Comments to Pugwash plenary ‘Unlocking Gaza in the Present Regional Environment’

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The sanctions imposed on the Palestinians go back to the immediate aftermath of the January 2006 legislative elections won by Hamas in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert came up with three conditions, which he had little difficulty persuading the U.S. Administration to embrace and turn into what become the Quartet Conditions. Hamas was told it would not be communicated with and its election success would not be acknowledged until it 1) recognised Israel’s right to exist; 2) disarmed and renounced violence; and 3) accepted all agreements reached between the PLO and Israel. Hamas, expectedly, rejected all three conditions and considered them an act of blackmail.

The international position contributed to fomenting discord among the Palestinians who were left with one of two choices: support democracy and you’ll suffer or rise against Hamas and you’ll enjoy a flow of ‘goodies’ from donor nations. For several months after the elections the new Hamas-led government was hindered in every possible way. The tension between Fatah and Hamas escalated and the threat of civil war loomed. A Saudi initiative succeeded in bringing the leaders of both factions to the negotiation table and the Mecca agreement was born paving the way for the formation of a national unity government. Yet, this did not please the Israeli and their U.S. sponsors. General Dayton was despatched to the territories to plot a coup against Hamas, which pre-empted the plan by disbanding the security agencies trained and groomed by the United States and some of its allies in the region to unseat Hamas. The 14th of June 2007 was the day when military force was used by Hamas to end the hegemony of PA agencies in the Gaza Strip. That was the beginning of the administrative and organisational split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Since then, the entire Strip has been under blockade whose primary objective is to weaken the resolve of Hamas or turn the population in Gaza against it as a result of rising hardship and deteriorating economic conditions.

The blockade has, indeed, made life much more difficult in Gaza and forced its people to resort to unconventional means to mitigate the impact of the siege. A new industry emerged known as the ‘tunnels industry’ with hundreds of tunnels stretching from the Palestinian to the Egyptian
side of the city of Rafah. The Egyptian regime under Hosni Mubarak contributed effectively to the siege and frequently tightened its grip against the inhabitants of Gaza by restricting access via the Rafah crossing and occasionally by demolishing some of the tunnels. Yet, the people of Gaza made use of the rampant corruption among Egyptian security officers who, in exchange for lucrative share in the cross tunnel trade kept a blind eye for much of the time.

When the 25 January revolution in Egypt led to the overthrow of Mubarak and eventually to democratic elections that rose the Muslim Brotherhood to power things started improving in Gaza as restrictions were being eased under direct instructions from President Muhammad Mursi. A year after his election, President Mursi was ousted in a military coup sponsored by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia amid cheering from the United States and Israel. The coup authorities treated the Gaza Strip from day number one as a hostile entity and the Egyptian pro-coup media waged campaign after another to incite anti-Palestinian and anti-Hamas sentiment. The Egyptian military ordered bulldozers to destroy the tunnels and curb all ‘illicit’ trade between Egypt and Gaza. The Rafah crossing has since the coup been mostly closed with only few exceptions on certain occasions. Many Palestinians believe that the hostile attitude of the coup authorities in Egypt toward Gaza may be intended to pave the way for measures to topple Hamas inside Gaza and reinstate the PA.

The blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip has only achieved one thing, it made Palestinians lives more difficult and created a political predicament for all parties concerned. Undoubtedly, Hamas is in predicament as a result of this situation but so are the Israelis, the Americans and the Egyptians. It makes no sense whatsoever for the blockade to continue. It could of course have been more successfully foiled had the Palestinians been united. Many attempts were made over the past few years to bridge the gap between Hamas and Fatah and achieve national reconciliation. Yet, the main obstacle has invariable been the insistence by the Israelis and the Americans that no such reconciliation would be allowed to succeed unless Hamas unequivocally accepted the three Quartet conditions.

The blockade on Gaza must come to an end for two important reasons. First, the siege is collectively punishing the entire population of Gaza and therefore amounts to a crime against
humanity. The Palestinians have been suffering unnecessarily for many years as a result but today the Strip is on the brink of a major humanitarian disaster as a result of the declared war against it by the new authorities in Egypt. Second, the siege and the insistence that Hamas should comply with the three Quartet conditions have failed to subdue Hamas or weaken it. At the same time the current status quo makes it harder and harder to resolve some of the problems that the parties concerned wish to see resolved. Some of these concerned parties know that some important business cannot be conducted without the involvement of Hamas. While they do not wish to be seen to communicate with the movement because it’s already designated as a terrorist organisation and is under siege they have not hesitated from seeking secret back channels with the movement.