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Pushing Gaza to Suicide: the Politics of Humiliation

By Ramzy Baroud
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Mohammed Abed is a 28-year-old taxi driver from the village of Qarara, near the town of Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip. He has no teeth.

Lack of medical care and proper dentistry work cost him all of his teeth, which rotted and decayed at a very young age. Yet, his dire financial needs prevented him from acquiring

dentures. His community eventually pitched in, collecting the few hundred dollars needed for Mohammed to finally being able to eat.

Mohammed is not unemployed. He works ten hours, sometimes more, every single day. The old taxi he drives between Khan Younis and Gaza City is owned by someone else. Mohammed's entire daily salary ranges from 20 to 25 shekels, about 6 dollars.

Raising a family with four children with such a meagre income made it impossible for Mohammed to think of such seemingly extraneous expenses, such as fixing his teeth or acquiring dentures.

Strange as it may seem, Mohammed is somewhat lucky.

Unemployment in Gaza is among the highest in the world, presently estimated at 44 percent. Those who are 'employed', like Mohammed, still struggle to survive. 80 percent of all Gazans are dependent on humanitarian assistance.

In 2015, the UN had warned that Gaza would be uninhabitable by 2020. At the time, all aspects of life had testified to that fact: lack of reliable electricity supply, polluted water, Israel's military seizure of much of the Gaza Strip's arable land, restricting the movement of fishermen and so on.

An Israeli military siege on Gaza has extended for over 10 years, and the situation continues to deteriorate.

A Red Cross report last May warned of another 'looming crisis' in the public health sector, due to the lack of electricity.

The energy crisis has extended from electricity supplies to even cooking gas.

Last February Israel cut cooking gas supplies to the Strip to a half.

"The cooking gas stations stopped accepting empty gas cylinders because their tanks are empty," according to the Chairman of the Petroleum and Gas Owners Association of the Gaza Strip, Mahmoud Shawa. He described the situation as "very critical."

Three months ago, the Mahmoud Abbas-controlled Palestinian Authority in Ramallah decided to reduce the salaries of tens of thousands of its employees in the Gaza Strip.

The money provided by the PA had played an essential role in keeping the struggling economy afloat. With most employees receiving half – or less – of their salaries, the barely functioning Gaza economy is dying.

'H' is a university professor and his wife, 'S', is a doctor. The middle-class couple with five children has lived a fairly comfortable life in the Strip, even during the early years of the siege. Now, they tell me they are counting their money very carefully so as to avoid the fate of most Gazans.

'S's salary comes from Ramallah. She is now only able to claim \$350 dollars from what was once a significantly higher pay. 'H' does not receive his money from the West Bank's authority, but his salary was slashed by half, anyway, since most of the students are now too poor to pay for their tuitions.

Mu'in, who lives in the Nuseirat Refugee Camp, is worse off. A retired teacher, with a pension that barely reaches 200 dollars a month, Mu'in is struggling to put food on the table. An educated father of four unemployed adult sons and a wife recovering from a stroke and can barely walk, Mu'in lives mostly on hand-outs.

With no access to the West Bank due to the Israeli siege, and with severe restrictions on movement via the Rafah-Egypt border, Gaza is living through its darkest days. Literally. Starting June 11, Israel began reducing the electricity supply to the impoverished Strip, as per the request of Abbas' Palestinian Authority.

The results are devastating. Gaza households now receive 2 to 3 hours of electricity per day, and not even at fixed hours.

'S' told me that her family is constantly on alert. "When electricity arrives at any time of the day or night, we all spring into action," she said. "All batteries must be charged as quickly as possible and the laundry must be done, even at 3 in the morning."

But Gazans are survivors. They have endured such hardships for years and, somehow, they have subsisted. But cancer patients cannot survive on mere strength of character.

Rania, who lives in Gaza City, is a mother of three. She has been struggling with breast cancer for a year. With no chemotherapy available in Gaza's barely-functioning hospitals, she has taken the arduous journey from Gaza to Jerusalem every time she has needed to carry out the life-saving procedure.

That, until Israel decided not to issue new permits to Gaza's terminally ill patients, some of whom have died waiting for permits and, others – like Rania – who are still hoping for a miracle before cancer spreads through the rest of their bodies.

But Israel and Egypt are not the only culprits. The Palestinian Authority in Ramallah is using the siege as a bargaining chip to put pressure on its rivals, Hamas, who have controlled the besieged Strip for ten years.

Hamas, on the other hand, is reportedly seeking a partnership with its old foe, Mohammed Dahlan, to ease the Gaza siege through Egypt in exchange for making him the head of a committee that is in charge of Gaza's external affairs.

Dahlan is also a foe of Abbas, both fighting over the leadership of the Fatah party for years.

Abbas' requests to Israel to pressure on Gaza via electricity reduction, together with his earlier salary cuts, are meant to push Hamas out of its the proposed alliance with Dahlan.

Palestinians in Gaza are suffering; in fact, dying.

To think that Palestinian ‘leaders’ are actually involved in tightening or manipulating the siege to exact political concessions from one another, is dismaying.

While Israel is invested in maintaining the Palestinian rift, so that it continues with its own illegal settlement policies in the West Bank and Jerusalem unhindered, Palestinians are blinded by pitiful personal interests and worthless ‘control’ over occupied land.

In this political struggle, the likes of Mohammed, ‘H’, ‘S’ and cancer-ridden Rania – together with two million others – seem to be of no significance.

Magdalena Mughrabi, Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International, sounded the alarm on June 14 when she warned that “the latest power cuts risk turning an already dire situation into a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe.”

“For 10 years, the siege has unlawfully deprived Palestinians in Gaza of their most basic rights and necessities. Under the burden of the illegal blockade and three armed conflicts, the economy has sharply declined and humanitarian conditions have deteriorated severely,” she said.

Omar Shakir, Human Rights Watch director for the region, rejected the notion that the Israelis cut of electricity supplies to Gaza are made as per the Palestinian Authority’s request.

“Israel controls the borders, the airspace, the waters of Gaza, so Israel has an obligation that goes beyond merely responding to a request from Palestinian authorities,” Shakir said.

Between Israel’s dismissal of international calls to end the siege and Palestinians’ pathetic power game, Gazans are left alone, unable to move freely or live even according to the lowest acceptable living standards.

Fatima, a 52-old mother from Rafah, told me that she tried to kill herself a few days ago, if it were not for her children wrestling the knife away.

When I told Fatima that she has so much to live for, she chuckled and said nothing.

The suicide rate in the Strip is at all-time high, and despair is believed to be the main factor behind the alarming phenomena.