

Analysis

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Washington Watch

Gaza deserves our support

By Dr James J Zogby

To say that the situation in Gaza is deplorable and desperate is an understatement. That impoverished strip of land on the Eastern Mediterranean has been deplorable and desperate for decades. I traveled to Gaza many times during the 1990s, in my capacity as co-Chair of Builders for Peace, which was a project launched by Vice President Al Gore to help grow the Palestinian economy. My colleagues and I were unprepared for what we found. Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, who led one of these delegations, described what he saw as "worse than Soweto".

During the first quarter century of its occupation, Israel pursued a policy described by Sara Roy as the "de-development of Gaza". There was no investment in infrastructure, with the local population reduced to a cheap pool of labor working either as day laborers in Israel or as poorly paid sub-contractors working for Israeli exporters. The poverty of the place was palpable, as was the congestion. Gaza is among the most densely populated places on earth.

Because 70 percent of Gazans are refugees living in camps, they received education, some medical and social services thanks the UNWRA - the United Nations agency created to provide for Palestinian refugees. But not much more. In Jabalya Camp, we saw little children walking through a pool of water in the middle of a dirt road. Since it hadn't rained in days, we asked about the source of the water and were horrified to learn that it was open sewage - the result of the fact that there were no paved roads in that part of the camp and no sewage system.

The Strip's best agricultural land had been taken by Israeli settlers. Palestinians who farmed on the land that remained had difficulty exporting their product unless they worked with Israeli middlemen reducing their ability to make a sustainable profit. We heard the same complaint from small manufacturers.

A number of the American business leaders that Builders for Peace brought on our visits were interested in investing and developing partnerships with Palestinian businesses but were discouraged from doing so when they learned that there would be restrictions on their ability to import raw materials and export finished products.

A visit to the border revealed the hardships faced by the tens of thousands of Gazans who relied on day labor employment in Israel. Because, by Israeli law they could not overnight in Israel and they were forced to leave their homes before dawn to get to the border before 6 am in hopes of being selected for a day's work in construction, agriculture or janitorial services. The lucky ones were loaded on trucks taken to their jobs and, at the end of the day, they were driven back to the border. Exhausted, they got home late at night to sleep and then to repeat the process the next day.

In 1996, I was honored to be a part of the Carter Center's team monitoring the first Palestinian election. The lines of voters were long and the excitement was real. I documented poignant scenes of men and women spending long hours waiting for their chance to cast their first-ever ballots in an election they believed was to be the first step to independence.

The last time I went to Gaza during the Clinton Administration, I accompanied President Clinton as he addressed a meeting of the Palestine National Council and cut the ribbon opening Gaza's new airport. Despite Palestinian (and US) frustration with the Netanyahu government's declared intention to end the Oslo peace process, there was still hope in the air.

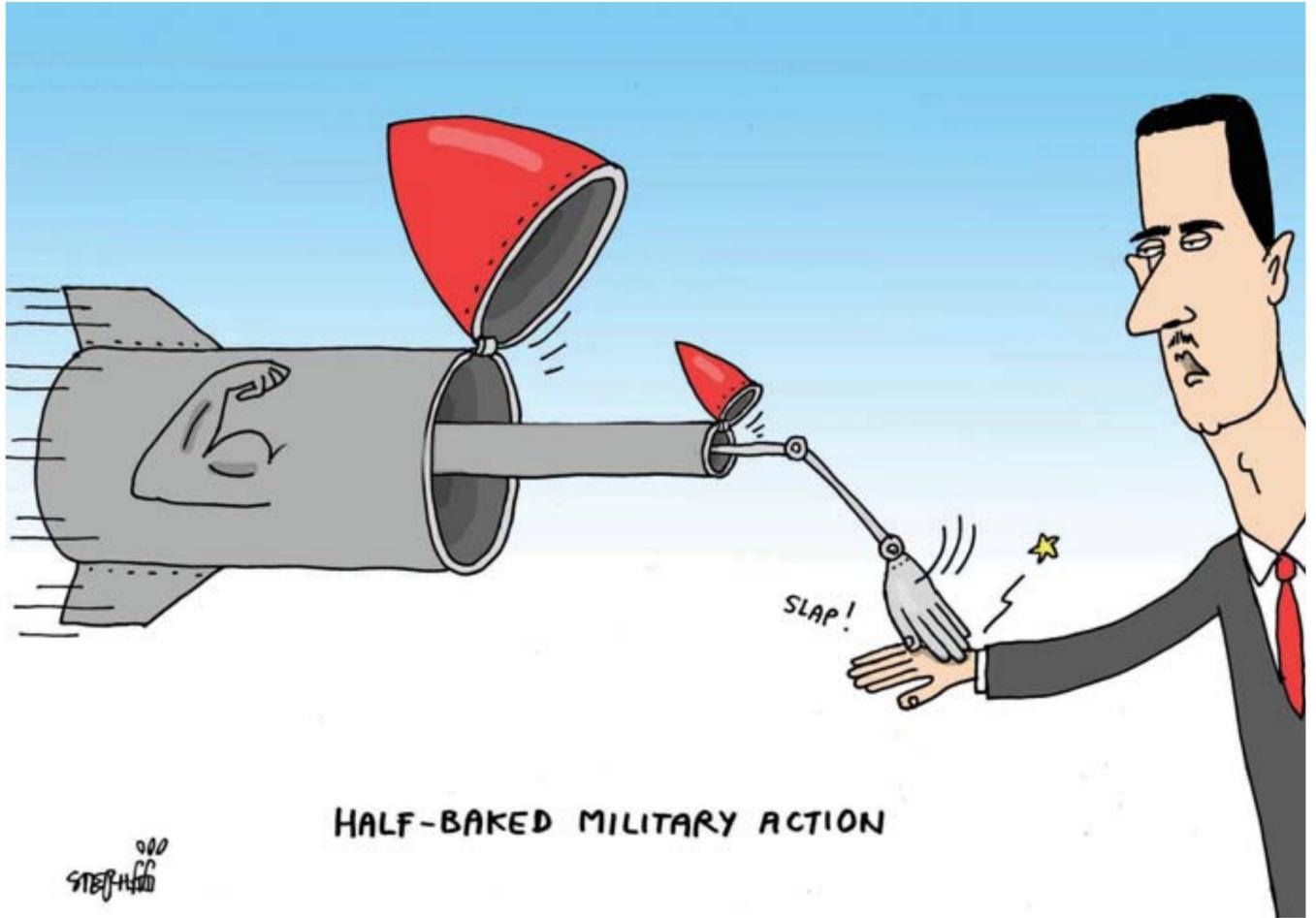
As desperate and deplorable as conditions were in Gaza back then, in many ways, those were the "good years". Likud hardline policies, violence, and provocation, coupled with Hamas' instigated acts of terrorism served to make a bad situation worse. Ariel Sharon's decision to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza and his refusal (despite US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's entreaties) to allow for an orderly hand-off of the administration of the Strip to the Palestinian Authority, paved the way for an eventual Hamas take-over.

Blockade

What followed was a complete Israeli blockade of Gaza, creating even greater Palestinian impoverishment. Three punishing Israeli wars on Gaza (in 2008, 2012, and 2014) left over 3,800 Palestinians dead, 15,000 wounded, and an already dilapidated infrastructure even more devastated by deliberate Israeli targeting of civilian sites, like a sewage reservoir and a chicken processing plant. In all three wars, there was clear evidence that Israel committed war crimes.

The blockade was especially cruel with the Israelis allowing in only enough food to provide for the minimum caloric intake to sustain life and no support to infrastructure repair. Ninety-five percent of Gaza's water is contaminated and undrinkable and most residents receive only between two to four hours of electricity daily. Poverty levels have reached extreme levels as has unemployment. For the last three decades, youth unemployment has hovered between 70 percent to 80 percent - meaning that most young Palestinians in Gaza have never had a job and have no prospect of a job. It breaks my heart when I read of the despair of a young protester in Gaza who was recently quoted saying "No peace, no jobs, no unity, and no future, so what difference would death make? If we are going to die, then let it not be in vain".

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute



Orban and the autocratic spring

It's been a sweet spring for autocrats. Three of them - in power in China, Egypt and Russia - are outside of what is commonly thought of as the democratic West. But the fourth, in Hungary, is in the West, and in the European Union. That Viktor Orban, the newly re-elected leader in Budapest, should fit into that company underscores the power of this authoritarian trend.

The greatest of this group, Xi Jinping of China, was acclaimed by the National Peoples' Congress as president for life in the second week of March. The following week, Vladimir Putin of Russia received his fourth mandate as president, with a higher vote than before. Hardly had April begun when it was announced that Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi had won 97 percent of the votes to be re-elected as president of Egypt. And earlier last week, Prime Minister Orban won his third straight mandate for the leadership of Hungary, with a victory still more crushing over the other parties than before.

In China, there was no opposition. Nor was there in Egypt, since the one other candidate was widely seen as someone pushed on to the ballot to give a veneer of choice. In Russia, there was some opposition - including from a Communist-backed mini-oligarch and a liberal young TV star who is the daughter of Putin's former mentor. But the radical opponent, Alexei Navalny, was disqualified even though he would not have won, since he was banned from the state-controlled media and little known in much of the country.

Orban, by contrast, has some right to call himself democratically-elected. There were real parties, to his left and right, who wanted to win and who believed they might at least substantially reduce his grip on parliament. However, Orban's Fidesz party won the two-thirds majority that allows it to carry on making regular changes to the constitution. The opposition parties didn't succeed in clipping the leader's wings, and several leaders resigned, unable to face again Orban's granite-like block on political change.

Same old US tensions as Cuba gets new leader

With Donald Trump in the White House, the end of the Castro era in Cuba next week is unlikely to bring warmer relations, analysts say. President Raul Castro will step down on April 19, ending nearly 60 years of Castro family rule after his brother Fidel seized power during the 1959 Communist revolution. Decades of Cold War tension with the United States followed, until Trump's predecessor Barack Obama and Raul Castro in Dec 2014 announced a warming of relations.

The two countries reopened their embassies and Obama made a historic visit to Cuba in 2016. But Trump vowed to crack down when he assumed office in Jan 2017. He tightened restrictions on US travelers to Cuba, and relations have cooled. Raul Castro's Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel, 57, is poised to assume the presidency - but his ascension still needs to be formally confirmed. He would be the first Cuban leader not to have fought in the revolution, but analysts say US domestic politics will play a more crucial role in shaping Havana-Washington ties.

"Unless Diaz-Canel or another comes along and changes things radically, I don't imagine there is going to be much change," said Elizabeth Newhouse, director of the Cuba program at the Center for International Policy, a Washington-based research and advocacy group. This is because it will not do Trump any good politically to change his views towards Cuba, she said. His supporters in Florida - a state whose lawmakers lead the way on Cuba policy - "want to see this relationship in some kind of freeze, exactly where it is right now," Newhouse told AFP.

HALF-BAKED MILITARY ACTION

Autocrat

We can bracket Orban, 54, with the other autocrats for two reasons. One, he has prepared the ground for the exercise of a power less trammled than in other democracies, saying in 2014 that governments which were "not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, and perhaps not even democracies" could be most successful and competitive.

Stance against migrants key element of his success

This frank embrace of systems which privilege success (however defined) over the rules of the democratic game opens up the vista for future Fidesz governments to reduce still further the narrowed scope of Hungarian democratic life and civil society in pursuit of further economic growth.

Second, as the Hungarian political scientist Andras Biro-Nagy wrote after the election, Orban's victory stems from three factors: "the systematic weakening of Hungary's democratic system, the success of Orban's anti-immigration platform, and the fragmentation of the opposition." That weakening includes discrimination against opposition media, mainly by depriving them of state advertising and ensuring most TV channels are in the hands of the state or government allies. After the election, monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said

that the polls had been "characterized by a pervasive overlap between state and ruling party resources, undermining contestants' ability to compete on an equal basis."

The fragmentation of the opposition, especially on the left, has been much helped by the opposition itself. Its previous incompetence in government, its association with deep cuts in living standards and changes to the electoral laws which have discriminated against all opposition parties have rendered near powerless the socialists and the small liberal parties.

But Orban's adamant stance against the entrance of all but a few migrants has been the key element of his success. A recent biography by the veteran Hungarian-born correspondent Paul Lendvai shows that Orban has traversed a political spectrum in his rise to power. He co-founded Fidesz as an open and liberal party, criticizing the then-ruling parties for excessive patriotism; now, he uses his defiance of European Union pressure to admit immigrants to Hungary to rally his people round his no-migrant policy by reviving their deep-seated feeling of victimhood after a 20th century of disasters and massive loss of territory, and their determination to survive as a unique, if isolated, people.

The Hungarian leader has, over the past year, chosen George Soros, the Hungarian-born Jewish-American billionaire who finances liberal, pro-EU, pro-immigration NGOs in Hungary and elsewhere, as enemy number one. The campaign, backed by a huge poster campaign featuring Soros' face, has attracted charges of anti-Semitism - though none of the propaganda makes that prejudice overt. Both the EU and the Vatican now stand against Orban - who enthusiastically embraced Calvinist Christianity after a secular youth and presents himself as the savior of Christian Europe. Where the Hungarian premier has defined himself as being against migrants, especially those from Muslim countries, Pope Francis has defined himself as their protector. —Reuters

On trade 'remedies' US barks, but where is the bite?

US President Donald Trump's administration claims it has doubled America's efforts to fight unfair trade, compared to Barack Obama's presidency. But a closer look at data from US trade officials' efforts to counter the dumping and illegitimate subsidies accused of hurting US companies shows Team Trump's efforts appear to be lagging. The president so far has not carried out his most dire warnings on trade. He has retreated from threats to scrap major trade agreements and on Thursday said he might even re-enter the Trans-Pacific Partnership - which he withdrew from after taking office last year.

He has also temporarily exempted America's largest trading partners from punishing tariffs on steel and aluminum, while his heaviest tariffs on Chinese goods have yet to take effect. But since last year, the administration has touted a blitz of one-off efforts to slap tariffs on a series of manufactured items, industrial supplies and agricultural goods. The aim is to protect American producers from the alleged dumping of products on the US market at below fair value and under purportedly unfair subsidies by foreign governments.

Goods as varied as Spanish olives, Argentine biodiesel and woven sacks from Vietnam. Various forms of steel and aluminum from Europe, Asia and Africa. Strange-sounding industrial chemicals little known to the general public like polyethylene terephthalate resin from Pakistan and ammonium sulfate, used in fertilizer, from China. All of these figure among imports the Trump administration says should face added duties to protect American suppliers.

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross told Congress last month he was vastly outpacing the Obama administration's anti-dumping and countervailing duty cases. "We have been running 70, 80 percent more cases initiated than had been true in the prior administration," Ross said during testimony on the budget. "We have also completed far more cases than any administration ever has completed. We had over 100 cases."

These efforts can hit snags, however, at the bi-partisan US International Trade Commission, which is independent and has the power to block the administration's anti-dumping and "countervailing duty" tariffs when it sees no harm to US industry. To the dismay of US aircraft giant Boeing, the ITC in February blocked the administration from putting duties on a \$5 billion order of C-Series mid-range jets from Canada's Bombardier.

Swatting away tariffs

The commission has also swatted away tariffs on imports of titanium sponge from Japan and Kazakhstan (with annual imports valued together at \$145.2 million), sodium gluconate and gluconic acid from France (\$6.4 million) and rubber bands from Sri Lanka (\$2 million). When these denials are taken into account, Trump's first year in fact looks slower than Barack Obama's last. The combined annual value of imports in trade-remedy cases begun in Trump's first year amounts to just over \$6 billion, involving imports from 29 countries.

But in 2016, the US issued final anti-dumping and countervailing duty orders on \$6.6 billion worth of imports from just 18 countries - almost \$600 million more. The amounts in question may seem small, given the \$566 billion US trade deficit last year. Economists also say the trade-remedy cases are most likely a drag on the overall economy as they tend to drive up prices. "That's not the point," said Peter Watson, a former ITC chairman. "They're there to help certain companies and certain sectors through periods of unfair trade." —AFP