**The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism: Old Wine in New Bottlenecks**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) – the main institutional mechanism regulating the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip since the 2014 war. Proponents of the GRM hold that it is a crucial lifeline enabling the entry of humanitarian and reconstruction goods into Gaza while assuaging Israel’s security concerns. In contrast, the paper argues that the GRM has introduced a bureaucratic and cumbersome mechanism that has created new bottlenecks to effective reconstruction and that has institutionalised and de-politicised the siege of the Gaza Strip by passing the responsibility for its maintenance onto the international community.*

**Key Words:** Gaza, Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, Post-conflict Reconstruction, Siege

**Introduction**

The 2014 war on Gaza was the third war that the territory has been subjected to since 2009, all occurring whilst the small coastal strip has been subject to a siege by its neighbours Israel and Egypt. Under the conditions of the siege prior to 2014, post-war reconstruction faced major obstacles in the form of the ban on imports that prevented the flow of construction materials, with locals turning towards smuggling and other coping strategies to rebuild the territory. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) was established in September 2014 as a means to expedite the reconstruction process by allowing greater flows of construction materials into Gaza while enabling Israel to control what comes in and out of the Strip. Yet after more than two years of its operation the track record of reconstruction is poor, with progress in some areas more limited than under more stringent conditions of the siege imposed prior to 2014.

What then explains this outcome? While a range of explanations have been put forward for the poor record of reconstruction in Gaza since 2007, these can be broadly categorized into three main classes of explanation. Firstly, it is held that the fact that Hamas controls Gaza and is opposed by both Fatah and regional powers creates obstacles to effective governance and international support (Hochberg 2016; Qarmout 2017). Secondly, insufficient reconstruction funding is cited as a major barrier due largely to donor fatigue in a context of repeated war and destruction (Hochberg 2016). Thirdly, the imposition by Israel and Egypt of a siege on Gaza that isolates the territory is commonly identified as the major impediment to effective reconstruction (Shaban et al 2013). This paper examines the GRM from the perspective that while all three possess explanatory power, in the final analysis it is the context of siege that accounts for reconstruction outcomes and furthermore that the siege constitutes the root cause of the former two explanations of Hamas rule and funding obstacles. As the latest institutional form of the blockade of Gaza that has itself proven to be the major obstacles to reconstruction, it is important to understand the GRM within the wider context of the siege of Gaza.

For this reason, the paper begins by contextualising the case of Gaza in terms of the trajectory of reconstruction under the shifting conditions of the siege of Gaza since 2007 and the economic, human, and physical impact of conflict. The paper then examines the major weaknesses of the GRM – lack of ownership, funding shortfalls, insufficient levels of construction materials, and bureaucratic obstacles. It then compares the strategies employed by various key international reconstruction actors in navigating the obstacles posed by the GRM since 2014. The paper concludes that the GRM has created new bottlenecks to reconstruction and development of the Gaza Strip and has served to depoliticize and internationalize the siege, spreading the moral responsibility for its maintenance to the international community. The findings presented in this paper constitute part of an ongoing research project on Gaza carried out by the authors. It reflects their cumulative experience and draws upon field observations in Gaza, in-depth interviews, a research workshop held in Doha, and a review of available literature.

**Context of Gaza Under Siege and Multiple Wars**

Following a military occupation from 1967 until Israel’s unilateral withdrawal in 2005, the political context of the Gaza Strip has since then been characterised by the rule of Hamas, which formed its first government in the Gaza Strip in March 2006 after victory in legislative elections over its rival Fatah. Since then, much of the international community has maintained a ‘no contact’ policy with regards to Hamas due to its refusal to accede to the demands of the ‘Quartet’ on the recognition of Israel, renouncement of violence, and acceptance of previous agreements with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Shaban 2017). Gaza is marked by a division between a Hamas-controlled Gaza and a Palestinian Authority (PA) led West Bank administration, which has major consequences for reconstruction in Gaza. Both Israel and Fatah have a strong interest in the failure of Hamas and the wars and siege can be interpreted as collective punishment aimed at diminishing the legitimacy of Hamas in the eyes of the local Gazan population. More broadly, the geographical bifurcation of Gaza and the West Bank gravely threatens the Palestinian national project and the prospect for a two-state solution.

Since June 2007, Israel has imposed controls on the flow of goods and people through its ‘closure’ of Gaza that imposes restrictions on entrance and exit of goods, travel between Gaza and the West Bank, travel from Gaza to the outside world, and access to the Strip's land, territorial waters and air space (Gisha 2016a). Li (2006) writes that ‘the Gaza Strip is a space where Israel tests and refines various techniques of management, continuously experimenting in search of an optimal balance between maximum control over the territory and minimum responsibility for its non-Jewish population’. The siege since 2007 is the latest and most elaborate technique of control that allows for entry of “essential humanitarian supplies” while cutting the territory off from the outside world.

The small territory of 1.8 million people has since then been subjected to three wars during which it has attempted to rebuild in the face of repeated destruction despite being physically isolated from the rest of the world and denied the resources to do so effectively. It is difficult to precisely quantify the damage and destruction that has been suffered by the Gaza Strip due to the cumulative nature of the impact of conflict and reconstruction needs. Damage and destruction has occurred as a direct result of the Second Intifada and the three wars that have been launched against Gaza during 2008-2014. Gaza’s civilian and environmental infrastructure has been subjected to repeated attack, with deleterious consequences for economic, social, and ecological systems in the territory (Sowers, Weinthal & Zawahri 2017). Yet reconstruction needs resulting from conflict have also been compounded by the deterioration of the built environment and the demands placed by natural population growth in one of the world’s most population dense urban environments.

The first war on Gaza began when the Israeli Defence Forces launched Operation Cast Lead which lasted from 27 December 2008 until 18 January 2009.The three-week long campaign had the stated aim of ending indiscriminate rocket fire by Hamas into Israel. The conflict caused widespread damage to social and economic sector including the destruction of 61,000 housing units at a cost to repair of $235 million, damage to the private sector of $140 million, and $269 million in damage to the agricultural sector (UNDP 2010). Israel launched its second full-scale war, Operation Pillar of Defense - after months of escalating violence between Hamas and the IDF - from 14-21 November 2012.Approximately 450 houses were destroyed or seriously damaged with over 8,000 houses sustaining minor damage (OCHA 2012). It also led to displacement of 14,920 people, widespread damage to water and sanitation facilities, and damage to 35 schools and 76 kindergartens (OCHA 2012). Furthermore, almost two-thirds of Rafah’s commercial tunnels were destroyed by airstrikes (Haysom & el Sarraj 2012). While the overall impact was lower than the 2008-09 conflict, it compounded pre-existing unmet needs for reconstruction.

The most destructive of the three wars occurred when - in a context of heightened tensions resulting from an IDF operation to rescue three kidnapped Israeli teenagers, the burning of a Palestinian child, and rocket fire from Gaza - the IDF launched Operation Protective Edge, a 51-day conflict lasting from 8 July until 26 August 2014. Table 1 below shows the impact of conflict in terms of damage to assets and buildings, economic losses due to disruption and opportunity costs, and projected needs for recovery, as quantified in the Gaza Detailed Needs Assessment and Recovery Framework (DNA 2015) – an exercise led by the PA with support from the UN, World Bank and EU. The area of greatest needs was Infrastructure with a total required funding of $1.383 billion. Gaza’s housing stock was severely affected with 10,799 homes totally destroyed, 6,800 severely damaged, 5,700 suffering major damage, and 147,500 sustaining only minor damage (SCP 2016c). 26 schools were totally destroyed while approximately half of all pre-schools, schools and universities sustained some damage (ANERA 2015). In total, Operation Protective Edge led to damages of $1.428 billion, losses of $1.688 billion, and recovery needs totalling $3.875 billion. Faced with these new war-related needs, in addition to cumulative impacts of previous conflicts, Gaza in late August 2014 required large-scale reconstruction.

**Table 1. Damage, Losses and Recovery Needs from the 2014 War on Gaza**

(insert Table 1 here)

**Source:** Gaza Detailed Needs Assessment and Recovery Framework (DNA 2015)

The three wars have also exacted a high human cost. The 2008/09 war saw 1,391 civilian fatalities in the Gaza Strip and 5 Israeli security forces fatalities, the 2012 war led to 167 Palestinian deaths and four Israeli civilian deaths, and in 2014 approximately 2,300 were killed and 10,500 wounded on the Gazan side with 66 soldiers and 7 civilians killed on the Israeli side. At the height of the 2014 war, over 500,000 people were internally displaced. The context of recurrent conflict has also exacted a high psycho-social impact. A quality of life study carried out in Gaza in 2005 and in 2009, six months after Operation Cast Lead, found the population to experience significant increases in their levels of distress and human insecurity, conceived as ‘fears and threats to home, community, and the future’ (Hammoudeh, Hogan & Giacaman 2013). More than eight years on, research has demonstrated high unmet psycho-social needs. A study in the Lancet found that nearly 30% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza suffer from major depression or post-conflict Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, explaining that ‘Palestinian resilience has been especially eroded by recurrent exposure to violence, heavy losses, and insufficient resources’ (Canetti et al 2014).

Gaza has been faced with the enormity of the task of reconstruction yet within a highly abnormal circumstance of a decade long blockade. While the siege of Gaza has been implemented since 2007, the imposition of restrictions has shifted over time with important consequences for reconstruction. In the aftermath of the 2008-09 war, the reconstruction of Gaza faced the huge obstacle of a total ban on imports of construction materials. From June 2007 until June 2010 only ‘a list of humanitarian products’ was permitted entry, which excluded essential construction materials such as cement, iron and plaster. In June 2010, in a move taken to deflect negative international attention on the deadly raid of the Mavi Marmara flotilla, Israel announced that a greater range of items would be permitted entry, although still excluding dual-use items, in particular cement, iron, steel, and plaster (Gisha 2010).

To navigate the obstacles imposed by the context of siege, Gazans have responded in often creative ways to procure construction materials. Gazans turned towards low-cost small-scale activities such as recycling construction materials from rubble of destroyed buildings in order to repair and rehabilitate their homes (UNDP 2010). More importantly, Gaza by 2010 had come to rely on the smuggling tunnels built under the Rafah border crossing with Egypt to import most of the required materials for reconstruction (Pelham 2012). While these coping mechanisms enabled some level of recovery and demonstrate the resilience of Gazans under adversity, the large-scale reconstruction of homes and critical infrastructure such as the electricity grid and industrial sector was severely limited under the harsh conditions of siege. Moreover, the GRM was introduced into a context in which the smuggling tunnels that provided a lifeline to Gaza’s economy and reconstruction efforts had been largely destroyed by the Egyptian armed forces under General Sisi in the summer of 2013, thus rendering reconstruction more dependent upon formal above-ground import of goods than at any time during the siege.

**The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism**

On 16 September 2014, Robert Serry, the UN Middle East Envoy, announced the establishment of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM).[[4]](#footnote-4) The GRM is a UN-administered mechanism between the UN, the Government of Palestine, and the Government of Israel designed to monitor and regulate the flow of goods into and out of the Gaza Strip. It establishes a multi-step procedure for the approval of construction materials and equipment entering into Gaza, which permits the entry of some dual-use items but under the supervision of international monitoring. While the governance of the GRM is collaborative between the PA, the UN, and Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the latter organisation maintains what is in essence a security veto over the entry of all items.[[5]](#footnote-5) The political context at the moment of the adoption of the GRM was marked by Hamas’ weakness and lack of funds to pay for even basic services or salaries, which created a permissible environment for negotiations. This explains why Hamas accepted the role of the PA and the establishment of a joint international monitoring agreement for reconstruction in Gaza – which it erroneously believed would be temporary.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There are a range of views on the intentions that drove the establishment of the GRM. Robert Serry – one of the leading individuals behind the GRM, which some refer to as the ‘Serry Mechanism’ – states that ‘in broad terms the new access mechanism for Gaza was set up to open up the Strip at the massive scale required for reconstruction’ (Serry 2017, p.166). Sara Roy (2016), by contrast, argues that the purpose of the GRM was never about reconstruction but rather that it forms part of a long-standing intentional Israeli policy aimed at the de-development of the Gaza Strip. In between these polarized viewpoints, the GRM can be seen as intended to meet the security concerns of Israel regarding appropriation of imported dual-use construction materials by Hamas to rebuild and fortify military infrastructure while also providing an above-ground alternative to tunnels that could enable Gaza’s reconstruction.

Regardless of the intentionality behind the establishment of the GRM, its implementation since September 2014 has not expedited the reconstruction process but rather created new bottlenecks to reconstruction, which from September 2014 until November 2016[[7]](#footnote-7) has been slow and uneven. Across several sectors a pattern emerges of relative success in light repair work combined with much less progress in large-scale reconstruction, which continues patterns of rebuilding during 2009-2014. In education, while all minor damage to schools was repaired by September 2016, of seven schools fully destroyed in 2014 construction work was underway in only five with none fully rebuilt (Gisha 2016b). Rehabilitation of Gaza’s only power plant has also been slow, in part due to restrictions on import of spare parts and other critical inputs, which produced an electricity crisis with operating capacity below 50 per cent two years after the war (UNCTAD 2016). Similarly, in the housing sector reconstruction of totally destroyed housing units progressed much more slowly than for housing units that sustained minor, major and severe damage. After nearly two years of reconstruction, only 11.06 per cent of the totally destroyed housing caseload was fully rebuilt compared to 65.06 per cent of severely damaged, and 52.51 per cent of minor damaged houses. As of September 2016, approximately 11,000 families comprising 60,000 individuals remained displaced due to slow progress in rebuilding (SCP 2016c). While this offers a brief snapshot of stalled progress in reconstruction, examples from other sectors are offered throughout the rest of the paper.

**Table 2. Progress in Reconstruction of Totally Destroyed Housing Units and Minor, Major and Severe Damage Housing Units – October 2014-August 2016**

(insert Table 2 here)

**Source:** Shelter Cluster Palestine – Shelter Cluster Monthly Report: September 2016 (SCP 2016b)

Based on the authors’ research, five major emergent themes can be identified as explanations for reconstruction outcomes in Gaza since 2014: the absence of local ownership, funding shortfalls, the flow of construction materials, bureaucratic obstacles, and the strategies employed by international actors. While several of these inter-linked factors have been continuous features of reconstruction in Gaza under siege since 2007, in particular funding shortfalls and the (un)availability of construction materials, these factors are now compounded by added layers of complexity in the form of severe bureaucratic obstacles posed by the GRM, and in a context marked by the absence of a concerted international effort to break the siege of Gaza.

***Absence of Local Ownership***

The problematic nature of the GRM was sown from its outset, as an externally-driven process that denies meaningful local ownership to Gaza’s population. The United Nations - the coordinator of the GRM - adheres to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the first principle of which is ownership, stating that ‘developing countries set their own strategies for poverty reduction, improve their institutions and tackle corruption’. Furthermore, the Recovery Framework for Gaza (DNA 2015) commits to several guiding principles relevant to issues of ownership and control:

* National government will define, lead, plan and coordinate overall recovery;
* Local governments will participate in and contribute to detailed project planning;
* Recovery will be inclusive of all stakeholders, including vulnerable and marginalised groups; and
* Affected communities will encourage public participation in recovery.

Despite these proclamations, the GRM has lacked ownership at all levels of its conception, design and implementation. On a basic level, Gazan civil society was not consulted during the GRM’s development, nor were Hamas representatives, resulting in insufficient consideration of the needs of Gazans (Barakat & Masri 2017). Gazans were only consulted after the establishment of the GRM, and only in the context of a damage and needs assessment. Furthermore, Gazan civil society groups did not see the full-text GRM agreement until over a year after its conception. These groups probably would have never seen the detailed agreement had they not demanded that the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) publish the document (PCSO 2015).

With no active involvement of Gazans, the GRM has from the outset strengthened the perception that reconstruction is an outsider’s game. This situation has ultimately arisen from the acceptance by the international community of Israel’s securitisation of Gazan civil society as a threat, based on the perception that any civil organizations could be co-opted by or covertly controlled by Hamas. Gazan NGOs felt totally excluded from the reconstruction planning and implementation, with many perceiving that Israel’s security needs were unfairly used to justify the marginalization of even those organizations that were not affiliated with Hamas.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, many of these organizations felt routinely suspected and ‘spied upon’ in the course of their humanitarian and developmental activities. The reconstruction process has in essence ignored the agency of Gazans – both by Israel and the international community, which has ended up leading the process. While such a denial of agency is negative in a ‘normal’ development context, it is made much worse in that the people of Gaza have been besieged for almost a decade during which their survival has been dependent upon the exercise of their agency and resilience.

***Funding Shortfalls***

Inadequate financing for reconstruction constitutes one of the major barriers to the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. At the household level, the lack of funds was consistently ranked by Gazans that had completed the rebuilding of their homes, those who had partially completed rebuilding, and those that had not started rebuilding as the single largest obstacle to effective recovery (SCP 2017). While the insufficient level of funding for reconstruction is usually explained solely by the lack of donor support and considered to be an external factor rather than a product of the GRM, it is important to recognize the role of the siege and its latest incarnation in the form of the GRM in slowly strangulating the Gazan economy, delimiting the possibility of self-financed or autonomous reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and deepening the dependency of the territory of donor handouts.

The international response coalesced around the Cairo Conference on Palestine - Reconstructing Gaza, held on 12 October 2014. Donors pledged $3.5 billion for reconstruction, leaving a financial shortfall of $375 million to meet recovery needs from the Gaza Recovery Framework. However, the financial shortfall is much greater as many donors disbursed the pledged funds slowly. By 31 December 2016, $1.796 billion or 51 per cent of total pledges had been disbursed.[[9]](#footnote-9) Of total disbursements, $612 million was allocated to priorities identified in the DNA which meets the funding requirement for 16 per cent of recovery needs across five sectors - Infrastructure, Governance, Social Development, Social Protection and Livelihood, and Productive. The funds that were pledged at the conference have not all been fulfilled (see Table 3). In particular, while the Gulf States made very high pledges, they have very low disbursement ratios compared to other major donors.

**Table 3. Donor Support to Gaza from Donors Pledging $100 million or greater at the Cairo Conference (in USD Millions) – as of 31 December 2016**

(insert Table 3 here)

**Source:** World Bank – Gaza Pledges Monitoring Tool[[10]](#footnote-10)

The gap between projected needs and pledged funds can be explained by donor fatigue. In the aftermath of the 2008-09 war, on 2 March 2009 the international community at the Sharm el-Sheikh donor conference pledged $4.5 billion to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) with $1.3 billion allocated to the reconstruction of Gaza. With two wars occurring since then many of the donor funded reconstruction projects have been damaged or destroyed, with the result that investments in reconstruction are increasingly perceived to be futile given the continual cycle of destruction and rebuilding (Bouris 2015). The 2014 conference also occurred in a regional and international context dominated by the Syrian war and its fallout, the response to which had the effect of dampening potential donor support for Gaza.

The need for external financing of reconstruction efforts has been perpetuated by the economic impact of the siege, which has severely impeded the Gazan economy and constrained the ability of Gaza to self-finance its reconstruction. The GRM was not only established with the official goal of enabling reconstruction efforts but was also claimed to have a number of positive social and economic impacts. According to an advisor with the Office of the Quartet, one rationale of the GRM was providing job opportunities through labor-intensive reconstruction efforts.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, job creation has not taken off, with only an estimated 3,796 workers employed in Gaza’s construction sector (UNDP 2016). As Table 4 below shows, under the GRM unemployment increased from 31 per cent in 2012 to 41.7 per cent in 2016.

**Table 4. Unemployment Rate in the Gaza Strip, 2012-2016**

(insert Table 4 here)

**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)

Gaza’s GDP growth rate was adversely affected by the 2014 war with a 15.1 per cent contraction compared to growth of 5.6 per cent in 2013. Growth rebounded in 2015 to 6.8 per cent yet slowed in 2016 to 5.5 per cent (IMF 2016). While these figures indicate a degree of economic recovery, given the very low base due to the economic impact of conflict, post-2014 growth rates compare unfavourably with rapid growth of 25.8 per cent in 2011 following the 2008-09 war (World Bank 2012). Economic recovery has in part been held back by slow reconstruction. Failure to restore electricity capacity following the 2014 war is cited by Gaza’s private sector as the single greatest obstacle to increasing production capacity (UNDP 2016). A UNDP (2016) study of Gaza’s economy concludes that ‘there is agreement on the major cause of Gaza’s weak economy and unemployment being the blockade’. While GDP growth rates are a limited indicator of livelihoods, in particular in an exceptional siege economy where much activity is informal, they offer a broad insight into the direction of the economy.

The GRM’s wider economic impact has also been limited by siege profiteering. At the GRM’s outset it was predicted that Israel would receive 30 per cent of international assistance due to prevention of aid from entering Gaza (Bouris 2015). It has since been estimated that 72 per cent of international aid to the OPT ultimately ends up in Israel’s economy (Hever 2015). Nesher, an Israeli company, controls 85 per cent of the cement market in Israel and the OPT (Coren 2011), profiting substantially from supplying materials to Gaza. Moreover, ‘the blockade imposed by Israel was not only aimed at reducing the security risks but implicitly appears to protect Israeli producers experiencing competition from Gaza’s agriculture’, for instance, dairy farms damaged during the war unable to procure replacement equipment (UNDP 2016).

Israel’s economic gain brings into focus Egypt’s short-sightedness in enforcing the siege, which exacts opportunity costs in mutual economic gain on both sides of the border. Destroying Gaza’s smuggling tunnels and severely limiting flows of goods through the Rafah border severs Egyptian domestic industries from Gaza’s high demand for construction materials, equipment, and workers. Rafah could become a reconstruction hub for Gaza not only in these supply-side inputs but also through infrastructural investments, such as power plants with a grid linked to Gaza that could resolve the enclave’s electricity crisis or as a coordination and logistics hub for reconstruction actors which are increasingly hampered by Israel’s restrictions on freedom of movement.

***Flow of Construction Materials***

Another major obstacle to reconstruction is the restriction on flows of construction materials imposed by the GRM which affects the availability of materials in Gaza. Infrastructural reconstruction from the 2014 war was estimated to require 1.6 million tonnes of construction materials, while cumulative needs for rebuilding totalled 1.91 million tonnes and the caseload for cumulative war-related needs plus natural growth required 6.41 million tonnes (SCP 2016a). Despite there being some level of resilience and creative adaptive use, there is a need for substantial imports of materials from outside to support meaningful reconstruction. With tunnels degraded and the Rafah crossing largely closed, rebuilding was much more dependent on formal imports of construction materials from Israel than previously. Under the terms of the GRM, ABC materials – aggregate, reinforced steel bars, and cement – remained listed as dual-use items in late August 2014 when reconstruction efforts began. This latest institutional technique for implementing the siege of Gaza has, rather than enable more effective reconstruction, ultimately served to create new bottlenecks to reconstruction.

**Chart 1. All Construction Materials entering Gaza through GRM or COGAT, January 2015 – September 2016**

(insert Chart 1 here)

**Sources:** Shelter Cluster Palestine (SCP 2016a; SCP 2016c)

Restricted dual-use construction materials can be imported through the GRM – by approved individuals, firms or bilateral donors such as Qatar - or ‘The Humanitarian Projects’ - exceptional bilateral agreements between COGAT and ‘some UN agencies, ICRC and very few NGOs’ (SCP 2015). While little data on this latter category is available, UNRWA and UNDP use this mechanism to procure materials for large-scale reconstruction projects. Since October 2014 of all BC materials – reinforced steel bars and cement - entering Gaza, the private sector however accounts for the vast majority of imports, with a total of 1,092,683 tonnes, compared to 159,756 through the Humanitarian Projects and 43,450 for Qatari projects (SCP 2016a). It can however be observed that the amount of construction materials entering Gaza, disaggregated by category of actor, has varied over time which illustrates clearly how the various actors have been differentially affected by the context of siege (see Chart 1). From January until August 2015, Qatari projects accounted for the majority of construction materials entering Gaza with much less imported by the private sector and the Humanitarian Projects, due to delays in the launch of the Residential Stream for rebuilding totally destroyed houses.

**Chart 2. Quantities of Cement and Steel Bars (ton) entered through Kerem Shalom Crossing, September 2014 – September 2016[[12]](#footnote-12)**

(insert Chart 2 here)

**Source:** Shelter Cluster Palestine (SCP 2016c)

After the Residential Stream came online in July 2015, private sector import of construction materials increased rapidly. The quantity of BC materials entering Gaza through the Kerem Shalom Crossing was on average 16,145 tonnes from October 2014 until June 2015, increasing to a monthly average of 63,158 tonnes from July 2015 (see Chart 2). The quantity of BC construction materials entering Gaza from October 2014 until July 2015 was consistently below the level required to meet the needs of solely the damage and destruction from the 2014 war (See Chart 3). From September 2015, the amount of BC materials entering Gaza increased to a level sufficient to meet the needs for conflict-related damage, with a brief spike in December 2015 which was the only month in the two-year period that construction materials met the cumulative needs for reconstruction plus natural growth. After the temporary ban on BC materials for the private sector was lifted in April, imports resumed at a level greater than that required to meet cumulative conflict-related needs but insufficient to meet these needs in addition to natural growth demands.

Headlines were made with Oxfam’s claim in February 2015 that, at the current pace of reconstruction, it would take 100 years to rebuild Gaza (Oxfam 2015), which reflected frustrations felt under a reconstruction process unable to rebuild a single totally destroyed house for almost one year. Since the introduction of the GRM Residential Stream estimations of the time period necessary to complete reconstruction work have been updated. In July 2016, it was estimated that at the current rates of entry of construction materials it would take 1.3 years to meet reconstruction needs from the 2014 war, 1.9 years to meet the needs of all previous conflicts, and 10.7 years to meet the needs of all conflicts plus natural growth (SCP 2016a).

**Chart 3. Quantities of Cement and Steel Bars (ton) entered through Kerem Shalom Crossing, October 2014 – September 2016[[13]](#footnote-13)**

(insert Chart 3 here)

**Source:** Shelter Cluster Palestine (SCP 2016c)

While construction material imports increased from July 2015, reconstruction faces other bottlenecks caused by restrictions under the GRM. Firstly, there have been numerous suspensions of the GRM, with COGAT implementing a slowing or halting to the import of construction materials despite its sophisticated system of inspection and monitoring of imports in addition to expansions and security enhancements to the Kerem Shalom crossing (Times of Israel 2015). On 3 April 2016, Israel banned cement imports for 45 days, accusing Hamas of hijacking cement deliveries (al-Mughrabi 2016), leading to cement prices increasing from 560 to 1,800 New Israeli Shekels (NIS) per tonne thus halting many GRM reconstruction projects (UNRWA 2016). This temporary ban explains the drop in private sector imports in March 2016 and the increase in imports for Qatari projects, as materials were scarcer on private markets. The amount of BC materials under the Humanitarian Projects spiked sharply in April 2016, indicating that UNDP and UNRWA greatly increased their purchasing of materials through this arrangement rather than procure materials from private vendors in Gaza.

Secondly, not all private sector materials are purposed for the rebuilding of war-damaged housing and infrastructure. Rather, an estimated 45 per cent of construction materials entering through the GRM are allocated to reconstruction projects for damage and destruction sustained in the 2014 war with the remaining 55 per cent meeting cumulative needs from previous conflicts and new construction projects (Gisha 2016b). It has been observed that Gazan developers affiliated with Hamas have carried out construction projects including malls and cafes as part of its strategies of economic survival and regime legitimacy. While this provides an outlet for consumption which can stimulate economic activity, it does not meet the needs of the most vulnerable.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Thirdly, the GRM includes restrictions on other construction materials. In particular, COGAT implements a ban on many categories of wood, on the ground that Hamas uses wood to buttress its attack tunnels (Heller 2015). Out of 321 requests for wood item imports across 214 categories of wood, 31 per cent were approved, 27 per cent rejected, and 42 per cent no decisions.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, no wood over one centimeter thick, essential for many reconstruction projects, has been approved. Furthermore, the GRM also restricts construction equipment imports, including cement mixers, pumps, and molds utilised in cinderblock production, which are all classified as dual-use items (Gisha 2016b). In the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector, which experienced major bottlenecks to meeting the need for $900 million in reconstruction investments, stakeholders ranked the GRM as the biggest obstacle to the implementation of projects, in particular the non-approval or delays in approval of WASH-specific dual-use items and the requirement for separate approvals of both the projects and requested imports of dual-use items (Oxfam 2017).

***Bureaucratic Hurdles***

The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, rather than enable effective and rapid reconstruction, has implemented a cumbersome bureaucratic mechanism that has impeded the rebuilding process. Although UNSCO defined the GRM as a temporary agreement, it did not establish an end date for the mechanism (UNSCO 2014a). After more than two years of the GRM, the exceptional nature of the externally-led reconstruction process that marginalizes the local population risks becoming a permanent mechanism of social control of the Gaza Strip. Moreover, the GRM institutionalized the siege by making international actors, in particular the UN, complicit in regulating and enforcing the blockade.

Gaza’s reconstruction involves various actors including the PA, UNRWA, UNDP, the State of Qatar, and numerous NGOs and construction firms. Donors and agencies have employed a self-help model for housing reconstruction that provides cash transfers to Gaza’s residents to purchase construction materials and oversee repair and rebuilding work on their own properties. Part of the explanation for slow reconstruction lies in the weaknesses in shelter strategy. An evaluation of shelter response finds that agencies exhibited ‘weak strategic prioritisation’ by strategically focusing on minor damaged houses because of the high caseload, low cash requirements, and minimal need for technical expertise which neglected the most vulnerable group, those with uninhabitable houses in the severely damaged and totally destroyed categories (SCP 2016b).

More significant, however, are bureaucratic barriers inherent in the GRM. The GRM initially consisted of two streams - a shelter stream for private individuals and firms to repair damaged buildings and a projects stream for international organizations for large-scale reconstruction and public works projects. While some actors, in particular UNDP and UNRWA, procure some construction materials through bilateral agreements with Israel, the vast majority of reconstruction activity is administered through the GRM. In June 2015, a residential stream was added for rebuilding totally destroyed houses and new construction. The delay in the launch of the residential stream was itself a major bottleneck in reconstruction, as no totally destroyed houses were rebuilt from October 2014 until June 2015. This delay was caused by a disagreement between Israel and the PA regarding the formula used to calculate the amount of materials required for reconstruction of totally destroyed homes (Gisha 2016b).

Under the shelter and residential streams, the GRM establishes a multi-step process to coordinate reconstruction between Israel and the PA. First, the PA Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MoPWH) surveys housing damage and estimates required building materials.[[16]](#footnote-16) It then uploads assessments to a joint COGAT, PA, and UN database. The PA submits assessments to the High Level Steering Committee (HLST), comprised of COGAT, PA, and UN representatives. COGAT can either approve or veto the assessment (UNSCO 2014a). After the lengthy approval process, the HLST provides beneficiaries with coupons authorizing purchase of construction materials from approved vendors. The UN is responsible for monitoring vendors to ensure that materials are sold to approved individuals and organizations.

Shelter reconstruction is slowed down by this lengthy bureaucratic process in which approval is required for each stage of construction. A request for laying a house’s foundation, framing, plastering, and finishing work must be completed, often creating a waiting period for the beneficiary that lasts weeks, or even months between each stage (Eldar 2015). According to the agreement, the process between registering a beneficiary and the beneficiary receiving approval to purchase aggregate, reinforcing bars, and cement (ABC), ‘shall be limited to two working days’ (UNSCO 2014a). Under the projects stream, in addition to a similar approval process, construction projects implemented by international actors such as schools or health clinics must also obtain project location approval from the Southern Command and the military planning department to prevent new buildings from interfering with future military plans, which has led to delays of months or even a year on some projects (Bashi 2016).

Many Gazan business enterprises and agencies involved in reconstruction efforts report that information regarding import and export regulations, tendering, GRM rules and the dual-use items list is ‘not always readily available’ (UNDP 2016). The only explanation for the GRM, published by UNSCO (2014b), was a summary fact sheet that did not provide clarity on the monitoring process. Bureaucratic hurdles created by the GRM are however much more easily navigable by large international organizations with sophisticated management systems and communication lines with COGAT than by individuals or small firms. While COGAT, the PA, Hamas, and the UN can all share blame for delays created during the approval process, adherence to the terms of the GRM agreement and greater transparency in their communication would significantly reduce delays.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**How International Actors Navigate the GRM**

The various international actors involved in the reconstruction of Gaza have reacted to the siege-imposed political and bureaucratic obstacles in different ways, with some utilising bilateral arrangements, others using the GRM, and many more not directly engaging in reconstruction work. Yet no major state actors or international organizations have attempted to break the siege of Gaza, which unlike previous sieges such as Sarajevo, has not been subject to a concerted international campaign. Attempts to physically break the siege have been limited to international civil society movements, such as the Mavi Marmara flotilla that was victim of a deadly raid by Israeli forces in May 2010, leading to the killing of ten Turkish activists.

In response to that same incident, Turkey severed its diplomatic relations with Israel. As a condition for diplomatic normalization, Turkey insisted that Israel lift the siege of Gaza. From June 2010 until June 2016, Turkey maintained this position, and as a result lost privileged access to the Strip. When a normalization deal was finally announced in June 2016, Turkey dropped this demand, with a compromise position of enhanced access for Turkish aid. While Turkey engaged in several projects prior to the agreement, including rebuilding nine mosques, the deal permitted Turkey to engage in large-scale work including hospital reconstruction and projects including a power station, desalination plant, and hundreds of new homes (AFP 2016).

Turkey’s position throughout this period contrasts with that of Qatar. Qatar is one of the few Arab countries to have constructive relations with Israel, which enabled it to maintain privileged reconstruction access to Gaza. Qatar also has good relations with Hamas and has thus been able to establish an office in Gaza for coordinating reconstruction. From this platform, Qatar emerged as the largest international reconstruction actor in Gaza. Shaban et al (2013) write that while limited rebuilding occurred during 2009-12, the ‘reconstruction process proper started after the allocation of $400 million from the Government of Qatar in 2012’. The Qatari grant – announced by the Emir of Qatar in the first visit of a Head of State to the besieged territory - funded projects including two large housing complexes, several highways, and a prosthetics centre (Rudoren 2012). While announced in October 2012, projects were delayed until late December 2012 when Egypt permitted shipment of construction materials, tools, and machinery through the Rafah crossing exclusively to Qatari projects (Almeghari 2013).

Qatar made the largest pledge of $1 billion at the donor conference, disbursing $216 million as of 31 December 2016 (see Table 3). In addition to continuing its projects from the $400 million grant made in 2012 which included the completion in January 2016 of Hamad City with over 1,000 housing units for displaced persons, Qatar supported new housing reconstruction efforts. In March 2015 Egypt reversed its decision to permit Qatar privileged access through the Rafah crossing. In response, Qatar turned to Israel to procure materials, which reportedly led to delays in construction and cost three times more than Egyptian goods (MEMO 2015). Since October 2014, Qatar worked through the GRM, and in the first year of its operation accounted for the majority of construction material imports (see Chart 1).

While the UN rebuilt zero totally damaged houses in this first year after the 2014 war, due in part to protracted disagreements over the definitional threshold for housing damage categories, the pragmatic approach followed by Qatar enabled some major housing reconstruction to take place. This underlines the utility of the pragmatic yet controversial politics that Qatar has become associated with for enabling reconstruction access to Gaza. Qatar’s approach to Gaza, and Turkey’s new approach, contrast with other Gulf states that pledged significant funding but played a hands-off reconstruction role. Kuwait, one of the largest pledging donors, refused to fulfil its pledges because it recognized the GRM’s inefficiency.[[18]](#footnote-18) Various donors, in particular Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have not taken an active role due to their anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance which deters direct or indirect engagement with Hamas.

The Hamas-Fatah split is often cited as a barrier to engagement for international actors that slows reconstruction. The EU and U.S., while major donors in pledges to Gaza’s reconstruction, channelled much of their Gaza funding into strengthening the PA as the body formally responsible for reconstruction, as opposed to Hamas which is a proscribed terrorist organization in the eyes of both actors. Furthermore, one of the PA’s duties through the GRM is to channel reconstruction funding through the Ministry of Finance. This was intended to ensure transparency while building the PA’s capacity but ended up contributing significantly to slowing the rebuilding process due to the disconnect between a Ramallah-based administration and Gaza cut off by restrictions on freedom of movement.

Many international agencies and NGOs operating in Gaza maintain ‘no contact policies’ prohibiting any communication with Hamas as the local authority, which creates a major barrier to effective emergency shelter response coordination (SCP 2016b), particularly for large-scale housing and infrastructure reconstruction projects that require sophisticated planning and coordination. For instance, reconstruction of the almost fully destroyed neighbourhoods of Shujaiyeh and Khuzaa faces the barriers of a complex planning context due to the Hamas-Fatah division which required a lengthy process of multi-stakeholder collaboration to design and execute a neighbourhood plan (Gisha 2016b). Ongoing Hamas-Fatah unity talks could create a more conducive governance environment for reconstruction and encourage more international actors to engage directly in Gaza. However, while Hamas’ presence as the authority in Gaza has made coordination problematic, the Qatari case shows that reconstruction projects – which are implemented through the sub-contracting of Egyptian and Gazan construction firms with no involvement of local authorities - can be carried out by non-UN international actors without Hamas’ direct involvement.

Restrictions on freedom of movement imposed on both national and international actors do however continue to hamper reconstruction. As part of the separation policy, Gazan construction experts are denied permission to travel to the West Bank for training purposes due to the stated goal of preventing the flow of information and materials between enemy parties in the two territories (Bashi 2016). Access for international actors has also been reduced, as indicated by the denial rate on permits for travel to Gaza issued to UN staff increasing from four per cent in 2015 to 26 per cent upto September 2016 (OCHA 2016). Furthermore, the scandal caused by Israel’s accusation that the Director of World Vision in Gaza channelled money officially earmarked for agricultural revitalization activities to Hamas (Beaumont 2016) has further restricted humanitarian space for NGOs operating in Gaza.

This analysis shows that the political will of international actors and their resolve to maintain funding levels are critical to breaking the siege of Gaza to engage in reconstruction. The actors enjoying some success in reconstruction are those that have maintained diplomatic, if not amicable, relations with key parties. Critics may argue that this only enables marginal reconstruction at the price of perpetuating the siege. It can be alleged that Qatar, Turkey and other international donors, by picking up the bill for reconstruction, spoil Israel and Egypt who share the moral responsibility for maintaining the siege. This was the response of some to Turkey’s decision to normalize relations with Israel, dropping demands for an end to the siege in return for access. However, while there is a moral dilemma over strengthening Israel’s hand as a besieging party, in the final analysis, with predictions that Gaza will become uninhabitable by 2020 (UNCTAD 2015), Gazans cannot wait for a potential future lifting of the siege before rebuilding. Furthermore, as lives and livelihoods remain trapped under these worsening conditions, the risk of conflict continues to escalate, with the threat of a new war that would feed the vicious cycle of destruction.

**Conclusion**

Clearly what has been illustrated is that very little progress has been made in reconstruction. The siege of Gaza has been normalized through a mechanism of post-conflict reconstruction that has turned into a sophisticated international mechanism for depoliticising and institutionalising the enforced isolation of the territory. The UN has been made into an accomplice, allowing Israel to paint the GRM as a UN mechanism whilst the “international community” has proven unwilling to stand up to Israel and has maintained its security at any cost. The GRM thereby plays into the hands of Israel, softening the edges of the siege while not addressing the deep-lying drivers of frustration and violence that led to the situation in the first place. The fact that the lid has been kept on is not a sign that the mechanism is working and that people are satisfied. Layers of frustration are growing and the fundamental problem remains that the GRM cannot be utilized to meet Israel’s security needs, which is evident from the ability of Hamas affiliates to procure materials for large-scale new construction projects. All the GRM has served to do is deliver old wine in new bottlenecks to reconstruction, make the lives of ordinary Gazans harsher, and feed into the long-term cycle of destruction, limited rebuilding, and repeated destruction.

Much recent analysis has focused on the prospect of the Palestinian unity agreement between Hamas and Fatah leading to the establishment of a new and functional government with widespread international legitimacy in the Gaza Strip. It may be reasoned that this would enable the loosening or even lifting of the siege and the end of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism. Such an outcome should however be viewed as tentative at best. So far only control of border crossings has been transferred from Hamas to the PA and governance within Gaza remains the prerogative of Hamas. Demands by Fatah to assimilate the al-Qassam Brigade under the PA could prove the key stumbling block on the road to a genuinely workable political settlement. Moreover, even under a unity government Israel is unlikely to quickly lift the siege and permit Hamas the free reign to strengthen, given the history of failed reconciliation agreements and the likelihood of a return to the polarised and antagonistic status quo.

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5. See section ‘Bureaucratic Hurdles’ for an extended discussion of the GRM procedures [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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