The Gaza blockade

For over 12 years, the people of Gaza have lived under an Israeli-imposed blockade that severely limits travel, trade, and everyday life for its 2 million residents.

The blockade was first imposed on Gaza by Israel in 2006 after Hamas won the Palestinian elections. It was tightened in 2007 after Hamas took control of Gaza and split from the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. The blockade effectively bans nearly all exports from Gaza, severely limits imports to Gaza, and closes the Gaza border for exit by Gaza residents and entrance by others.

The impact of the blockade has been devastating. Today, Palestinians in Gaza don’t have reliable access to clean water, electricity, and many other services. Construction is limited, hospitals are under resourced, school systems have degraded, and the economy has been destroyed. Gaza’s unemployment rate stands at 40 percent—one of the highest unemployment rates in the world—and over 80 percent of the population depends on international assistance to survive.

The United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross have both declared the blockade to be an illegal form of collective punishment against the Gaza population under international law. The blockade must end, but change will only come through political action.
Impacts of the blockade

MOVEMENT

Movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza has been restricted and controlled by Israel for decades, but since 2006 and the imposition of the blockade, restrictions have been severely tightened.

The Israeli-controlled Erez Crossing, located on the northern edge of the Israeli-built wall around Gaza, is the only crossing through which civilians can travel between Gaza and Israel. At the start of the Second Intifada, approximately 26,000 people were allowed to leave Gaza each day via the Erez crossing. During 2018, an average of only 9,000 Palestinians were allowed to exit through the crossing each month.

Nearly all access to the outside world is blocked for the residents of Gaza. Students are denied exit to study abroad. Patients needing medical treatment not available in Gaza are delayed or blocked from reaching care. People with families in other parts of the occupied Palestinian territory are kept from seeing their relatives. People wishing to leave to pursue work in other places are blocked from doing so.

The only official crossing for goods into and out of Gaza is through Kerem Shalom, and any imports and exports must be regulated through a list of controlled entry items created by Israel. Severe restrictions on the import of many basic goods, including the raw materials necessary for industrial production, construction materials, medical supplies, fuel, and many consumer goods remain in place.
EMPLOYMENT

Many of the basic raw materials and resources needed to produce goods in Gaza are blocked from entering Gaza, and exports are down nearly 85 percent from their pre-blockade levels. Electricity is available for approximately four hours per day, fuel is limited, and in most areas of Gaza, access to water is severely restricted.

Together, these factors—combined with repeated Israeli military attacks on Gaza—have destroyed Gazans’ business and industry, resulting in the closure of 90 percent of factories and workshops. Other key sectors of the Gaza economy, including fishing and farming, have also been impacted by the blockade. As a result, Gaza’s unemployment rate is over 40 percent, one of the highest in the world.

HEALTH CARE

Like the rest of Gaza, hospitals and medical clinics have only four to six hours of power per day, requiring them to rely on generators, which are expensive and don’t provide regular access to electricity. Fluctuations in the electrical supply impact sensitive medical equipment such as ultrasounds, X-rays, laboratory machines, cardiac monitors, sterilizing machines, and infants’ incubators, putting patients’ lives at risk.

Gaza doesn’t have the means to treat cancer patients, people who need heart surgery, and other complicated cases. These patients need medical care in Israel or the West Bank. But under the blockade, movement restrictions delay and block access to treatment for patients, at times with fatal results. Only 64 percent of requests for permits to leave Gaza to receive medical treatment were approved in 2018.

The blockade also prohibits the import of vital medical equipment, including X-ray, MRI, and other laboratory machines. Imports of life-saving medicine as well as basic medical supplies are also often delayed or blocked, leading to severe shortages. Israeli officials have also repeatedly turned away World Health Organization trucks full of medical supplies, without explanation. Approximately 40 percent of essential drugs and 25 percent of essential medical disposables are out of stock each month in Gaza.

ELECTRICITY

Today, less than one-third of Gaza’s electricity demand is being met. Rolling blackouts leave Palestinians in Gaza with approximately four hours of electricity per day—afflicting the health and well-being of residents; jeopardizing critical...
QUICK FACTS

The blockade has had a devastating impact on the Gaza population, affecting all aspects of life. According to U.N. Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs:

- Only 9,000 Palestinians were allowed to exit Gaza each month through the Erez crossing during 2018, down from 26,000 per day in 2000.
- Of those allowed to leave Gaza each month, approximately half (4,400) were allowed out to conduct trade or business.
- Fifty-seven percent of Gaza households are food insecure, and approximately 80 percent receive some form of food assistance.
- Gaza’s unemployment rate was over 40 percent during 2018, one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. Youth unemployment was over 60 percent.
- Due to fuel shortages and damaged or destroyed electrical infrastructure, there are power outages for up to 20 hours per day in most areas of Gaza.
- Running water is only supplied to homes for four to six hours every three to five days throughout Gaza.
- Over 96 percent of the water extracted from the Gaza aquifer is unsafe for human consumption, while needed filtration equipment cannot be imported to Gaza.
- Nearly 108 million liters (28,530,528 gallons) of untreated or partially treated sewage are dumped into the sea off Gaza every day. This is the equivalent of 43 Olympic sized swimming pools. Equipment needed to build new or maintain existing treatment facilities are banned from entering Gaza.
- Throughout 2018, over 40 percent of essential medicines and approximately 25 percent of essential disposables at the Gaza Ministry of Health Central Drug Storage in Gaza were at zero stock, which is defined as less than one month’s supply.

Despite the human suffering caused by the blockade, the situation in Gaza is not a humanitarian crisis that can be resolved through international aid and assistance. It is a political crisis that results from the blockade that can only be resolved through political action.

services, such as hospitals, schools, and water sanitation; and making it impossible for businesses to function.

Many factors contribute to this situation, including restrictions on the import of fuel, cuts in the amount of electricity supplied by Israel, and damaged and destroyed infrastructure. Even basic electrical components are blocked from entering Gaza by the Israeli authorities, worsening this crisis. As a result, Palestinians in Gaza remain without regular access to power.

WATER

Gaza has long faced a water crisis. Overexploitation of the Coastal Aquifer on which Gaza relies—combined with contamination from chemicals, wastewater, and other pollutants—has created a situation in which 96 percent of Gaza’s water supply isn’t fit for human consumption.

This situation is compounded—and, in part, caused—by repeated Israeli military attacks on Gaza that have damaged or destroyed water and sanitation infrastructure, including desalination plants, wells, and waste management facilities. The blockade has also prevented Gaza from repairing or replacing this infrastructure, as Israel prohibits the import of key materials that are needed.

As a result of damaged infrastructure, over one-third of Gaza’s population gets only six to eight hours of running water every four days. And at least 100,000 people remain completely disconnected from the water network. Twenty-eight percent of the population is not connected to the sewage network. Even where the sewage network is accessible, the energy crisis has forced wastewater treatment plants to shorten treatment cycles, causing a backflow of sewage onto streets and the discharge of partially treated waste into the Mediterranean Sea.
The blockade: Failed policy

In 2006, Dov Weisglass, advisor to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, said that the blockade was imposed to “put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger.” The logic of the Israeli government was that if the Palestinian population suffered enough, they would turn on Hamas and force it to capitulate to Israeli demands. This targeting of the Gaza population is what led the U.N. and International Committee of the Red Cross to declare the blockade an illegal form of collective punishment under international law.

After a decade it should be clear that the blockade is a failure. It has not stopped violence, it has not weakened Hamas, and it has not brought Israelis or Palestinians security. All that it has brought is suffering to the civilian population in Gaza, but despite failure, the blockade remains firmly in place with international support.

The U.S.’s refusal to engage with Hamas has also led it to actively oppose reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority by threatening to end all assistance to the PA if it reconciles with Hamas. This policy has helped entrench political divisions within Palestinian society.

Further, the United States provides more than $3 billion in military assistance to Israel each year. This unconditional U.S. military assistance subsidizes and allows Israel to maintain its occupation in Gaza. More specifically, weaponry purchased by Israel from the U.S. using U.S. military assistance, including missiles and white phosphorus shells, are used by Israel during its attacks on Gaza. Even while calling for an end to violence in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, the U.S. government approved the transfer of even more weapons and money to the Israeli military. This policy brings nothing but harm to Gaza and also undermines the long-term security interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.

What can you do?

Demand an immediate end to the blockade on Gaza: U.S. government policy officially supports Israel’s continued blockade on Gaza and the isolation of Hamas. The blockade is illegal and immoral and must end. Contact your government representatives, and demand that they call for an immediate change in U.S. government policy and support both the complete end to Israel’s blockade on Gaza and engagement with Hamas.

Additionally, if any solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is going to be found all political factions including Hamas must be at the table and involved in reaching an agreement. U.S. policy must change.

What role is the U.S. playing in this situation?

The United States is complicit in the current situation, playing a key role in sustaining both Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territory and the Gaza blockade. Both the current and past administrations have given Israel a green light to carry out attacks on Gaza and have asserted an Israeli right to self-defense while failing to recognize an equal right to self-defense for Palestinians. The U.S. also continues to support the isolation of Hamas and the Israeli-imposed blockade on Gaza, which it views as a legitimate tool for undermining Hamas, regardless of the blockade’s impact on the Gaza’s people.
LEARN MORE

The following organizations in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel address and challenge Israel’s policies on Gaza:

**Al-Mezan**
www.mezan.org/en

**Palestinian Center for Human Rights**
www.pchrgaza.org/portal/en

**Gaza Community and Mental Health Program**
www.gcmhp.net/en

**B’Tselem**
www.btselem.org

**Gisha**
www.gisha.org

**The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**
www.ochaopt.org

American Friends Service Committee

Since 1948, AFSC has worked in the U.S., Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territory with Palestinians, Israelis, and other committed activists to support nonviolence, challenge oppression, and (since 1970) to end Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. This work is guided by our “Principles for a Just and Lasting Peace in Palestine and Israel.” These principles support the implementation of international human rights and humanitarian law and call for an end to Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories, implementation of refugees’ right of return, equality, and justice for Palestinians and Israelis.