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EUROPEAN COORDINATION OF COMMITTEES AND ASSOCIATIONS FOR PALESTINE

POSITION PAPER ON EU POLICY FOR THE GAZA STRIP

October 2013 (revised March 2014)

1. Introduction

“I chose to be here to underline the situation in Gaza, and to say that we support the work of UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees) and want to see a future for the people of Gaza” declared EU High Representative Catherine Ashton during her visit in Gaza last June. She added: “We want to see the crossings open, and the economic situation improved”.

Since then, **the situation of Gaza Strip has dramatically worsened** due to the last events in Egypt, suppressing the precarious solution of the tunnels to supply goods to the Palestinian economy in Gaza, and making the circulation of persons from and to Gaza since more difficult than before. Whatever the appreciation we can have on the policy of Egypt, **the Gaza Strip is a Palestinian territory occupied by Israel, which bears full responsibility for its situation**. Despite this responsibility, the Israel authorities have recently taken **outrageous measures by denying access of Gaza Strip to an official delegation the European Parliament** which was scheduled from 27 to 30 October.

Moreover, the long-lasting Israeli policy of separating the Gaza Strip from the West Bank deeply affects any solution for a Palestinian state.

Protests are no longer sufficient, **clear demands** must be requested by the European Authorities and Parliament to the Israel government, **sanctions** must be taken if these demands are not fulfilled.

2. Key demands

We ask the European Parliament, the Foreign Affairs Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and External Security, to make **imperative demands** to the Israeli authorities for **immediate, short-term** and **mid-term actions**.

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Immediate measures should be the following:

- ≡ end the Israeli blockade of Gaza, allow the import and export of all goods through the Israeli crossings;
- ≡ arrange, without conditions, for all Palestinian citizens of Gaza, an emergency passage through West Bank for their travels abroad;
- ≡ re-establish the right to fish for Palestinian fishermen on the whole domestic waters, at least for 20 nautical miles, and cease immediately any attack against them;
- ≡ immediately stop all attacks on Palestinian farmers, allow free cultivation on the “buffer zone”;
- ≡ allow all Palestinian students to study in any Palestinian university, wherever it is, in the Gaza Strip or in the West Bank,
- ≡ allow the families, living in the Gaza Strip, of Palestinian prisoners, to visit their prisoners.

In parallel, it is the responsibility of the Egyptian authorities to immediately open the Rafah crossing to all categories of the population and to establish a legal crossing for merchandise and all types of goods alongside the present Rafah crossing.

Very short-term measures should be the following:

- ≡ establish a complete “safe passage” between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, allowing the free passage of persons and goods without condition: this was a very important commitment in the Oslo Agreements, regularly recalled and never implemented;
- ≡ immediately stop any pumping of the underground water between the Hebron hills and the Gaza Strip, take any measure needed to stop the degradation of the underground water in the Gaza Strip.

Immediately prepare the mid-term:

- ≡ prepare the reconstruction of the Gaza airport,
- ≡ launch the construction of the Gaza harbor,
- ≡ accelerate all the infrastructure projects, especially for sewage, water distribution and electricity generation,
- ≡ prepare the use of the Palestinian gas resources offshore Gaza,

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- ≡ establish import and export circuits independent from Israel, and support the re-building of a Palestinian industry in Gaza.

All these measures are realistic. **They need to be enforced**, and the EU can largely contribute to this achievement. Oral or written statements have proved inefficient. The EU can no longer have the sole role of putting money to attenuate some effects of the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. **The EU and its member states must put real pressure on Israel to have this plan implemented. Sanctions must be clearly envisaged** if they are not implemented by Israel, including **the suspension of the Association Agreement** between EU and Israel, on the basis of Article 2 of the Agreement.

3. Recall of the situation in the Gaza Strip

Israeli authorities continue to impose an illegal blockade on Gaza which affects every aspect of life in the Gaza Strip. According to the 2012 OCHA consolidated appeal¹, “livelihoods remained severely constrained by policies that restricted access to the areas with the most viable agricultural and fishing prospects. Restrictions on the movement of goods and people into Gaza have created chronic problems in health services, education and wash, sanitation and hygiene facilities”. We propose detailed figures on this report in Annex 1.

With many other organisations like B’Tselem², we must also recall that the continuing siege of the Gaza Strip, together with still longer-lasting and nearly complete blockade, have ruined the Palestinian economy in Gaza, pushing a majority of the population below the poverty threshold.

Since July-August 2013, with the destruction of the tunnels by the Egyptian authorities, the situation has even more dramatically degraded for the population in Gaza, now totally depending on the Israeli decisions. For months, people in Gaza are living a dramatic shortage of electricity (presently available 4 hours/day) and fuel, affecting all sectors of the economy including essential transport and water pumping, of gas for cooking and heating, of construction materials.

As stated by UNRWA officer Chris Gunness³, the effects of the floods last December were dramatically increased by the situation of the infrastructures in Gaza and the lack of electricity or fuel for pumping.

Inhabitants of the Gaza Strip face very severe restrictions for their mobility; recently, hundreds of students registered in foreign universities for their Master cycle have been denied their exit from Gaza. International NGOs face more and more difficulties to enter the Gaza Strip. Families split between the

1" http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ochaopt_cap_2012_full_document_english.pdf

2 http://www.btselem.org/gaza_strip/siege_tightening

3 <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=657294>

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West Bank and the Gaza Strip are denied their right to mutual visits, and families of prisoners from the Gaza Strip are denied any visit to their imprisoned parent.

However, the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip is striving for life in a remarkable way, maintaining a high level of education and even a lively artistic creation. We must always recall that **Gaza is not victim of a natural catastrophe, but of a strategic choice from the occupying power, Israel, to systematically strangle its economic, cultural and social life.** This action from Israel has been particularly shocking and visible since the beginning of the siege in 2007, but has started longer ago in the Nineties.

4. Israel is accountable for the situation in the Gaza Strip

Israel is party to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. The Fourth Geneva Convention on occupation applies in Gaza since Israel still exercises control over Gaza's airspace, sea space and land borders, as well as its electricity, water, sewage and telecommunications networks and population registry. Occupying powers have a duty to ensure the security and well-being of the civilian population in areas under their control. Israel's continuing blockade of the Gaza Strip, a measure that is depriving its population of food, fuel, and other necessities, constitutes a form of collective punishment in violation of article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

We need also recall that the Israeli forces have completely and repeatedly destroyed the Gaza airport (constructed with UE funds), made impossible the realization of the Gaza harbor project, destroyed a considerable number of vital infrastructure and most of the factories during the so-called "cast lead" operation.

While the industry has been destroyed, either physically by bombing or economically by the blockade, the fishing zone for Palestinian fishermen has been arbitrarily limited to a tiny zone of 3 nautical miles, and a considerable part of agriculture land has been made unusable due to the "buffer zone" unilaterally set up by the Israeli military forces.

The extreme degradation of the economic and social situation in the Gaza Strip is the result of a systematic Israeli policy.

5. The European Union, together with the United Nations, has formally taken position against the Blockade

The EU's position on the blockade is unequivocal: the EU calls for the immediate, sustained, and unconditional opening of crossings for the flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons to and from Gaza. The EU considers that the changes on the ground that followed the decision of the Israeli government of June 2010 to ease the closure have been limited and insufficient⁴.

⁴ Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process, 3058th FOREIGN AFFAIRS Council meeting, Brussels, 13 December 2010

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The European Parliament, after the Israeli military operation against the humanitarian flotilla in 2010, has adopted a resolution on the Gaza blockade. It urges “Israel to immediately end the blockade on Gaza, which has resulted in a humanitarian disaster and increasing radicalization, which is becoming a source of insecurity for Israel and for the region as a whole”. It also calls upon the “HR/VP and EU Member States to take steps to ensure the sustainable opening of all the crossing points to and from Gaza, including the port of Gaza, with adequate international end-use monitoring, to allow the unimpeded flow of humanitarian and commercial goods necessary for reconstruction and a self-supporting economy, as well as currency flows and free movement of people”.

As for the United Nations, they have several times recalled the “unacceptable, unsustainable and counterproductive”⁵ nature of the Gaza Strip blockade.

We need also to recall that the Israeli attack on Gaza in winter 2008-2009 resulted in 1400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis killed. It included deliberate attacks on civilians and non-military facilities, among which water supply and sewage systems, hospitals, schools and residential buildings. Israel has failed to conduct independent, impartial and thorough investigations into the violations of international law it committed. These investigations were demanded in the “Goldstone report” - endorsed by the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council - and called for by the EU.

ANNEX 1 : SOME FIGURES FROM THE 2012 OCHA REPORT

- ≡ At least 70% of the households near the access restricted areas have either been temporarily or permanently displaced since 2000.
- ≡ Additionally, at least 20,000 people are still displaced from Operation Cast Lead.
- ≡ Restrictions on freedom of movement continue to impact all aspects of civilian life, undermining economic growth, affecting employment and livelihoods and limiting access to basic services. Such restrictions also have a detrimental effect on family unity, gender roles and the enjoyment of political, religious, economic and cultural rights.
- ≡ 80% of government and 95% of UNRWA schools operate double shifts to cope with a shortage.
- ≡ 63% of primary health facilities and 50% of hospitals lack basic infrastructure, 23% of all medical equipment is not functional, 38% of essential drugs and 23% of disposables are out of stock.
- ≡ More than 1.1 million people are at risk of consuming bad-quality or contaminated water.
- ≡ Agricultural livelihoods across the oPt are under enormous pressure from shrinking access to productive assets, services and markets, water shortage, and risk of animal and plant disease

⁵ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sgsm12805.doc.htm>

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outbreaks. In Gaza, 35% of arable land and 85% of the maritime space is totally or partially inaccessible to herders and fishermen.

- ≡ Gradual but devastating de-development is being caused by the blockade, now in its 5th year. The economy remains distressed and majority of population continues to depend on humanitarian aid to meet basic needs.
- ≡ More than half of Gaza's population are food-insecure. These are often the same families who have suffered loss of housing and other assets as result of the Israeli offensive in 2008/2009 and subsequent home demolitions as well as those that suffer from a lack of income opportunities, i.e. unemployment, due to a moribund private sector.

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