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Gaza, Conflict

Gaza: A Hopeful Solution to a Destructive Conflict

There is a long history of political unrest in the Middle East, and the small territory of Gaza is no exception. This Palestinian state is currently in the forefront of destructive conflict in the Middle East from its war with Israel. While the Palestinian/Israeli factions have been at odds for generations, it has worsened in recent years after Hamas (a political faction associated with the Islamic Resistance Movement) attained control of the Gazan government in 2006. Tensions arguably came to a head when Hamas carried out an attack on Israel in October 2023, which resulted in the deaths of 1200 Israelis- mostly innocent civilians (Robinson). This incited a declaration of war from Israel which led to counter-attacks and blockades. This has escalated to the point where it has created a serious crisis directly threatening the welfare of the civilians living in Gaza. This food insecurity crisis is not just a lack of food resources, it is also a lack of clean water, sanitation issues, and an increase in health issues; all these are direct effects of the war.

The Hamas government rules Gaza under Palestinian Sharia-based law that is very restrictive- especially regarding the roles of women (Robinson). Hamas is also identified by many countries internationally as a terrorist organization due to its extreme hate for its neighboring nation of Israel. Its original charter from 1988 called for the murdering of the Jews and the destruction of the Israeli nation to establish an Islamic society (Robinson). Gazan citizens may fear Hamas authority because of their violent tactics, but at the same time, they generally believe a victory over Israel will effectively end the conflict. Khalil Shikaki contends “Palestinians believe that diplomacy and negotiations are not available to them, that only violence and armed struggle is the means to end the siege and blockade over Gaza” (Robinson).

Gaza is one of two Palestinian territories that shares one of its borders with Israel, the other territory being the West Bank. Gaza is the smaller of the two territories, but it borders the Mediterranean Sea while the West Bank is landlocked between Israel and Jordan. Gaza is a very small territory, with a land area of only 360 square kilometers- or the equivalent to 139 square miles. It has a population of approximately 2.1 million people, with the majority of that population concentrated in urban areas. (Gaza Strip). Gaza’s land area is mostly sandy, and dune-covered planes and has a climate that ranges from mild winters to hot and dry summers. The areas are susceptible to droughts. Gaza’s standard crops are citrus fruits, vegetables, and strawberries, and 90 percent of the farms are less than one-half acre (Agriculture 3). A typical diet of a Gazan family would include staples of rice, beef, lamb, vegetables and fruits (Gaza-Strong). While Gaza did get much of their food through imports, about 44 percent of households got at least some of their food from domestic producers (Vos and Kim). Unfortunately, in February of 2023, it was estimated more than one-third of Gaza’s agricultural lands had sustained damages from the war (Vos and Kim).

A typical Gazan household has about 4-6 people, and it is very common for extended families to live together or near each other, in both the urban and rural populations (Evason). Education is also highly valued. Despite the conflict that has affected the nation for generations, the Palestinian population has an exceptional literacy rate amongst men and women- 97.5% (Gaza Strip). The major barriers faced by Gazan families are centered around the effects of the state's ongoing violent conflict with Israel- affecting their employment, livelihoods, and access to basic needs. Healthcare has also been affected by the destruction of hospitals and other medical facilities. Much of the population (nearly 85 percent) is currently displaced from their homes, in some instances families have to relocate multiple times (IPC). One UN reporter noted, "Gaza has simply become uninhabitable. Its people are witnessing daily threats to their very existence..." (Chen and Brennan).

Food security was a challenge in Gaza even before the current outbreak of war with Israel. Blockades began in 2006 at the time of Hama's rise to power, resulting in a collapse of the small territory's economy. A 2022 report noted 64.3 percent of the population experienced some form of food insecurity (Fact Sheet). Gaza has never had a strong economy, contributing to high levels of poverty even before its current state of war with Israel. The few exports the state had were mostly sold to Israel. Furthermore, Israel has contributed to the stifling of the Gazan economy by blocking some exports and restricting imports as well (2022 Investment). Because much of Gaza's population is urban, they rely heavily on imports, including food products for households to purchase (Barron). Even if products weren't scarce, many families wouldn't have enough money to purchase basic goods. For example, in 2022 the unemployment rate in Gaza was 44.7 percent; and the average daily wage of an employed individual was \$13/day (2022 Investment). Today, the unemployment rate has risen to 79.1 percent, a direct impact of the current war (War). War has intensified the poverty situation in Gaza, where, according to Robinson, "more than one million people needed aid before the fighting broke out" (Robinson). This continuing political divide seriously handicaps Gaza's ability to grow economically and provide a better life for its citizens.

Historically, Gazan citizens have been forced to rely on significant humanitarian aid with a heavy emphasis on food assistance. In 2018 alone, it is estimated that Gaza and the West Bank (another Palestinian state) received foreign-funded humanitarian assistance at a cost of \$540 million (Romano et al. 22). In Gaza's current state, citizens will not survive without significant assistance. The entire population is being affected by an extreme lack of food resources, and Israeli interference has only slowed humanitarian aid to Gaza citizens. For example, In February, Israel imposed restrictions on the primary UN agency providing aid, effectively stopping food shipments that could have benefitted over a million Palestinians (Frankel). International initiatives such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) foresee famine conditions in the near future for Gaza if there is no change to the currently inadequate humanitarian relief efforts (Bryant and IPC). It has been estimated that 1.1 million Gaza citizens are at "catastrophic levels of hunger" because families have exhausted their food supplies (Bryant). Additionally, WFP asserted that they have enough food supplies to feed the entire Gazan population, but continue to face obstacles getting this relief to the citizens in need because of the violent hostilities with Hamas and Israel (Bryant). Recent reports reflect staggering levels of crisis. More than 90% of the population is experiencing severe food insecurity as a direct result of the war between Israel and Hamas (IPC). It is predicted that the entire population could be facing actual starvation, noting that families are going without meals on a daily basis (IPC).

Another area of concern is the scarcity of safe, clean water. Gaza attains most of its drinking water from these sources: three desalination plants, Israeli pipelines, and wells extracting water from coastal aquifers which is contaminated with wastewater and must be treated (Palestine 2). Because Gaza's water is of poor quality, much of its clean water supply comes from Israeli pipelines. Some of those pipeline supplies were cut after the Hamas attack on Israel, and by December 2023, much of northern Gaza was without a water supply (Michaelson). A Palestinian representative to the United Nations claimed "access to water is limited, as the Israeli operation has prevented access to the largest desalination plant in Gaza that previously provided drinking water for 350,000 people" (Michaelson). Another shocking statistic: at the onset of Israel's counter-attack, citizens lost approximately 97 percent of the water needed to meet basic needs (Palestine 5). As the conflict has escalated, there has also been damage to the infrastructure- several water facilities have been damaged by bombings across Gaza (Palestine 4).

Citizens are having to make difficult choices as a result of water scarcity- including consumption of unclean water as they are unable to locate bottled water in their locations. One citizen noting having to drink water collected in a barrel outside her home, stating "I'm aware it's not completely clean but we have no other choice," and she goes on to point out suffering from symptoms of dysentery as a result (Michaelson). Tamara Alrifai of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) also paints a grim picture at the water scarcity crisis resulting from the continued blockades- predicting an increase in diseases as a direct result from lack of access to clean water supplies (Michaelson). Evidence of this came just two months after the current conflict began in October when there was a Hepatitis-A (a communicable disease that can result from consuming contaminated water or food) outbreak in a UNRWA shelter (Palestine 6).

Solutions must be found to aid and protect the Gazan citizens immediately and longer term. The ideal solution to help expedite aid is to end the war. Hostile actions on both sides must end, and they also must figure out how to come together and reach some sort of peace agreement. It's possible that if Israel would recognize both Gaza and the West Bank as independent Palestinian states, that could be the first step in efforts to reform and help Gaza to recover and thrive. This is easier said than done, given the long history of conflict and hatred between the two, and it doesn't help when one of the political organizations is widely recognized as a terrorist group. It would have to be a careful compromise to recognize an independent state but at the same time not to support terrorist actions. One thing Israel must realize is the line between seeking justice/retribution for the attack and continuing a war that could very well decimate an entire population of innocent people.

There are barriers that must be overcome for peace to be realized. Hamas still holds Israeli hostages, and Israel has not slowed their military campaigns. Civilians are constantly being displaced- many multiple times- because of military actions. Attempts at agreements have failed thus far. While the US has been involved in trying to help negotiate peace, one potential idea suggests aligning with surrounding nations. One scholar suggests that "key regional players," which include nations of Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia working together in moving towards diplomatic solutions focusing on long-term viable relationships (Sebenius 13). Perhaps a more localized approach like this could result in both sides being

more open to negotiation and reduce the risk of longer and potentially expanded conflict. Ordinary citizens should also not be afraid to speak out and call for an end to conflict.

Agencies and nations providing humanitarian assistance must be given access- Israel has been at the forefront of the blockades, slowing and reducing aid to Gaza. Maybe they could receive regional aid from other neighboring nations such as Egypt. Access must be provided and immediate attention focused on food assistance and the provision of clean water to citizens. Then move on to the reconstruction process and rebuilding of critical infrastructure- such as water pipelines, water treatment plants, healthcare, and sanitation facilities. It will take a significant amount of aid from foreign agencies. Foreign aid is critical to helping Gaza build a successful economy. One could also say that nations providing foreign aid also profit because it could help develop and strengthen peaceful relationships in addition to stimulating their own economies.

Once the emergency situation is resolved, then it would be time to progress to longer term solutions that will focus on helping Gaza achieve self-sufficiency. One idea would be to expand their agricultural production so that they can grow more of their food. International agencies could provide aid and education to help citizens develop alternative methods of crop production. Some examples would be providing hardy, drought resistant seeds more suited to cultivate in their desert like soil, or using hydroponics to grow crops without soil, utilizing seawater for irrigation, and educating farmers and families on sustainable methods. Additionally, since a large part of the population is urbanized, the idea of setting up community gardens where families could grow small crops of their own, may help in reducing families' food costs, promote citizens coming together and having a part in their own success. To combat water scarcity and sanitation issues, aid can be given to construct updated and reliable wastewater treatment facilities, and desalination plants to generate clean fresh water from the ocean. Adding to that would be construction of their own pipelines so they would not be dependent on Israel as their primary source. Implementing these solutions would require significant amounts of continued foreign aid, but the long-term results for the welfare of Gazan citizens would be worth the effort.

The hostility between Israel and Hamas political factions has gone on for decades, and arguably the citizens of Gaza are currently amongst the worst conflict since the Hamas takeover. Almost the entire population has been displaced since this war began and is facing a dire situation with regards to food security. There are no winners to either side- both Hamas continued hatred and berating of Israel, and Israel's continued oppression of the Palestinian state could ultimately result in thousands more deaths of innocent people. It is imperative that aid is provided to these civilians now to prevent a catastrophic famine crisis, and further help them grow and develop into a self-sufficient society.

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