



COVID 19: Bringing the unimaginable realities of Gaza to the world

Yasser Abu Jamei

The Gaza Blockade

The story of Israel's imposition of a blockade on the Gaza Strip in 2007 after Hamas took control there is an infamous one. Yet one could well claim that the blockade really began in September 2000 when the second Intifada erupted. In that year and well into 2001 Israel inflicted severe trade restrictions on the Gaza Strip and shut down its International Airport too. Even more movement restrictions have been put in place since then.

Until the late 1980s, however, Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem - the Palestinian areas occupied in 1967 - were quite free to move between those areas and 48/Israel. Palestinian workers would go to their jobs in Gaza, West Bank and 48/Israel without any official restrictions. Many Gazan students attended universities in the West Bank for their undergraduate and graduate educations. Members of large families that reside across 48/Israel and Palestine were meeting and enjoying visits without impediments. The initial change of that policy came in 1991 when Israel started demanding that any Palestinian wishing to travel between Gaza, West Bank, East Jerusalem, or 48/Israel must obtain a personal permit (*B'Tselem*) first. This requirement literally meant splitting the Occupied territories into three totally separate geographical areas and giving Israel complete control over movement of the population.

Permits were relatively easy to obtain only at the very beginning and, in a very short time, regulations were tightened. Even now, most of the negotiations about travel policy are just a show that cover the reality of systematic refusal of approvals or “permits” to exit Gaza or to travel through 48/Israel, an expression of Israel’s Separation Policy. During the second Intifada Israel installed numerous checkpoints in the West Bank and Gaza that further interfered with movement within the occupied territories. In 2001 Israel also bombarded and destroyed the Gaza International Airport that had operated for only a few years as well as crippling the Gaza Seaport project where construction had just begun.

Who was affected?

Hundreds of Gazan students who were studying at West Bank Universities started to struggle with the drastic change in regulations. Some suddenly now found themselves “illegally” present in the West Bank as permit renewals were delayed or as their applications were rejected. This meant that if they went back to Gaza, they wouldn't be able to return to study at their universities. That was indeed the case with some students, while others preferred to stay in West Bank for the whole studying duration and return to Gaza after graduation. Today you could hardly find a student from Gaza who is studying in the West Bank universities.

In the early 2000s and with the launch of the second Intifada tens of thousands of Gazans who were working in 48/Israel were not allowed to go to their workplaces anymore. The restrictions immediately took a heavy toll on the economy in the Gaza Strip and pushed tens of thousand of families under the poverty line. International organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) issued a stream of reports that highlighted this suffering as an intended result of stringent restrictions both on trade and on population mobility. An OCHA report in 2017 noted that during the first half of 2017 less than 240 Palestinians were allowed on daily basis out of Gaza to 48/Israel whereas the daily average before the second Intifada and in early 2000 was about 26,000.

The World Health Organization (WHO) monitors the restrictions of movement as it affects the movement of patients who need to exit Gaza to receive treatment in the West Bank, East Jerusalem or Israeli hospitals. In its monthly report on health access December 2019 the WHO found that only 64% of patients' applications to leave Gaza were approved. This means that one third of applicants were without access to needed health care. Moreover, the report also shows that only 48% of Gaza companion permit applications were approved. The rest of the applications were either denied or delayed. During that month fifty-five children under age 18 and eighteen patients over 60 were denied permits to exit Gaza for medical reasons. Another 180 children and 50 patients over the age of 60 did not receive a definitive answer to their application (delayed). About 25% of the denied cases and 31% of the delayed ones were appointments for oncology care.

In July 2019 OCHA's monthly humanitarian bulletin highlighted the negative effects of restrictions on the movement of humanitarian staff in and out of Gaza. The report mentions measures and regulations that engendered enormous challenges for Gaza-based national staff who work for International NGOs or UN agencies. Permit applications to exit Gaza to travel to 48/Israel and the West Bank now must be submitted 55 working days in advance of the date of travel, as compared to 14 days in 2017. The official processing time for applications for a one-day permit to travel to Jordan, via 48/Israel, is 70 working days.

For the general population, Rafah terminal was the only "available solution" to attempt to exit Gaza. The terminal used to operate via agreement between the Israeli authorities and Egypt, and then in agreement between Israel, Egypt and the PA. Israel used to impose added restrictions occasionally on travelers when it was operating the terminal. For some years, people below the age of 35 and above the age of 16 were not allowed to leave Gaza at all. In 2005 an agreement was put in place on how to operate the terminal with some degree of oversight. However, after Hamas took control of Gaza strip, Rafah terminal only operates for "humanitarian reasons." There are long waiting lists of needy patients, students planning to study abroad, and people who are residing and working outside the Strip waiting their turn. Only a few hundred people can leave on a daily basis. This is for an area that has a population of 2 million people.

Implications of movement restrictions

The Legal Center for Freedom of Movement (Gisha) issued an interesting document in December 2017 entitled "10 Years, 10 Judgments; How Israel's courts sanctioned the

closure of Gaza.” The document provides synopses and analyses of ten judgments that challenged aspects of Israel’s policies in relation to Gaza. Gisha explains that “a reading of this collection of judgments reveals that abandoning a clear system of law in favor of a vague humanitarian rhetoric framework has given the state unlimited discretion, leaving Gaza residents exposed to an exceedingly flimsy basis for the protection of their human rights.”

Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly, reads: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. And (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country. This was reinforced by Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The movement restrictions among other violations of human rights would have an impact on the psychological wellbeing of the people. The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (*B’Tselem*) explains that Israeli restrictions on Palestinians’ movement impose a life of constant uncertainty, making it difficult to perform everyday tasks or make plans, and frustrates the development of a stable economy. This comes also in addition to the various reports stating that Gaza would be uninhabitable by the year 2020. Many of the media outlets and international organizations started to call Gaza, with much justice, “the largest open-air prison in the world.”

To many people who live outside Gaza, it’s beyond imagination to understand how Gazans feel about their living conditions and how movement restrictions affect their lives. What does it feel for a person applying for a permit to go to work in 48/Israel, knowing that the permit will enable him to earn his family food and may be survival? What about patients who need to receive cancer treatment in Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem who are just waiting for a piece of paper that could spare their lives! What about a child who is wondering if his mother will get a companion permit to be with him during his treatment journey, or that he will need to look for another companion as his mother is denied! Or maybe go with his 70 years grandmother who will “definitely cause no harm to Israeli’s security”, or what if he will be travelling on his own?

How does it feel for a student who wins a Chevening or Fulbright scholarship, but finds that joining the intended university is still pending approval! And in quite a few cases, how does it feel, to be losing one academic year as you try your best to exit Gaza to get to your place of study? How does it feel when you visit your parents in Gaza and then lose your chances of going back to your job outside the Gaza strip, in Europe or in other countries? How does it feel if you live abroad and you must think it over a thousand times before travelling to see your family in Gaza, because travelling back could be a mission impossible.

Many brides had to have a symbolic wedding in Gaza because the bridegroom lives abroad and is afraid of getting stuck in Gaza. She celebrates her wedding with her family, then travels alone after months of waiting to meet her bridegroom who resides outside, and knowing full well that returning to Gaza to see her Mom and Dad is not happening soon! Its hard to imagine that a population of 2 million people faces those difficulties in the 21st century and that this is the result of procedures devised by what people consider the only democracy in the Middle East.

COVID-19 and Social Distancing

With the outbreak of the Pandemic in December 2019, many countries took dramatic steps to stop the spread of the disease. More drastic steps were taken when the pandemic hit Italy very hard. Among those health measures were movement restrictions. Flights were cut back, if not halted, and borders were closed. In some areas and neighborhoods people had to remain in their flats in quarantine. The social distancing measures were nearly unbearable to humanity. People reacted in different ways to those strict measures. While some were reckless, others tried their best to comply with what were, after all, temporary regulations. Many people were not able to visit their parents and loved ones, which was very hard to accept. Their loved ones might not live far away. However, people wanted to adhere to social distancing. They kept in contact through social media but, as they say, it's never as good as being physically together and having a hug!

COVID-19 imposed restrictions on movements that are far weaker from what we observe in Gaza, but they also just might bring some of the grim realities that Palestinians live with every day into the consciousness of a wider humanity. Humanity will hopefully soon win its battle against this brutal virus and gets its freedom back. Yet when are Palestinians going to enjoy their freedom? It's a question that humanity also needs to answer.

Further reading

<http://www.emro.who.int/pse/publications-who/>

http://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/palestine/documents/Dec_2019_Monthly_Update_d.pdf?ua=1

https://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement

<https://gisha.org/publication>

https://www.gisha.org/UserFiles/File/LegalDocuments/10_Years_10_Judgments_EN_Web.pdf

<https://www.ochaopt.org/>

<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/increased-restrictions-movement-humanitarian-staff-and-out-gaza>

https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/the_humanitarian_impact_of_the_blockade.pdf

Yasser Abu-Jamei M.D. is a psychiatrist who has served since 2014 as General Director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Center, a leading provider of mental health services in Palestine. In 2012, he obtained his MSc in Clinical Neuropsychiatry (with distinction) at the University of Birmingham. He received the Best Alumnus Achievement award from the Said Foundation in 2015 for his work developing both the mental health sector in Gaza and the GCMHP crisis response plan following the 2014 war on Gaza. He received the Alumnus of the Year award from the University of Birmingham in 2016. Dr. Abu-Jamei is a member of the Taskforce responsible for Palestine's National Mental Health Strategy for 2015-2019. He has a special interest in capacity-building programs, neuropsychiatry, advocacy, and lobbying activities. He has been certified as a Trainer of Trainers in the field of supervision and Care for Caregivers from the Free University of Berlin. He has recently co-authored articles investigating mental health treatment approaches that integrate public health and human rights in the Gazan context.