

NZZ Artikel nimmt Bezug auf nachfolgenden HAARETZ-Artikel von Y. Feldman und Uri Blau vom 11. Juni 2009:

Gaza bonanza

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[COGAT is the acronym for the 'Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the [Occupied] Territories'. The word "occupied" is omitted in the acronym because Israel is in official denial that it is occupying the occupied territories.]

The policy is not fixed, but continually subject to change, explains a COGAT official. Thus, about two months ago, the COGAT officials allowed pumpkins and carrots into Gaza, reversing a ban that had been in place for many months. The entry of "delicacies" such as cherries, kiwi, green almonds, pomegranates and chocolate is expressly prohibited. As is halvah, too, most of the time. Sources involved in COGAT's work say that those at the highest levels, including acting coordinator Amos Gilad, monitor the food brought into Gaza on a daily basis and personally approve the entry of any kind of fruit, vegetable or processed food product requested by the Palestinians. At one of the unit's meetings, Colonel Oded Iterman, a COGAT officer, explained the policy as follows: "We don't want Gilad Shalit's captors to be munching Bamba [a popular Israeli snack food] right over his head."

The "Red Lines" document explains: "In order to make basic living in Gaza possible, the deputy defense minister approved the entry into the Gaza Strip of 106 trucks with humanitarian products, 77 of which are basic food products. The entry of wheat and animal feed was also permitted via the aggregates conveyor belt outside the Karni terminal."

After four pages filled with detailed charts of the number of grams and calories of every type of food to be permitted for consumption by Gaza residents (broken down by gender and age), comes this recommendation: "It is necessary to deal with the international community and the Palestinian Health Ministry to provide nutritional supplements (only some of the flour in Gaza is enriched) and to provide education about proper nutrition." Printed in large letters at the end of the document is this admonition: "The stability of the humanitarian effort is critical for the prevention of the development of malnutrition."

These quantities allow a very slim margin for error or mishaps. Moreover, COGAT's analysis is statistically accurate only on condition that there is an equal division of the minimum supplies that are allowed in. "This analysis does not take distribution in the field into consideration," says the "Red Lines" document. A COGAT official says that he assumes that food distribution within Gaza is not equal. If some are receiving more, others are necessarily receiving less than the required minimum. So it is hard to reconcile this information with the claims of the defense minister and COGAT officers that there is no real food shortage in Gaza.

COGAT officers are in regular contact with international organizations, listen to their complaints and examine their requests to bring in various goods, in both official and unofficial meetings. For example, Amos Gilad has dinner from time to time with an official from the UNRWA delegation in Israel. **The Israeli officers repeat the following phrase in**

their meetings with organization officials: “No prosperity, no development, no humanitarian crisis.” A senior COGAT officer explains to Haaretz that it’s not a siege policy, but rather the restriction of entry of luxury products. The decision as to which products qualify as “luxury” changes from week to week, and sometimes from day to day.

Some of these changes are the result of international pressure exerted upon Israel. For example, when he visited Gaza last February, U.S. Senator John Kerry was stunned to discover that Israel was not allowing Palestinians to bring in trucks loaded with pasta. Following American pressure, on March 20 the cabinet decided to permit the unrestricted transfer of food products into Gaza. Incredibly, the COGAT personnel do not see any contradiction between this decision and the serious restrictions that are nevertheless imposed on the entry of various food items.

“Let it be clear that the decision was not intended to lift the restrictions that were imposed in the past in relation to the entry of equipment and food into the Gaza Strip, as determined by the cabinet decision of September 19,” said COGAT in response to Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, which has demanded that “prohibited” foods be allowed to enter Gaza.

Despite the many resources invested by the IDF in coordinating with the Palestinians, since the start of the blockade no list of permitted and prohibited items has been relayed to the Palestinian side. The DCO spokesperson says there is no such list and that the Palestinians “know what they’re allowed to bring in.” But the Palestinians are less satisfied with this situation: Riad Fatouh says that at a meeting three months ago at the Agriculture Ministry in Tel Aviv, attended by al-Sheikh and Mhana from the Palestinian side, he asked DCO chief Moshe Levi for an official document detailing which products the army currently allows to be brought into Gaza. “Even if there are just 10 types of goods, I want to see it in writing,” says Fatouh.

According to Fatouh, Levi was visibly angered upon hearing the request, and told him never to make such a request again, to be satisfied with the transfer of information by telephone. When Fatouh asked Levi why, the DCO chief told him: “Any goods that we allow in, or prohibit - you’ll know about it by phone. That’s the way we work.” No one else in the room mentioned it again.

“If you go back two years, you see that it was utter foolishness,” says a senior officer who was serving in COGAT when the blockade was imposed. “There was a vague, unclear policy, influenced by the interests of certain groups, by this or that lobby, without any policy that derived from the needs of the population. For example, the fruit growers have a powerful lobby, and this lobby saw to it that on certain days, from 20-25 trucks full of fruit were brought into Gaza. It’s not that it arrived there and was thrown out, but if you were to ask a Gazan who lives there, it’s not exactly what he needs. What happened was that the Israeli interest took precedence over the needs of the populace.”

This move was greeted with dismay by many farmers in Israel, who were very pleased with Madar’s performance. At an April 20 meeting in the office of Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai, it was decided that Madar is the one “who will set the agricultural agenda.” Vilnai decided at that same meeting that Madar would be returned to the Erez checkpoint, but a military source explained that security considerations prevent his permanent return there. The spokesperson for the coordinator of activity in the territories would not permit Madar to be interviewed.

Avshalom Herzog, a member of Moshav Almagor, is a fruit grower and the proprietor of a large packing house. He says he has connections with 80 percent of the packing houses in Israel that transport goods to Gaza, in part because of his partnership with Khaled Uthman, the largest fruit trader in Gaza. Herzog is an energetic farmer, and frequently writes to the decision-makers - Deputy Defense Minister Vilnai, Agriculture Minister Shalom Simhon and COGAT officers - about bringing goods into Gaza.

“Until three or four years ago, in a normal year I transported 30-40 percent of the fruit that went into Gaza,” says Herzog. “Today it’s no more than 10-15 percent, because the market in Gaza is not a real market, but rather a market determined by the Defense Ministry. If the Defense Ministry says only 10 trucks will enter, then it doesn’t matter who works in Gaza - he’ll make money. And then there are wars between people who were never traders and there is bribery and people start to pay huge sums for the transport of fruit - irrational things, and then my share is diminished. I know that’s how it is and there’s not much I can do about it.”

Herzog and other farmers have found an attentive audience in Simhon and Vilnai, but they are still not satisfied. “Simhon helps us sometimes,” says Herzog, “but if he wanted to, he could have solved the problems a long time ago. You know what really makes me mad? There was a decision made in a meeting back in April. They came out with a protocol that required the entry of 20 trucks a day, and required that at least three trucks be filled with melons and that an officer from the agriculture staff who was exiled to Julis, in north Israel, be immediately returned to the Erez crossing, where he needed to be for the farmers’ sake. This decision makes it plain as day that the one determining the mix of fruit [to be trucked in] is the director of the fruit growers’ organization together with an officer of the agriculture staff in the Gaza DCO. But it’s ignored. Today it’s permissible to bring in peaches, bananas, apples, dates. Kumquats were permissible until yesterday. There are no plums, no pumpkin, no watermelon and no onion. It’s just impossible to believe.”

Summaries of the discussions about entry of food into Gaza show just how deeply the captains of the defense establishment seem to care about the income of Israeli farmers. Hence, in a discussion that took place in the office of Deputy Minister Vilnai, it was decided that every day, 15 trucks filled with agricultural produce would be brought in. “The problem right now is the emphasis on melons and fruit in general,” Agriculture Ministry Director General Yossi Yishai said at the meeting. At the conclusion of the discussion, Vilnai instructed that three trucks with melons be brought into Gaza each week, “So as not to cause a market failure in Israel.” Another document, from the end of April, signed by Vilnai’s public information officer, says: “Israel’s policy at the crossings is set at various times in accordance with a number of considerations ... Economic considerations, including the agricultural establishment, are at the basis of the policy considerations.”

Meir Yifrah, secretary of the Vegetable Growers Organization, also tries to exert influence on the decisions of COGAT and the Defense Ministry, with occasional success. “Once a month or so, I send a text message to [Agriculture Minister Simhon] Shalom saying the situation in the market is very tough, the growers need to send produce to Gaza, see what you can do with the Defense Ministry, so they’ll bring in what’s needed. It seems odd to me that pumpkin can be defined as a luxury item. It’s sometimes used to feed animals, more than for people. If there are two or three or four growers who want to send stuff in and it’s something they’re short on there (in Gaza), I say they should be able to do that. I tried to pressure the Agriculture Ministry, and in the end we were successful. Last year I had a bad situation with onions. A lot of growers were stuck with their stock. We pressed the Agriculture Ministry and then they increased the onion quota from five to eight trucks at the end of last year.”

Are sales to Gaza significant for Israeli farmers?

“The farmers’ interest is to find other markets, so we can increase profitability for the grower, by creating demand in Israel and avoiding surpluses.”

The Agriculture Ministry claims it also takes care of Palestinian interests: “When it comes to a decision on the kind of produce to be allowed into Gaza, the ministry takes into consideration Palestinian needs, the Israeli growers’ ability to fulfill these needs as well as their own interests, and especially the Israeli consumer, to maintain reasonable prices in the local market. Minister Simhon, as a matter of policy, sees agriculture as a bridge to peace, and in every government in which he served, he has demanded the continuation of trade in farm products with the Palestinians, as well as cooperation in disease control in animals and plants - even in the worst security situations.”

COGAT’s “Red Lines” document, which defines the minimum necessary for the sustenance of Gaza residents, also finds that 300 calves a week are needed to feed Gazans - That’s at least 200 fewer than the number brought in when the crossing was open for trade. Nevertheless, in the six months since Cast Lead, Israel has not permitted the entry of any live calves into Gaza, allowing only frozen meat and fish. In the period prior to the war, when Gaza residents were able to obtain permits to import calves, this was limited to calves from Israel, not from other countries as in the past.

In recent months, Israeli cattle breeders have been exerting pressure on the Agriculture Minister to get him to allow calves into Gaza. Most impacted by the restrictions on bringing meat into Gaza is Eyal Erlich, a former journalist who 15 years ago made a drastic career switch to become an importer of beef. Each year, until the blockade of Gaza was announced, Erlich sold 50,000 calves that he imported from Australia to Palestinians in Gaza (Gazans apparently prefer beef to lamb).

Erlich, 50, heavyset and white-haired, complains about the severe dent in his income and that of his Gazan partner, Hosni Afana. He believes that Agriculture Minister Simhon, who was involved in shaping the policy regarding import of beef to Gaza, exploited the situation to compel the Gazan market to buy Israeli, and thereby assist local breeders.

One way the Palestinians make up for the shortage of beef is by bringing in a large number of sheep via the Rafah tunnels. Unlike other animals, lambs will walk on their own to the other end of the tunnel, so they are easier to smuggle. Veterinary services in Israel estimate that since the start of the blockade, the Palestinians have smuggled in about 40,000 lambs through the tunnels, without any veterinary oversight. The Agriculture Ministry is concerned that these animals could spread epidemics that would eventually reach Israel.

Two days before the High Court’s hearing on Erlich’s petition, there was a meeting with attorney Hila Gorny of the State Prosecutor’s Office. At this meeting, Uri Madar, of the agriculture department of the DCO, voiced his concern that the prohibition on importing beef to Gaza was adversely affecting the residents’ nutrition. Colonel Alex Rosenzweig, head of the civilian division of COGAT, argued the opposite, saying there was no shortage of meat in Gaza and the ban on importation of cattle was not endangering the Palestinians’ nutrition.

Madar declined to sign the state’s response to the petition, asserting that there was “a black flag waving over it,” and his view was not presented at the High Court hearing. Furthermore,

at the hearing, the IDF did not present the COGAT document which states that at least 300 calves are to be imported into Gaza per week.

A Justice Ministry spokesperson, responding on behalf of the High Court Petition department, confirms this, adding, “Not only that, the state’s position was never that the weekly quota of 300 calves, which applied for a certain period of time, was defined as a minimal humanitarian need. The position of the COGAT officials charged with assessing the humanitarian situation in Gaza was presented to the court, stipulating that the entire ‘food basket’ that is brought into Gaza, which includes frozen meat products, meets the humanitarian needs there. This position was supported by data presented to the State Prosecutor. These officials also stated that they were informed that this was the case by Palestinian officials with whom they are in contact. Beyond this, the State Prosecutor does not intend to relate to the content of the internal discussions held in anticipation of the filing of responses to the petition.”

The spokesperson continues, “Although Erlich is seeking to paint his motives for filing the petition as stemming from concerns about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, he is essentially seeking to promote his business, which is being harmed by government policy on Gaza. The Supreme Court also reached this conclusion.”

Erlich’s experience in the ongoing fight to get cattle allowed into Gaza prompted him to establish Adam Solutions, a company devoted to assisting Palestinians in coping with the restrictions imposed on Gaza by the Israeli government. Erlich and his partner Basel Darawshe, son of former MK Abdulwahab Darawshe, hire out their services to wage a public and legal battle for “traders who need to bring in products” or “people who want to go out to get to hospitals.”

How would you have helped?

“It’s a legitimate and legal activity. What I would have done is go to a journalist, for example, and show how we’re wrecking Israel’s public relations.”

Why did they turn to you?

“I’m a private businessperson. People come to me because they know I’ve solved more than a few problems because I was determined and clever.”

Adiri also spoke about the matter with Bikel, a familiar figure in the flower, fruit and vegetable, and spice export field, who in the early 1990s also headed the Agricultural Strategy Committee, which dealt with agricultural relations with Palestinian farmers, among other things. Bikel remembers the problem with the bulbs: “The authorities wouldn’t allow them to be imported. Hillel asked me if there was anything I could do. I told him that I thought I could do something, but it meant having to appeal to defense officials, to persuade the government and the agriculture minister, the defense minister and the prime minister. It’s a tiring process. It’s work. I told him that remuneration would only be due in the event of success, even though it meant a lot of work either way.”

If it was really a security decision, how could it be subject to change?

“Decisions can be changed,” Bikel insists.

In the end, Adiri did not avail himself of Erlich's or Bikel's services. "I asked the Dutch and they said absolutely not," says Adiri. "But the inquiry showed them that it was possible and motivated them to keep trying. They went to Ehud Barak and he eventually approved it."

Three months ago, an acquaintance walked into the shop run by H., an electronics merchant from Gaza City, and started talking about the situation in Gaza and the difficulty of bringing in goods. Then the acquaintance "casually mentioned" a friend of his who could help in obtaining merchandise. "After he started dropping hints, he told me that for NIS 60,000-70,000 he might be able to bring in my merchandise," says H. He says he didn't go for the offer because of the high price. Other merchants say they've received offers to get their goods into Gaza for the exorbitant price of anywhere from NIS 40,000-100,000 per truck (the regular cost is about NIS 3,000). At least one admits that because of the ongoing blockade he did accept one such offer from an Israeli shipper.

One Israeli shipper explains how merchandise can be smuggled into Gaza. He says shippers often use permits obtained from aid organizations to bring in products Israel does not allow merchants to receive, such as clothing and shoes.

"We have no information whatsoever about this," says a spokesperson for the UN World Food Program. "This question does not apply to us since we use only our own trucks and drivers," says the International Red Cross. "All of our aid for Gaza is coordinated with the Israeli authorities," says a UNRWA spokesperson. "We have not encountered the kind of irregularities described. And if we did, we would report them."

How is it possible to do that?

"Let's say a merchant receives a turn to bring in sugar. He relays the name of the driver and the truck number to the Israeli side. The shipper who received the turn contacts another merchant, who didn't receive a turn and is ready to pay a lot of money to bring in his merchandise, which is stuck in Israel. The shipper arranges with the Palestinian shipper and transfers the sugar to the merchant who paid him. He makes up some story to tell the merchant who was supposed to receive the merchandise - that the truck got stuck or that it wasn't allowed through for some reason."

Since the blockade was placed on Gaza, the Karni terminal, through which more than 600 trucks used to pass daily has been closed. Now most goods are transferred through the Kerem Shalom crossing, and the only thing in operation at the Karni terminal is a conveyor belt that brings wheat, seeds and animal feed to the Palestinian side. The person who has profited most from this change is Nissim Jan, a former Shin Bet agent who served, among other things, as "head of the crossings department." In the seven years since he left the Shin Bet security service, he has managed to build himself a little empire that includes a company for logistical services, shipping services and real estate deals; he is currently constructing a building in the Barnea area of Ashkelon, together with contractor Didi Yamin.

Jan lives in a villa on the Ashkelon coast, drives a fancy Audi and wears neatly pressed button-down shirts. "Anyone who's anyone in the PA, and in Israel too apparently, knows me," he tells Haaretz. Palestinian and Israeli sources say that Jan is particularly close to Nasser Saraj, who oversees the operation of the crossings between Israel and Gaza.

Israel and Palestinian sources say that Jan gets a significant cut of this sum, ostensibly as payment for supplying food to the drivers and fuel for the trucks, a cost that cannot exceed

more than a few thousand shekels a month. Man'am Shehaiber agreed to describe to Haaretz the way in which merchandise is transported from either side of the terminal. He said he employs 50 people at the crossing, but declined to reply to questions about his income from providing this service or the nature of his business connections with Jan. In addition, says an Israeli familiar with his business, Jan receives payment from the Palestinians for various jobs he does on the western (Gazan) side of the crossing.

Jan's profits seem dazzling to the Palestinians and the other Israelis involved in operating the crossings. One Israeli familiar with their operation says: "The services Jan supplies on both sides of the crossing have made him one of the most significant figures at Kerem Shalom." Some of the Palestinian traders mistakenly thought that he was the actual director of the crossing. Jan himself attests to his deep involvement there: "Nothing that happens at the crossings escapes my notice," he told Haaretz in a phone conversation. Sources in the Defense Ministry said that lately they've been checking into various complaints about his activity at the crossings.

Jan says that he handled, on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, the passage back into Gaza of Palestinians who found themselves stuck in Egypt after Hamas took control in Gaza and the Rafah crossing was closed. "They came to me because you go to people you can rely on," he says. "I think I'm someone who has a different approach than anyone else at the crossings."

We've been told you get a share of the NIS 500 that the Shehaiber family collects on each truck that goes through the crossing.

"That's a total lie."

But you know the Shehaiber brothers?

"Of course I do. They work with me every day."

And it's not a business partnership?

"It has nothing at all to do with what you're talking about. It's purely business, all legal, and has nothing to do with any 500 shekels."

What is your connection with Nazmi Mhana (the Palestinian director of the crossings)?

"Nazmi is a personal friend of mine. For some reason, it's hard for people to accept a proper, legitimate relationship between two adults."

We've been told that you also do jobs for the Palestinians.

"All the time, all the time. Including now."

How does one get these kinds of jobs?

"Be a person like me - serious, quiet, honest - and apply for any tender in proper legal fashion, and then work. Anyone who wants to can apply."

Doesn't the Israeli crossings administration have a problem with the fact that you also work in the Palestinian Authority?

“I don’t speak with the crossings administration about anything. What I do with the Palestinian population, with the Palestinian Authority, with the Europeans - has nothing to do with that.”

A lot of people we’ve talked with seemed genuinely nervous to even speak about you. Why are people afraid of you?

“Because I have integrity. Maybe because I don’t deal in dirt.”

Maybe because you were in the Shin Bet?

“What does the Shin Bet have to do with anything? It’s been 10 years since I was in the Shin Bet.”

Jan’s business wasn’t hurt by his entanglement in the affair of the transfer of gas canisters to the Palestinian Authority area. Less than a year ago, in late August, inspectors from the enforcement unit of the Infrastructure Ministry raided warehouses belonging to Jan in the southern industrial zone in Ashkelon. There the inspectors found about 100 tons of cooking gas and reported at the time that this was the largest amount of stolen gas ever discovered in Israel in recent years. The Israel Police’s economic crimes unit began an investigation into the matter.

But you paid a fine.

“We paid, but not at the crossings. My shippers, who operate legally, stored the gas canisters in a place where they shouldn’t have been stored, and so we paid the fine and I said that it was my merchandise, so I would bear the expenses and the consequences.”

Isn’t paying the fine akin to an admission that you committed an offense?

“Paying the fine is just a way of saying ‘Leave me alone.’ People just find it hard to accept that I’m not the person they think I am. When I was given the fine, I told [the person from the Infrastructure Ministry] right to his face: I’m paying, even though I think I’m more moral than anyone.” W

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