

Australian humanitarian assistance to Gaza: what a difference five years doesn't make

by Robin Davies

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The recent resurgence of hostilities between the Israel Defence Forces and Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip, with sickening and quite possibly criminal impacts on civilians, brings back memories of 2009. But it also brings with it one piece of good news, admittedly very small. The reader is invited to compare and contrast the following two samples of prose:

1. Australia will provide a further \$5 million for urgently needed humanitarian assistance in Gaza. ... The additional \$5 million includes up to \$2 million for Australian NGOs <World Vision Australia, APHEDA, ActionAid Australia and CARE Australia> to deliver immediate emergency assistance ... The remaining \$3 million is for United Nations agencies to replenish food and emergency stores. This brings to \$10 million the amount of emergency humanitarian assistance committed by Australia to Gaza this year, and is in addition to the \$45 million in development and humanitarian assistance provided to the Palestinian people <last year> ... Australian assistance announced earlier this month has provided financial support to families displaced by the violence in Gaza and delivered urgently needed food aid and medical supplies to those affected. This earlier assistance included \$2 million cash assistance through United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for displaced families, \$1.5 million for emergency food through the World Food Program (WFP), and \$1.5 million to the Red Cross.

And:

2. To respond to growing needs, the Australian Government is providing \$5 million in urgent humanitarian assistance to Gaza. This will be delivered through our established development partners in Gaza: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), World Vision and APHEDA. The funds will provide emergency food, medical supplies, hygiene kits, and psycho-social support. The assistance will also enable UNRWA to restore education and health services, and NGOs to rebuild livelihood programs for communities. This assistance is in addition to Australia's existing commitment to provide \$56.5 million in development assistance to the Palestinian Territories <this year>. This funding will help build Palestinian institutional capacity, stimulate private sector economic growth, improve livelihoods and meet humanitarian needs. UNRWA will receive \$20 million of this funding.

Only the ritual reference to stimulating private sector economic growth sets the two passages apart. The second is from a Julie Bishop [press release](#) issued on 28 July 2014; the first from a Stephen Smith [press release](#) issued on 27 January 2009. So, a similar problem has drawn a similar response through, encouragingly, similar delivery partners. This is despite a series of suggestions from Coalition figures, particularly employment minister Eric Abetz, Leader of the Government in the Senate, that several of the above NGO delivery partners have in the past effectively funded the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel, by channelling funds to local organisations active in that campaign or in other efforts to 'demonise' Israel. It was even suggested that in one instance ([denial here](#)) funding had found its way to an organisation associated with terrorism. Suggestions of this nature have been fuelled by and reflected in opinion pieces such as [this](#) and [this](#) from pro-Israel organisations.

The BDS-related concerns just mentioned led Julie Bishop, as shadow minister for foreign affairs, to say in the [September 2013 issue](#) of the *Australia/Israel Review* that 'the Coalition will institute a policy across Government that ensures no grants of taxpayers' funds are provided to individuals or organisations which actively support the BDS campaign'. Whether or not one considers that to be a reasonable policy (the ALP, quoted in the same issue, didn't think it was), it appears that the Coalition in government has judged it unworkable, and is now willing to continue supporting Australia's 'established' delivery partners in Gaza. It's especially notable

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that APHEDA is among those partners, given that it is the overseas aid arm of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, has long weathered potshots from **those who believe** aid should be handled only by NGOs that subscribe to government policy, and has been the subject of **close attention** from Senator Abetz in relation to its support for the BDS-sympathetic **MA'AN Development Centre**.

Perhaps the government is not entirely comfortable with its partners in this case, but the reality is that people and organisations on the ground, or for that matter in Australia, will have views. If those people and organisations are the best possible funding channels or delivery agents, if their views are merely inconsistent with Australian government policy, and if they advocate nothing other than peaceful protest, the government is right to work with and through them.

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