

GAZA

2007 academic year. Computer classes, science labs, and extracurricular activities had been largely cut out because they consume too much power. A recent study estimated that to reach at least current West Bank standards, Gaza's educational system needs at least 7,616 additional teachers and 4,749 new classrooms by 2010.²² However, education carries far less weight in an area so devoid of hope. Israeli policy and aggression is damaging Gaza's future just as much as its present.



Children in Rafah get a ride to school

In September 2007, UNRWA - which has taken responsibility for the education of 200,000 school children in Gaza, or about half the total - stated that 30% of their students were without textbooks, which the Israeli army prevented from entering. In addition, as the texts used in the PA-run public schools are printed in Gaza and the Israeli ban on supplies was extended to raw materials such as paper and ink, a severe shortage in textbooks evolved. When the school year began, the Palestinian Education Ministry said 27% of its textbooks had not been printed.

Students Trapped

After the closing of Rafah crossing in June 2007, 722 Palestinian university students studying abroad were trapped in Gaza - about 30 study in US universities, and 10 in the UK. Another 2,000 students enrolled in foreign schools were also trapped. They are a part of the 7,500 Gazans who need permission to continue their work, education or medical treatment outside of Gaza. In January 2008, there were 625 Gaza students still trapped in Gaza and unable to continue their studies.

Source: *The Right to Education Fact Sheet, Right to Education Campaign, Birzeit University, 17 May 2008.*

Students from Gaza are also forbidden from attending Palestinian universities in the West Bank. The argument used by the State was that once they were given permits to leave they would become "information carriers". While prior to the Al-Aqsa Intifada Gaza students comprised 25% of the students of West Bank Universities, including 350 students at Birzeit University alone²³, there are close to none today. Through Israeli imposed movement restrictions, students have also been systematically deprived of their right to enroll and continue their education abroad, whether in the Arab world or other countries. This is a clear form of collective punishment, which is prohibited by international law.²⁴

US Withdraws Fulbright Grants

In May 2008, the US State Department revoked all Fulbright scholarships that had been granted to exceptional Palestinian students in Gaza, because they feared Israel would not let the students leave Gaza to study abroad. The official Israeli response was that education does not fall under the umbrella of humanitarian concerns, which are the only instances in which Palestinians would be allowed to leave Gaza. However, government spokespeople also said that the State Department never even asked to get visas for the students. Instead of challenging Israel on the oppressive closure policy in Gaza, the US chose to punish Palestinian students.

Source: "U.S. Withdraws Fulbright Grants to Gaza," *New York Times*, 30 May 2008.

22 Harvard University, *Population Projections for Socioeconomic Development in the Gaza Strip*, June 2006.

23 *The Right to Education Fact Sheet, Right to Education Campaign, Birzeit University, 17 May 2008.*

24 *Ibid.*

EXTERNAL PLAYERS

What is the position of the United States?

According to President Bush, reaching a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians developed into a serious goal of his administration during his second term. In 2005, he endorsed Sharon's "Disengagement Plan" as a positive step towards the Road Map for Peace. Bush made his first visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in January 2008, and a push for more purposeful negotiations soon followed. The merits of the Bush Administration's efforts remain to be seen, but it is clear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had been on their radar long before the public maneuvering of the Annapolis process.



Olmert and Abbas with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

In March 2008, reports surfaced that confirmed Hamas claims that covert actions of the United States had been a primary factor in the split between Hamas and Fateh, a split that left Gaza isolated and under siege.²⁵ Leaked documents and statements from former top officials showed that the US had been caught off guard by the Hamas victory in the 2006 elections. In response, it set out to implode the subsequent unity government by essentially fomenting a Palestinian civil war. The American plan was to arm certain groups within Fateh and influence them to push Hamas officials from any position of power. The Hamas takeover of Gaza was a response instead of a provocation; it was essentially a preemptive maneuver to deflect the American influence. Since that time, the United States has claimed to approach the peace process with a new resolve, but in reality it has maintained a policy of ignoring and isolating Gaza and Hamas and stepped up the pro-Israeli rhetoric to new levels. President Bush, during his visit to Israel in May 2008, continued to pledge his support for the Jewish state and made repeated references to Israel's biblical right to land and security in a speech to the Knesset in May 2008.

What role does the UN play in Gaza?

Following the 1948 War and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, the UN established UNRWA to carry out direct aid programs for the refugees. Originally envisaged as a temporary organization, UNRWA's mandate has been repeatedly renewed



Children play in the streets of Nuseirat Refugee Camp south of Gaza City

in the absence of a solution to the refugee problem. Over the years, UNRWA adjusted its programs to meet the changing needs and has evolved into the main provider of basic services - education, health, and social services - to over 4.4 million registered Palestine refugees in the Middle East (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). In the Gaza Strip, over three-quarters of the current estimated population of some 1.5 million are registered refugees.

The UN was in favor of Israel's 2005 disengagement as a first step towards a resumption of the peace process, in accordance with the Road Map. Since then, however, its various agencies operating in Gaza have repeatedly warned that the ongoing Israeli military attacks and counterattacks, which come on top of an already deteriorating humanitarian situation, are pushing the Palestinians into an ever deeper crisis.

25 Rose, David. "The Gaza Bombshell." *Vanity Fair*, April 2008.