those seeking employment and not of the entire work-capable adult population.)

Another sector that had in recent decades played a significant role in the Strip's economy had been the manufacturing industry ¹⁸. However, the damage dealt by the Israeli air campaigns on the Strip to industrial facilities, the reduced government spending and the fiscal crisis, as well as much reduced international access to the nation's economy (especially after the Egyptian campaign against the tunnels' usage) has resulted in the employment provided by this sector shrinking by 20 percent between 2016 and 2018. Before the war, however, the industrial sectors had accounted for over two times the number of jobs it does today. It must also be noted that whenever Israel eased the restrictions on trade, the



sector would exhibit significant growth, proving the importance of the restrictions as the source of a lack of development ¹⁷.

These have left the public sector as the primary source of employment in the region, providing stable job opportunities and consistent wages. This is to such a great extent that it has been noted that as much as 85% of household incomes came from public sector employees' salaries. However, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has been under serious economic pressure recently, with dwindling economic support and harshening economic conditions, which have stimulated them to cut down the employment (via "early retirements") and salary levels in the public sector. This has especially held true for the Gaza Strip, as recent tensions between Hamas and Fatah for control over the area (since Hamas has recently established a council for the Strip which resembles the functions of a government) have risen, prompting the PNA to cut the funding for the regional organs of the government in Gaza Strip, and by proxy for Hamas's own employees, resulting in delaying of the public sector salaries, with dire consequences for the rest of the economy ¹⁷.

It must also be noted that online job opportunities represent a new opportunity in the region, enabled by improving computer and internet access, though the lack of access to electricity (as elaborated below) has restricted the size of this sector, which is already being exaggerated in non-qualitative retellings of the situation in Gaza with regards to its size and significance.

The other large source of income for the region is a non-productive endeavor: foreign aid. UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the key distributor of foreign aid in the region, employing 13 thousand people and providing aid to approximately 70 percent of the population ¹⁷. However, this international aid has declined radically in the recent years, with significant reduction coming after the recognition of Palestine as a UN Observer State and the US explicitly "throwing their support" behind Israel, resulting in a prediction of declining GDP this (past, in the case of delegates reading this report) year, as well as stagnation with 1 percent growth in the year 2018, even before accounting for the population growth ¹². Some of this foreign aid goes into funding the PNA's operations, while some of it goes to humanitarian relief in the Strip. The World Bank has actually predicted a two billion USD budget deficit for the PNA, to illustrate the deficiency of foreign aid ¹⁷.

One final important source of income for the nation has been the relatives of the



denizens of the Strip sending in funds from abroad, which provides a limited but notable stimulus for the local economy. However, the employment of Gazan workers in Israel is prohibited since 2006, with dire consequences for Gazan economy. Predictions suggest even as few as 10 thousand of the hundreds of thousand unemployed taking up jobs in Israel would result in a 3% GDP and a stunning 14% purchasing power growth ¹⁷.

Aside from the additional demand for funding armed conflict places on the budget of Hamas, it also has significant impact on the infrastructure in the region, as the military campaigns of Israel sometimes possibly inadvertently but sometimes very much advertently target the little infrastructure already present in the Strip. One such example, demonstrative of the actions of Israel, though not being recent, despite its effects still being felt, has been the Yasser Arafat International Airport in the Strip. It was built in 1998, by contemporary standards, but its bombing in 2001, despite its exclusively commercial use, left the country without any air connection to the outside world, having a serious impact on international trade and tourism, another sector which was unable to acquire importance it has the potential to acquire due to the conflict ^{8, 18}. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) would “strongly condemn” the destruction of the airport by Israel, noting the violation of the Chicago and Montreal Conventions dealing with matters of aviation by the action, and call upon Israel to assist in and ensure the reopening of the airfield, a demand which it simply chose to ignore ¹⁰.

The most significant of the infrastructure impacts of the bombings were felt, however, in the provision of electricity, both for commercial and domestic use, with the bombing of the major power plant in the strip leaving generators and imported fossil fuels as the primary local source of power for the Strip. The fossil fuels have been funded primarily via foreign aid, which has been unreliable and recently running low. To make matters worse, the bombings and the blockade, in a combined effect, have resulted in damaged electricity supply cables that are not possible to repair, resulting in power outages of 20 to 22 hours each day. While some power has been received from Israel, both as fossil fuel and current, it has been fairly unreliable and extremely contingent on the military and political situation in the region. The intra-Palestinian governmental dispute has also reflected onto this utility, with the lack of agreement on the taxation of energy between the two sides resulting in the PNA cutting the funding from the budget allocated to electricity. While the UN and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have provided generators and solar cells for health



services in the region, the lack of access to electricity has tremendous impact on the nation's economy, with predictions for a GDP increase of around 2.4% for the Strip if achieved ¹¹.

It must be noted emphatically that there is an incredible amount of human capital in the region, with such a young population make-up and most of the population being unemployed, yet the present state of the area prevents this capital to be taken advantage of ¹³.

The reason behind this is, in part, the import and export restrictions placed upon the Strip. Especially with the illicit trade via the tunnels now being significantly more difficult due to the military operations, this problem is felt very deeply in the country, which cannot reasonably manufacture tradable quantities of industrial good due to export restrictions, cannot import the materials needed for such industries and construction of new buildings (despite the easing of the blockade in this latter category), and cannot provide the foreign currency required to engage in the trade in the first place. While the already mentioned digital sectors have allowed for some service exports, they are simply not enough for a country of two million citizens.

At this point, it would be appropriate to discuss the issue of the Paris Protocol of Economic Relations, which regulates the customs union between Palestine and Israel. Despite this 1993 agreement originally being brought in as a temporary measure for just five years, it has been held in effect by the Israeli government ever since, with refusal to hold any renegotiations, nor observe the aspects of the treaty that would benefit Palestinians. This has resulted in a near-exclusivity of trade in both directions being with Israel, and since the disproportionate dependency holds one-way only, in this economic power being widely exploited by the Israeli state. One of the worst aspects of this treaty that is also highly damaging to the economic sovereignty of Palestine is that it gives Israel the exclusive right of tax collection in the countries and borders, with these revenues being withheld from the government of Palestine until it is convenient for Israel for them to be released, in accordance with their political agenda ^{3,9}. These factors, of course, work to deteriorate the question in hand.

Major Parties Involved

Hamas

Hamas, the semi-militaristic and semi-political entity in control in the Gaza Strip,



mostly independent from the PNA, is the primary party suffering from the present poor state of the economy in the country. With the PNA cutting on its funding for governmental, it has gone through a fiscal crisis, and despite its economic governance, remains popular with the locals, due to their strongly anti-Israel stance ¹².

Palestine National Authority (PNA)

PNA, which is in control in the West Bank and is recognized by the UN to be the sole authority in all of the Palestinian Territories, has chosen to cut back on the funds it had allocated for the Gaza Strip, to be given to the Hamas “government” there, due to its viewing of Hamas’s recent formation of a general governance council as an attempt to create a parallel government there, in addition to the fact that it is suffering economical problems of its own, due to falling foreign aid and increasing Israeli pressure on its economy. It is currently controlled by the Fatah movement ¹⁷.

Israel

Israel has been the main scourge for this situation in the Gaza Strip, though it may be argued by some that in its absence, the situation in the country could have proved to be much worse. Nonetheless, the wide-ranging and harsh blockade it implements, its manipulation of Palestinian taxes which it collects “on behalf of the Palestine”, as well as other restrictions on Palestinian citizens leave the Strip strapped for income of any sort ³. If change is intended to be achieved for the long term in the region, negotiations with the state are key, due to their disproportionate wielding of power. The fact that Israel has recently enjoyed support from the United States, in the middle of widespread condemnation in the UN for its actions, makes the situation more complicated to deal with.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

UNCTAD has long been the primary director of foreign aid for development to the Gaza Strip, using the funding for long-term economical plans it creates in junction with the PNA. The significant reduction in funding UNCTAD has seen in the last few years for Palestine, in part due to the shifting position of the United States on the region, has raised concerns for the long-term economy of the Strip. They also work to create comprehensive reports on the situation and their activities in the region, as well as long-term development plans, which should prove useful to delegates ¹⁶.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near



East (UNRWA)

UNRWA is the primary director of foreign aid in Gaza Strip, and the larger Palestinian diaspora, for short-term, humanitarian relief purposes, such as those relating to hunger and health issues. An ever-increasing and significant proportion of the Strip's population is dependent on the aid supplied by UNRWA, indicating how dependent on foreign aid the region has become, losing any resemblance of economic sovereignty and independence ¹⁷.

Egypt

Egypt, which has gone through tumultuous times recently with regards to its government, had long been one of the primary sources for subsistence in the Gaza Strip, with many underground tunnels serving as a portal between the regional economies, despite the official position of the state in enforcing the blockade of Israel ⁴. However, the recent changes have drastically reduced this source of economic stimulus, making the situation in the Strip much more dire.

Relevant International Documents

- Permanent Sovereignty Over Natural Resources in OPT and Golan, 20 December 2018 **(A/RES/73/255)** ¹⁵
- Report on UNCTAD assistance to the Palestinian people: Developments in the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Note by the UNCTAD secretariat, 22 July 2019 **(TD/B/EX(68)/4)** ¹⁶
- Peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine: Report of the Secretary-General, 26 August 2019 **(A/74/333 - S/2019/685)** ¹⁴
- Evaluation of FAO's Programme in West Bank and Gaza Strip: 2011-2015, August 2017
- Gaza-Jericho Agreement, Annex IV: Protocol on Economic Relations between the Government of the State of Israel and the PLO, Representing the Palestinian People (Paris Protocol), April 29, 1994 ⁷
- The Palestinian Decent Work Programme, 2018 – 2022, April 2018 ¹³
- Building Economic Resilience in the State of Palestine, 25 November 2016 ²



Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The mercurial characteristics of this issue make it difficult to identify as one, marking where it begins, with the economy of the region actually being in seemingly stochastic cycles of growth and decline and the actions being done address the present economic situation and to establish the sovereignty of the Gazan economy being indistinguishable from each other in most cases. Despite this, there exists a few plans for the future of the country, prepared either by UN bodies or the PNA itself.

Firstly, there is the Palestinian Decent Work Programme (2018-2022) by the International Labor Organization (ILO). It proposes a funding mechanism for a swathe of changes it proposes in the industry, with the aims of increasing employment and “livelihood opportunities”, expanding the nation’s social security system, and improving labor rights ¹³.

Then there is the report from the Palestine Resilience Conference 2016, organized by the PNA and UN Development Programme (UNDP), titled “Building Economic Resilience in the State of Palestine”, which suggests building economic stability by ensuring “macroeconomic stability”, “microeconomic market efficiency”, “good governance”, and “social development”. The report notes the crucial role of occupation and the Paris Protocol in causing the economy to come to its present state. In response to the problems faced by the nation, it proposes the expansion of utilities and public services (especially with regards to geographic reach), lobbying of Israeli politicians with regards to the economic state of citizens, protection of women’s and minorities’ rights, take a bottom-up approach to identifying the communities’ issues, promoting civil society to take an active role in self-governance, take environmental action, invest in e-commerce, IT, tourism, and social entrepreneurship with the aim of receiving international investment, fund (re-)development in agriculture, manufacturing industries, and construction, promote the competitiveness of Gazan industrial products by opening up the market further to foreign goods, invest in information technologies to boost productivity, increasing political and economic links between the two halves of the country, build a new airport and seaport, and invest in the youth of the country ².

Finally, the National Policy Agenda by the State of Palestine for the years 2017-2022 states that the gap between the two sections of Palestine in terms of economic development should be reduced, work with research and academic institutions to identify the economic needs of the country, invest in IT, energy, agriculture, construction, and tourism via foreign



monetary sources, rebuild the industrial, agricultural, and touristic sectors, expand trade, invest in utilities, engage in deregulation to promote business, offer support to start-ups and co-operatives, promote the local consumption of Palestinian products, engage in more public-private partnerships, ensure of quality work opportunities for the educated, encourage females to join the workforce, and ensure a safe working environment ¹⁹. These are the solutions currently being attempted by the government and UN agencies, with varying degrees of success.

Solution Alternatives

As the situation in the Strip had been relatively stable, though vulnerable, for most of the last few years, with the economic crackdown on the local government and the drastic fall in external aid beginning only recently, many plans have currently been put out, few of which have actually been implemented by the government. In this section, some of these common proposals will be considered.

One of the most important threats facing the economy of the Strip currently is the possible repercussions of the falling out between the two Palestinian territories' governments, with Hamas recently passing some measures to instate a higher degree of control in governance in the Strip while the PNA decreasing the wages and number of public-sector employees in the Strip. This is found by many, including the Tony Blair Institute, to be particularly troubling, as these jobs are crucial for the local economy, constituting some of the most reliable jobs in the country and creating crucial cashflow ¹⁷. Taking measures to ensure the continuance of these wages, whether via external funds or facilitating talks between the parties to mediate the conflict should prove effective in threatening this problem.

Another threat faced by the economy of the country is the collapse of the agricultural and industrial sectors, which used to be cornerstones of the nation's economy ¹⁸. To address the former, Israel must somehow be convinced to allow for the expansion of the farms closer to the Israeli border, where a large buffer zone currently exists, blocking farmers out of some of the best soil in the region, which coincidentally lies close to the border. A similar extension proposal could be passed by Israel for the fisheries, which restrict the fisherhumans' fishing capacities to that of 30% of the international standard, which can be expanded much closer to the international standard to promote a sustainable local economy ¹⁷. As for the industrial sector, which has been under trouble due to the comprehensive blockade, easing of these blockades in exchange for additional information and tracking rights in ensuring the materials



brought in are not used for militant purposes can be negotiated with Israel.

The blockade, in fact, has been at the root of many of the problems faced by the locals. Egypt's role in allowing for the continuance of the blockade, as well as the implementation and expansion of BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement against Israel as a bargaining chip may be re-considered by the Arab League. International promotion of the movement, as well as inside the Palestinian territories may prove useful to provide an incentive to the State of Israel to come to the table. Measures should also be taken in recognition of the development of the e-commerce and other online sectors in the country, which may be made more attractive to foreign investment and promoted via loans or subsidies made available by Arab League members ¹⁷.

Also under consideration must be the crucial role of infrastructure in the achievement of a self-sustaining economy, as well as the future of a national utilities sector. Currently, the electricity supply in the country is remarkably unreliable and third-party reports have determined that this unreliability hinders economic growth significantly.

Working on Israel-Gaza relationships for the purpose of allowing Palestinian workers to take up jobs in Israel (which are much higher-paying than Palestinian ones on average) would also grant a useful stimulus to the local economy of Gaza, yet, Israel would have little incentive to accept such a proposition, meaning that some other compromises would likely be needed to have them accept such a measure.

Finally, bringing the Paris Protocol economic regime in the region to a end, replacing it with a mutually agreeable and negotiated agreement for the future of the trade relationship between the two states would prove useful, as the present agreement, originally intended to be temporary, is contrary to the economic independence of Gaza, with some essential functions of the government, such as tax collection enforcement, being conducted by Israel "on behalf of" Palestine, though such taxes have not been returned recently ^{3,9}.

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