

Feeding West Bank While Starving Gaza a Bad Recipe

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©Published July 4, 2007

Let's hope that we don't make the same mistake in Palestine as we did in Iraq. In Iraq, the West sought to topple Saddam Hussein's regime through sanctions and finally through military means. Our policies ultimately valued defeating Iraq's political leaders over protecting the Iraqi people from poverty and social strife.

Today, the international community is keen to support Fatah and President Abbas through what some analysts call a "feed the West Bank, starve Gaza" strategy: give political and financial aid to Fatah in the West Bank while cutting off Hamas in Gaza. Even if politics and geography lined up so simply (they do not), this is a recipe for disaster. Any plan which appears to reinforce a divide between the West Bank and Gaza flies in the face of Palestinian national aspirations. Any government which appears to accept such a divide will lose credibility and support from the Palestinian people.

"Feed the West Bank, starve Gaza" is also a recipe for humanitarian disaster. Gaza is already on the verge of starvation. Putting aid even further out of reach would be immoral given that Gazans cannot fully help themselves. They are surrounded by barbed wire and military posts and can't get in or out of Gaza without Israeli permission, which is rarely forthcoming. It is impossible for Palestinians to even try to support themselves by developing an economy in such a situation—they must rely on international aid. Yet, UN agencies revealed last week that Gaza will run out of essential food supplies within weeks if Israel does not ease on travel and other restrictions. *Haaretz*, the Israeli newspaper, recently reported that 87 per cent of Gazans live below the poverty line of \$2.40 per day. Leveraging aid for political ends in such circumstances is tantamount to a medieval siege where innocent people are knowingly starved to force surrender of political and military leaders.

Some urge optimism. They argue that ministers from Fatah will get money circulating in the hands of the people in Gaza through the civil service. But, they fail to sufficiently consider that only some people will get paid. As the economic situation gets more desperate, those who are left out in the cold will turn to desperate measures. We don't fully know what this means, but even investment banks like Merrill Lynch warn that isolating Gaza will only engender greater radicalism.

UN diplomat Alvaro de Soto's recently leaked End of Mission Report constitutes a must-read for anyone who wants to understand why the economic, social and political situation in the Palestinian areas has deteriorated under the watchful eye of Western governments and UN

officials. A dizzying array of international agencies fetter Palestinian institutions and decision-makers both directly and indirectly. The Quartet has imposed various conditions on Palestinian leaders to promote a peace process while various donor country committees meet regularly to assess Palestinian institutional reforms. Yet, few want to take on the central unresolved problems in Israel and Palestine: the failure to hold those who violate human rights to account. This array of international agencies generally also turn a blind eye to the fact that Palestinians, despite elections and Gaza “withdrawal” remain under occupation and there is no plan to end the occupation. As de Soto observed, “the occupation/resistance dynamic may be a textbook example of the chicken/egg quandary.” Violence feeds violence.

John Duggard, a South African law professor and United Nations special rapporteur for Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories, starkly defined the policy challenges for Western countries in his January 2007 report:

“For years the occupation of Palestine and apartheid in South Africa vied for attention from the international community. In 1994, apartheid came to an end and Palestine became the only developing country in the world under the subjugation of a Western-affiliated regime. Herein lies its significance to the future of human rights.

“If the West, which has hitherto led the promotion of human rights throughout the world, cannot demonstrate a real commitment to the human rights of the Palestinian people, the international human rights movement, which can claim to be the greatest achievement of the international community of the past 60 years, will be endangered and placed in jeopardy.”

The time to respect, protect and ensure human rights is now. Western interventions in the Palestinian areas will only be helpful if we stop thinking about supporting this political group over that one and start asking what it will take to support long term peace, stability and justice in the region. In other words, our primary goal should be supporting Palestinian society and the human rights of all people in Israel and Palestine on the basis of equality. This must be at the centre of our analysis.

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