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## The Real Goal of Israel's Blockade

by Jonathan Cook

The latest tightening of Israel's chokehold on Gaza – ending all supplies into the Strip for more than a week – has produced immediate and shocking consequences for Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants.

The refusal to allow in fuel has forced the shutting down of Gaza's only power station, creating a blackout that pushed Palestinians bearing candles on to the streets in protest last week. A water and sanitation crisis are expected to follow.

And on Thursday, the United Nations announced it had run out of the food essentials it supplies to 750,000 desperately needy Gazans. "This has become a blockade against the United Nations itself," a spokesman said.

In a further blow, Israel's large Bank Hapoalim said it would refuse all transactions with Gaza by the end of the month, effectively imposing a financial blockade on an economy dependent on the Israeli shekel. Other banks are planning to follow suit, forced into a corner by Israel's declaration in September 2007 of Gaza as an "enemy entity."

There are likely to be few witnesses to Gaza's descent into a dark and hungry winter. In the past week, all journalists were refused access to Gaza, as were a group of senior European diplomats. Days earlier, dozens of academics and doctors due to attend a conference to assess the damage done to Gazans' mental health were also turned back.

Israel has blamed the latest restrictions of aid and fuel to Gaza on Hamas' violation of a five-month ceasefire by launching rockets out of the Strip. But Israel had a hand in shattering the

agreement: as the world was distracted by the U.S. presidential elections, the army invaded Gaza, killing six Palestinians and provoking the rocket fire.

The humanitarian catastrophe gripping Gaza is largely unrelated to the latest tit-for-tat strikes between Hamas and Israel. Nearly a year ago, Karen Koning AbuZayd, commissioner-general of the UN's refugee agency, warned: "Gaza is on the threshold of becoming the first territory to be intentionally reduced to a state of abject destitution."

She blamed Gaza's strangulation directly on Israel, but also cited the international community as accomplice. Together they began blocking aid in early 2006, following the election of Hamas to head the Palestinian Authority (PA).

The U.S. and Europe agreed to the measure on the principle that it would force the people of Gaza to rethink their support for Hamas. The logic was supposedly similar to the one that drove the sanctions applied to Iraq under Saddam Hussein through the 1990s: if Gaza's civilians suffered enough, they would rise up against Hamas and install new leaders acceptable to Israel and the West.

As AbuZayd said, that moment marked the beginning of the international community's complicity in a policy of collective punishment of Gaza, despite the fact that the Fourth Geneva Convention classifies such treatment of civilians as a war crime.

The blockade has been pursued relentlessly since, even if the desired outcome has been no more achieved in Gaza than it was in Iraq. Instead, Hamas entrenched its control and cemented the Strip's physical separation from the Fatah-dominated West Bank.

Far from reconsidering its policy, Israel's leadership has responded by turning the screw ever tighter – to the point where Gazan society is now on the verge of collapse.

In truth, however, the growing catastrophe being unleashed on Gaza is only indirectly related to Hamas' rise to power and the rocket attacks.

Of more concern to Israel is what each of these developments represents: a refusal on the part of Gazans to abandon their resistance to Israel's continuing occupation. Both provide Israel with a pretext for casting aside the protections offered to Gaza's civilians under international law to make them submit.

With embarrassing timing, the Israeli media revealed over the weekend that one of the first acts of Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas prime minister elected in 2006, was to send a message to the Bush White House offering a long-term truce in return for an end to Israeli occupation. His offer was not even acknowledged.

Instead, according to the daily *Jerusalem Post*, Israeli policymakers have sought to reinforce the impression that "it would be pointless for Israel to topple Hamas because the population [of Gaza] is Hamas." On this thinking, collective punishment is warranted because there are no true civilians in Gaza. Israel is at war with every single man, woman, and child.

In an indication of how widely this view is shared, the cabinet discussed last week a new strategy to obliterate Gazan villages in an attempt to stop the rocket launches, in an echo of discredited Israeli tactics used in south Lebanon in its war of 2006. The inhabitants would be

given warning before indiscriminate shelling began.

In fact, Israel's desire to seal off Gaza and terrorize its civilian population predates even Hamas' election victory. It can be dated to Ariel Sharon's disengagement of summer 2005, when Fatah's rule of the PA was unchallenged.

An indication of the kind of isolation Sharon preferred for Gaza was revealed shortly after the pullout, in December 2005, when his officials first proposed cutting off electricity to the Strip.

The policy was not implemented, the local media pointed out at the time, both because officials suspected the violation of international law would be rejected by other nations and because it was feared that such a move would damage Fatah's chances of winning the elections the following month.

With the vote over, however, Israel had the excuse it needed to begin severing its responsibility for the civilian population. It recast its relationship with Gaza from one of occupation to one of hostile parties at war. A policy of collective punishment that was considered transparently illegal in late 2005 has today become Israel's standard operating procedure.

Increasingly strident talk from officials, culminating in February in the deputy defense minister Matan Vilnai's infamous remark about creating a "shoah," or Holocaust, in Gaza, has been matched by Israeli measures. The military bombed Gaza's electricity plant in June 2006 and has been incrementally cutting fuel supplies ever since. In January, Vilnai argued that Israel should cut off "all responsibility" for Gaza, and two months later Israel signed a deal with Egypt for it to build a power station for Gaza in Sinai.

All of these moves are designed with the same purpose in mind: persuading the world that Israel's occupation of Gaza is over and that Israel can therefore ignore the laws of occupation and use unremitting force against Gaza.

Cabinet ministers have been queuing up to express such sentiments. Ehud Olmert, for example, has declared that Gazans should not be allowed to "live normal lives"; Avi Dichter believes punishment should be inflicted "irrespective of the cost to the Palestinians"; Meir Sheerit has urged that Israel should "decide on a neighborhood in Gaza and level it" – the policy discussed by ministers last week.

In concert, Israel has turned a relative blind eye to the growing smuggling trade through Gaza's tunnels to Egypt. Gazans' material welfare is falling more heavily on Egyptian shoulders by the day.

The question remains: what does Israel expect the response of Gazans to be to their immiseration and ever greater insecurity in the face of Israeli military reprisals?

Eyal Sarraj, the head of Gaza's Community Mental Health Program, said this year that Israel's long-term goal was to force Egypt to end the controls along its short border with the Strip. Once the border was open, he warned, "Wait for the exodus."