



UNDERSTANDING GAZA



INTRODUCTION

Ever since the beginning of the Israeli occupation and especially in recent years, Gaza is usually associated with attributes such as military escalation, economic plight, and disastrous infrastructure, which makes it easy to forget that it is a place where normal people – doctors, teachers, artists, engineers, day laborers, men and women, young and old, and so on – live and try to make a living. Not normal are only the circumstances under which this part of the Palestinian society lives, or better, has to exist there, and the humanitarian distress it is exposed to for more than a decade by now.

Once an important trade center between Egypt and Mesopotamia, Gaza today is like the world’s largest open-air prison, with close to two million people confined to a strip of land comprising some 365 km², making it one of the most densely populated places on Earth. While also under Israeli occupation, the Gaza Strip is geographically severed from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which has contributed significantly to the internal Palestinian political divide during the last decade.

In recent years, the Gaza Strip has increasingly made headlines due to its catastrophic humanitarian situation, fuelled by Israel’s economic blockade and with no real prospects in sight. The Fatah and Hamas rivalry has only exacerbated these ills, as they fight over whom will pay for services in Gaza rather than respond to Gaza’s needs. It was this despair that made thousands of people participate in the week-long “Great March of Return” protests near the separation fence that started on 30 March 2018 and tried to shake up the rest of the world about Israel controlling every aspect of their life in Gaza, but not taking any responsibility for its brutal consequences. At the same time, these mass demonstrations, during which Israeli forces killed at least 118 people and injured over 4,000, proved once again that Palestinian resistance is alive and the unmistakable message remains that Palestinians will never give up their right to return, the right to their land, their identity, and a dignified life - as part of the Palestinian state, and not in an isolated enclave or separate entity as has been repeatedly suggested over the past years and especially recently in the framework of the American plans.

This bulletin provides the facts and figures behind the stereotypical images of the Gaza Strip and examines the current situation, violence and poverty in an attempt to promote a comprehensive understanding of what Gaza is and what it means to be forced to live under a prolonged siege and military occupation.

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Gaza at a Glance:

- Area:** 365 km², 45 km long, 5-12 km in width
- Boundaries:** 51 km Green Line (Israel), 11 km Egypt, 40 km Mediterranean coast.
- Population, total** (mid-2017): 1.94 million
- Projected Population 2030:** 3.1 million
- Population <15** (% , mid-2017): 42.6%
- Population Growth Rate:** 3.8%
- Fertility Rate** (2017): 4.17
- Median Age** (2016): 18.4 years
- Population Density** (persons/km², 2017): 5,324
- Refugees** (UNRWA-registered, 2017): 1,348,536; 40.3% live in 8 camps.
- GDP Growth** (2017): 2.7%
- GDP per capita** (US \$, Q4.2017): 423.5
- Unemployment** (2017): 44%, among youth: 60%
- Poverty rate** (2017): 39%

Brief History (See also [timeline](#) on pages 4-5)

The Gaza Strip was part of historic Palestine before the area was included in the **British Mandate** of Palestine, saw a huge influx of Palestinian refugees during the **Nakba** 1947-49 when Jewish/Israeli forces expelled hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes and villages, and was controlled by Egypt during the 1948 War following the creation of the state of Israel. After the war, the armistice lines became the “border”¹; and Gaza remained under Egyptian control until **1967**, when Israel **occupied** the remaining Palestinian territories (along with the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula) during the June Six-Day War.



The Gaza District 1946 and Today's Gaza Strip

Just one example...

Al-Majdal (Asqalan), located some 30 km north of Gaza, was in 1948 home to 11,496 Palestinians, who owned 41,430 dunums of land and many of whom made a living of the city's thriving textile industry. During the 1948 Nakba, Zionist forces expelled almost the entire population to Gaza. After the War, it was repopulated by Jewish immigrants and became the Israeli town of Ashqelon.



Khan Younis Refugee Camp, 1948

As part of the **1979 Israeli-Egyptian** peace treaty, the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egyptian control and a 100-meter-wide strip of land (known as the “Philadelphi corridor”) was established as a buffer zone between Gaza and Egypt.

Following the outbreak of the **First Intifada in 1987**, Israel began to impose movement restrictions, requiring Palestinians in Gaza to get (hard-to-obtain) permits if they wanted to work in or travel through Israel or access the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The permit regime became more regular in 1993, when Israel began imposing its checkpoints and closure politics.

Under the **1994 Oslo Accords**, Israel withdrew from parts of the Gaza Strip and the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) began administering limited civilian control (while Israel remained in charge of borders, airspace, settlements and security). A year later, Israel built an electronic fence and concrete wall around the Gaza Strip.

With the eruption of the **Second Intifada in September 2000**, Israel cancelled many existing work and travel permits, and significantly reduced the issuance of new permits. The following year, Israeli airstrikes and incursions demolished much of the infrastructure, including the Gaza airport, which had only opened three years earlier.

In **2005**, after concluding that maintaining settlements in the Gaza Strip was not worth the cost and that it only poses a “demographic threat,” Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s “unilateral **disengagement**” saw Israel remove its army and some 8,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza, although it remained in control of all exit and entry points.

1 Palestinians have long criticized the use of the word “border” to describe the 1949 armistice line that divides Gaza and Israel, because it is misleading, suggesting that Israel bears no responsibility for the conditions beyond it and thus disguises the fact that Palestinians in Gaza are still being occupied and oppressed by Israel.

A military agreement with Egypt was also reached regarding the deployment of Egyptian forces along the Egyptian side of the border to jointly act with the PA against smuggling and other cross-border violations.

In **2006**, Hamas won the free, democratic **elections** for a new Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and formed a government, seeking also a long-term ceasefire with Israel, which refused to even negotiate. In 2007, it formed a coalition government with the rival Fatah faction, but Israel did not approve of it and straight away worked to undermine it, resorting to economic warfare and pushing Fatah to stage a coup. Western powers followed suit and declared a boycott of the PA as long as Hamas was part of the government, eventually causing it to break up. Subsequently, tensions between Hamas and Fatah forces flared up and peaked in a violent conflict in June **2007** (“the Battle of Gaza”) during which **Hamas seized control** of the domestic affairs of the Gaza Strip, boycotted by the international community, which, however, resumed normal relations with the Fatah government on the West Bank.

The Hamas’ takeover further prompted Israel to impose a full-scale **blockade of Gaza** in flagrant violation of international law, which has led to a constant deterioration of the humanitarian situation, aggravated by three full-scale military assaults and numerous incursions. In addition, the EU withdrew from the Rafah Crossing where it had monitored Palestinian compliance on the Gazan side, while Egypt agreed with Israel to close the border, effectively sealing off Gaza from the outside world.



“Disengagement” from Gaza, 2005



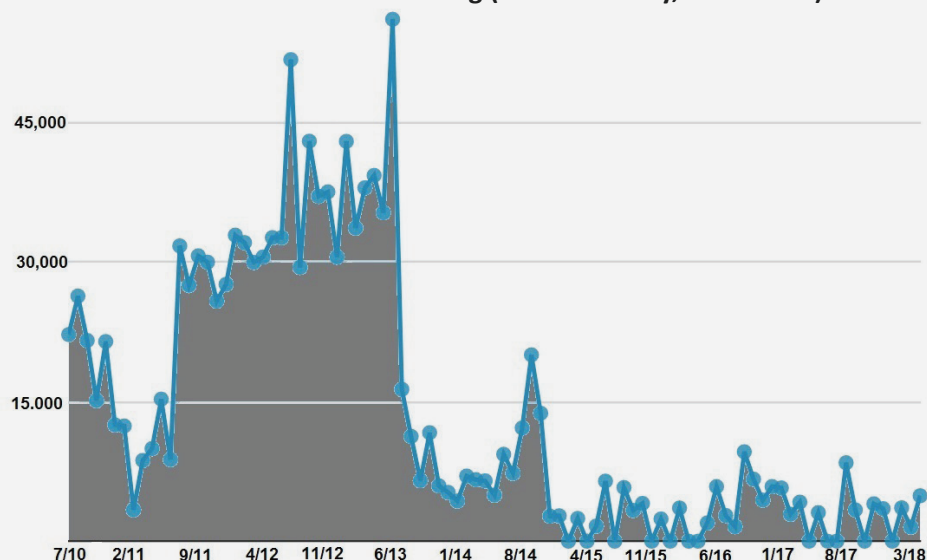
Hamas Supporters Celebrating the Election Victory, 2006

THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN GAZA - HAMAS VS. PA

After the PA, Hamas is the second biggest employer in Gaza. Currently, the PA is paying the salaries of some 25,658 civil servants (12,293 of whom are not working) and 33,550 security personnel (all of whom are not working) in Gaza (some of those are slated for early retirement), while Hamas pays partial salaries to approximately 20,299 civil servants (including 2,340 PA employees who continued to work after 2007).*

* Quoted in UN, Gaza Ten Years Later, July 2017, https://unsc.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/gaza_10_years_later_-_11_july_2017.pdf.

People’s Movement via Rafah Border Crossing (Exit and Entry, 2010-2018)

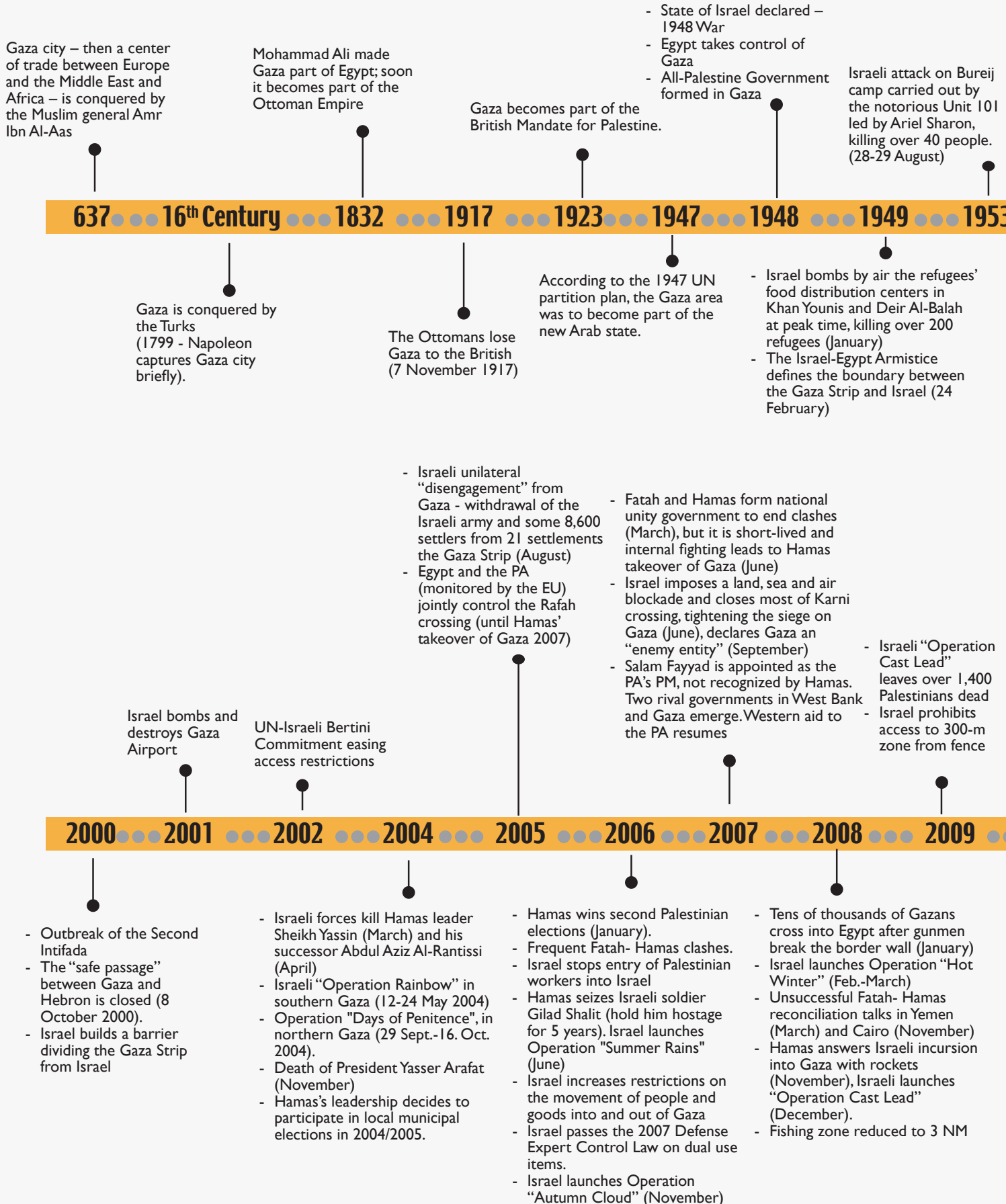


Source: Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, <http://gisha.org/graph/2392>

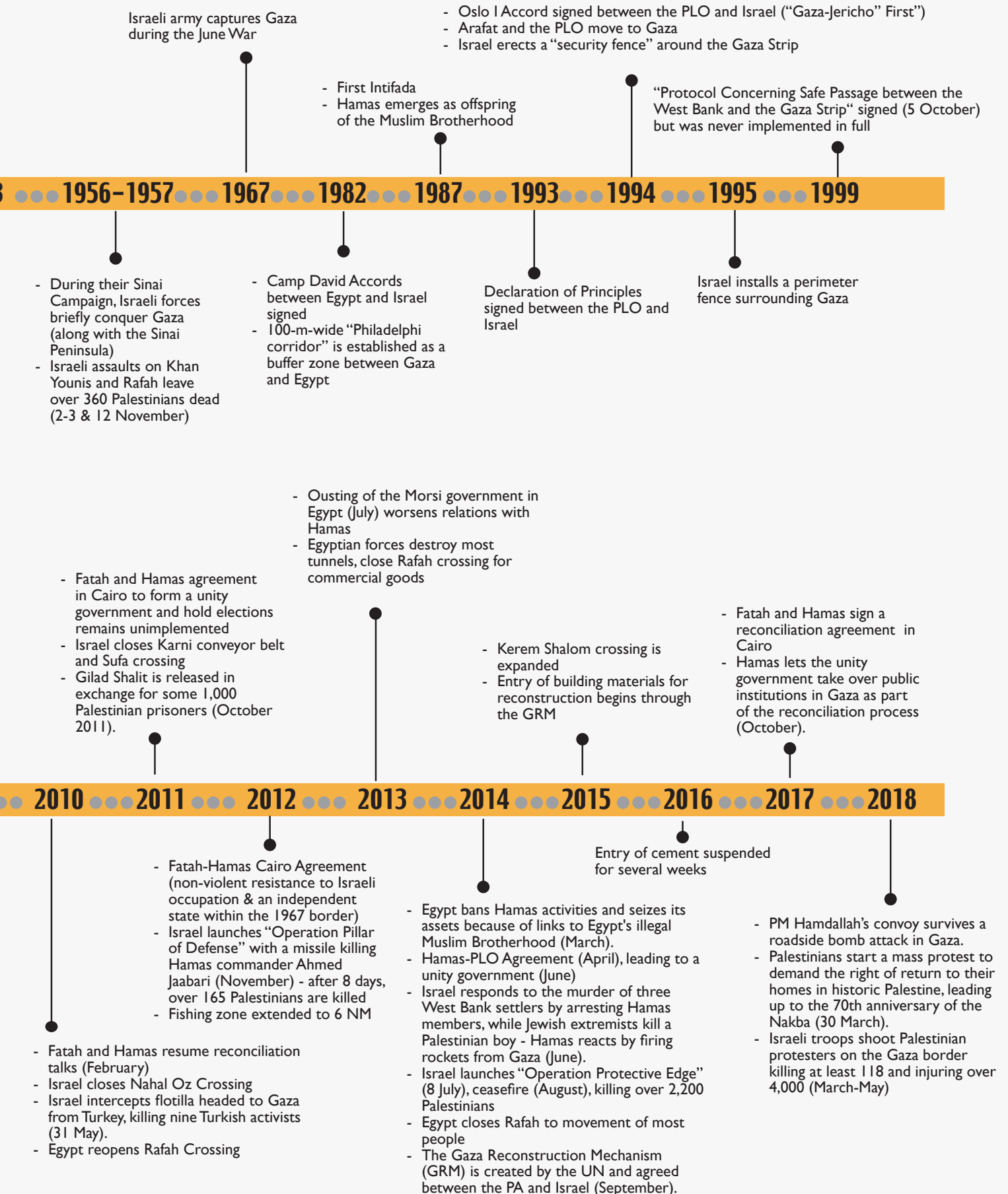
UNDERSTANDING GAZA



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Timeline



Numerous rounds of **reconciliation talks** took place between Hamas and Fatah/PA representatives ever since 2007.² A promising outline for an agreement was negotiated in **2014**, but failed to succeed after Israel suspended negotiations, stating that it would not negotiate with any Palestinian government “backed by” Hamas.

Gaza’s disastrous situation received a new blow in **2017**, when the PA **reduced payments** for electricity and for patients’ referral outside Gaza as well as for the allowances of public employees. President Mahmoud Abbas assumed that increasing Hamas’s isolation and the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza would destabilize Hamas’s rule to an extent that the PA could resume administration of the Strip. However, this calculation ignored the fact that Israel was never keen to end the West Bank-Gaza separation and has so far done everything to undermine attempts at inner-Palestinian reconciliation. In addition, the inescapably necessary disarmament of Hamas under such a scenario was (and is) very unlikely to happen. An Egyptian-mediated **reconciliation agreement** in October 2017, returning, *inter alia*, control of the Gaza crossings to the PA, yet remains to be implemented.

Although both Hamas and Israeli intelligence believe that the respective other side has no interest in a military conflict (the latter being more worried about developments in the north), the post-2014 (Gaza War) relative calm in Gaza is eroding since the beginning of the demonstrations organized as part of the “**Great Return March**” in late March 2018, which drew a certain extent of world attention but did not bring about any changes for the people on the ground in Gaza. High casualties on the Palestinian side, flammable kites and balloons that burn Israeli fields, and a resumed exchange of rockets and mortars on the one side and Israeli air strikes on the other does not bode well.



Clashes During the “Great Return March” Protests 2018

Legal Status and Aspects

Notwithstanding Hamas’ current *de facto* control inside Gaza and despite Israel’s claim that its occupation of Gaza ceased after it unilaterally withdrew its forces and settlers from the coastal strip in 2005, Gaza remains under **overall Israeli military occupation** according to international law as Israel still controls Gaza by land, sea, and air.³ This has been affirmed by the UN, the US State Department⁴, as well as by international human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and International Committee of the Red Cross).

An independent UN panel of experts reporting to the UN Human Rights Council determined that Israel’s **blockade** of Gaza amounts to **collective punishment** in “flagrant contravention of international human rights and humanitarian law,” depriving all Palestinians living there of fundamental rights.⁵ Thus, Israel clearly violates its obligations under international law, according to which it, as the occupying power, is responsible for the safety and welfare of the civilian population under its control, including the almost two million Gazans.⁶

² For details see the PASSIA Bulletin on *Fatah & Hamas and the Issue of Reconciliation*, 2013, <http://passia.org/publications/117>.

³ According to International Humanitarian Law three elements “define” occupation: “the unconsented-to presence of foreign forces, the foreign forces’ ability to exercise authority over the territory concerned in lieu of the local sovereign, and the related inability of the latter to exert its authority over the territory.” See <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/review/2012/irrc-885-ferraro.pdf> for details.

⁴ See, for example, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2014/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=236604&year=2014#wrapper.

⁵ UN OHCHR, *How can Israel’s blockade of Gaza be legal?* September 2011, <https://newsarchive.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=11363&LangID=E>.

⁶ As stipulated in 1907 The Hague Convention and the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. The latter also prohibits collective punishment of civilians (Article 33) and puts the occupier in charge of “ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population” as well as “ensuring and maintaining... the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory” (Articles 55-56).

It should also be noted here that the **Oslo Accords** between Israel and the Palestinians confirmed the Palestinian territories as **one political entity**, stating that “the two sides view the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit, whose integrity will be preserved during the interim period.”⁷ *De facto*, however, Oslo brought more fragmentation and, with the exception of a brief period when a “safe passage” allowed movement between Gaza and the West Bank (1999-2000), increasing isolation.

Another aspect of international law concerns the fact that some 66.2% of Gaza’s population are **refugees**⁸, expelled from their homes and towns in other parts of mandatory Palestine during the *Nakba*, mostly in places just a few kilometers away from today’s Gaza Strip. UN General Assembly **Resolution 194** of 11 December 1948 stipulates that “that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.”

Israeli also violates key principles of **International Humanitarian Law**, which demands, *inter alia*, that combatants must at all times distinguish between legitimate targets and civilians, with the property and infrastructure of the latter not to be targeted; that attacks be proportional and do not cause excessive civilian death or injury; that civilian safety is paramount, thus prohibiting acts such as collective punishment, attacks on medical staff, ambulances and hospitals, threats of violence to terrorize the civilian population, torture and other degrading treatment.

The Israeli Blockade and Life under Siege

At present, Gaza is with no doubt one of the worst places to live, it is basically like a detention camp surrounded and regularly threatened by one of the world’s mightiest armies and with one of the world’s highest population densities, creating **unimaginable living conditions** and an environment rife with nothing but hopelessness, anger and despair. Since 2007, Gaza is kept under a crippling **land, sea, and air blockade**, which has affected every aspect of life for its population, and is prevented from accessing its own oil and gas reserves so as to continue their energy dependence on Israel.⁹ According to international law the blockade (or siege) amounts to **collective punishment**, which is illegal. It not only separates families¹⁰ and denies people access to their centers of religious life and holy places in Jerusalem, but has also triggered major **socio-economic and health crises**, exacerbated by three major military assaults (Operations Cast Lead, 2008-2009; Pillar of Defense, 2012; and Protective Edge, 2014) that destroyed much of Gaza’s already fragile infrastructure. It has placed an entire society in a *de facto* prison from which they are rarely permitted to leave, regardless the purpose,¹¹ and which has destroyed its economic base, resulting in unprecedented levels of **unemployment** and **poverty** (44% and 39% respectively), an 80% **dependency on international aid**, mainly food supplies, and causing the UN to talk of “de-development.”

The Siege - Key Facts

- **80%** of the population depends on aid.
- **44%** of the population is unemployed.
- **39%** of the population is poor.
- **47%** of the population is food insecure.
- Electricity outages average **22** hours a day
- **97%** of water is not safe for consumption.
- **45%** of essential medicines are unavailable.

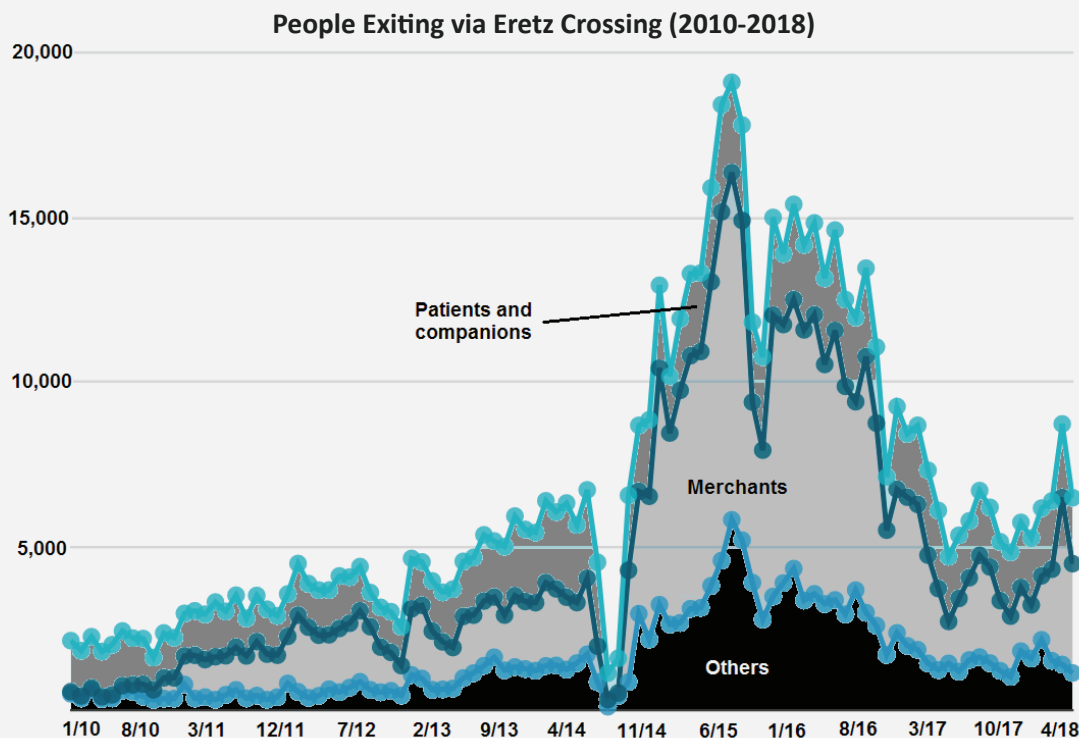
⁷ 1993 Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, Article IV; 1995 Oslo II Agreement, Article XI.

⁸ UNRWA Statistics, 2018.

⁹ Baconi, Tareq, “How Israel Uses Gas to Enforce Palestinian Dependency and Promote Normalization,” *Al-Shabaka*, March 12, 2017, <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/israel-uses-gas-enforce-palestinian-dependency-promote-normalization/>.

¹⁰ At least 31% of Gaza residents have relatives in Israel, East Jerusalem or the West Bank. See Gisha, “Survey summary: Family ties between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank”, 2013, <http://gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/familyties-2013/Family-ties-survey.pdf>.

¹¹ 2017 saw a 50% decline in the number of people entering Israel through the Erez crossing; just 54% of permit applications for patients, merchants and aid workers were approved, down from 62% the prior year. ILO, *The Situation of Workers of the Occupied Arab Territories*, 1st edition 2018.



Source: Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, <http://gisha.org/graph/2392>

AGRICULTURE AND LAND

Limited access to land and to markets outside of Gaza has significantly undermined the agriculture sector, which provides for 11% or 44,000 of jobs in the Gaza Strip.¹² At least 35% of agricultural land falls within Israel’s buffer zone¹³ where Israeli forces shoot at farmers, who dare to tend their fields, and often bulldoze crops. The Oslo Accords stipulated a 50 m-wide **buffer zone** but *de facto* an area of 1.5 km from the fence is inaccessible, containing important arable land.¹⁴ The Ministry of Agriculture has repeatedly complained about Israel’s deliberately **ruining crops** close to the border by spraying herbicides from planes at Palestinian farmlands.¹⁵



“Buffer Zone” near the Gaza fence

FISHING

At present, an estimated 35,000 Gazans depend on the fishing industry.¹⁶ Although the Oslo Accords stipulated a **fishing zone** of 20 nautical miles (NM)¹⁷ off the coast, Israel never allowed that range, keeping up to 85% of the fishing waters off limits to producers.¹⁸ The furthest Gaza fishermen were allowed was 12 NM and since 2007, they are only permitted to fish within 3-6 NM and, during sardine season, up to 9 NM.



Gazan fishermen

¹² According to Ministry of Agriculture statistics.

¹³ UNCTAD, *Report on UNCTAD’s Assistance to the Palestinian People*, 2017.

¹⁴ NRC, *Fact Sheet 1: Types of Land Ownership in Gaza*, April 2015, <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/fact-sheets/types-of-land-ownership-in-gaza-icla-hlp-fact-sheet.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ministry of Agriculture, Press Release, 7 March 2018, http://www.moa.gov.ps/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2680:2018-03-07-07-43-29&catid=46:minnews.

¹⁶ OCHA, “Restricted livelihoods: Gaza fishermen,” *The Monthly Humanitarian Bulletin*, May-June 2017.

¹⁷ 1 nautical mile – 1.85 km.

¹⁸ UNCTAD, *Report on UNCTAD’s Assistance to the Palestinian People*, 2017.

Polluted waters also harm the industry as due to Gaza's chronic electricity crisis, each day huge amounts of raw sewage are pumped into the sea. Even within the permitted fishing range, there have been numerous incidents of **Israeli attacks** on Palestinian fishermen and/or their vessels; since 2000, some 1,192 shooting incidents have left eight fishermen killed, over 130 injured and 656 arrested, while 209 fishing boats were seized and more than 111 boats and equipments damaged.¹⁹ According to the Palestinian Fishermen's Syndicate, only 2,000 of the 3,800 registered fishermen (in 2017) were actually fishing as a result of the attacks, the high cost of fishing tools, and the irregularity/seasonality of the profession.



Israeli naval patrol off Gaza's coast

HEALTH

While Gaza's health system is permanently on the verge of collapse due to the siege, Palestinians are also denied access to health services outside of the Strip. There has been a gradual increase in the *absolute* number of **medical patients** allowed through the Erez crossing, but the approval *rate* has been declining in recent years. It was 62% in 2016, while some 6.6% of all requests were denied, mostly for "security" reasons, and 31.4% did not receive a response in time for their medical appointments. The approval rate for permits for patient companions was even lower (53%).²⁰ In 2017 alone, 54 Gazans died waiting for permits to leave for medical treatment.²¹ In the first quarter of 2018, the acceptance rate for patients was 60%, while 8% were denied and the rest were pending.²²



Lack of medical supplies

The protracted closure of the Rafah terminal has further compounded the situation; in 2017, it had only partially opened for 29 days, allowing 1,222 patients to exit for medical treatment.²³

In addition, **supplies and medications** are running constantly low. As of the end of March 2018, 40% of essential drugs were completely depleted and 45% were at less than one month's supply at the Central Drug Store in Gaza.²⁴

Another indicator for the deteriorating health situation in Gaza is the fact that the rates of **neonatal** (deaths within 4 weeks after birth per 1,000 live births) **and infant mortality** (deaths before the age of one per 1,000 live births) have risen for the first time in five decades from 12 in 2008 to 20.3 in 2013 and from 20.2 in 2008 to 22.4 in 2013, respectively.²⁵ In addition, some 40,000 children suffer from **micronutrient deficiencies** in Gaza.²⁶

INDUSTRY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Over the years, the blockade and Israeli missile attacks and ground incursions have severely damaged Gaza's infrastructure and productive assets.²⁷ Countless houses and factories were destroyed during Israeli operations in 2008, 2012 and 2014, and their **reconstruction** is massively hampered by Israel's siege, which prevents construction materials from reaching Gaza. As of late 2017, some 23,500 people still remained displaced from the 2014 conflict as only 5,755 out of the 11,000 totally destroyed housing units had been reconstructed, also due to insufficient funding.²⁸ Already back in 2015, Oxfam warned that unless the Israeli blockade is lifted it could, at current rates, take over 100

19 Al-Mezan press release, 26 February 2018, <http://mezan.org/post/25123>.

20 WHO, *Right to Health - Crossing Barriers to Access Health in the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2016*, 2017.

21 Human Rights Watch, "Israel: Record-Low in Gaza Medical Permits," 13 February 2018, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/13/israel-record-low-gaza-medical-permits>.

22 UN OCHA, *Allocation Strategy Paper, oPt Humanitarian Fund*, 2018 2nd Reserve Allocation, June 2018.

23 UN OCHA, *2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview - Occupied Palestinian Territory*, November 2017.

24 UN OCHA, *Allocation Strategy Paper, oPt Humanitarian Fund*, 2018 2nd Reserve Allocation, June 2018.

25 UNRWA, "Infant mortality rate rises in Gaza for first time in fifty years", 8 August 2015.

26 UN OCHA, *2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview - Occupied Palestinian Territory*, November 2017.

27 Industrial sites were purposely targeted and destroyed. For example, the UN fact-finding mission into the 2008-2009 war in Gaza that left over 1,400 Gazans and 13 Israelis killed, headed by Judge Richard Goldstone, wrote in its September 2009 report ("Goldstone Report") that "the precise targeting of crucial machinery suggests the intention was to disable the factory in terms of its productive capacity."

28 UN OCHA, *2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview - Occupied Palestinian Territory*, November 2017.

years to rebuild Gaza’s homes, schools, health facilities and other infrastructure.²⁹

Cut off from supply chains, Israeli import and export restrictions have forced many businesses to shut down or operate at below capacity levels. The World Bank estimated in 2015 that Gaza’s **manufacturing** sector, once significant, shrunk by as much as 60% in real terms, due to the wars in the past 20 years and the ongoing siege, while Gaza’s exports virtually disappeared since the 2007 imposition of the blockade.³⁰



Destroyed residential area

WATER

In Gaza, **groundwater contamination** with untreated wastewater and increasing salinity has been linked to a high incidence of water-related diseases among the population, with experts warning of cholera and other epidemics that are liable to be unleashed. Already in 2012, a UN report had warned that Gaza would be unlivable by 2020, and at present, over 96% of the groundwater is unfit for human consumption.³¹ The shortening or suspension of sewage treatment cycles as well as damaged pipelines and treatment facilities has also led to increased **pollution of the sea** along Gaza’s coast, with around 25 million m³ of partially treated wastewater and 7 million m³ of raw sewage discharged annually to open ponds and the Mediterranean Sea - equivalent to around 90 million liters per day.³²



Raw sewage discharged into the sea

As a result of the limited availability and access to safe drinking water – 40% of the population receive just 4 to 6 hours of **water supply** every 3 to 5 days – 90% of the people in Gaza rely on purchasing water from private trucking, posing a heavy financial burden.³³



Distribution of bottled and tanked water

Plans to improve Gaza’s water situation have so far been thwarted by Israel’s blockade which allows less than 16% of the items needed to construct water infrastructure to reach Gaza as well as by the ongoing power crisis (water projects require large amounts of electricity).³⁴ For instance, the Southern Gaza Desalination Plant, launched in January 2017, only receives about 4-5 hours of electricity from the grid and only operates at 10-15% of its capacity.³⁵

ELECTRICITY

While power shortages have been common in Gaza, especially since its power plant was destroyed by Israeli bombardments in 2014, the recent severe electricity crisis began in June 2017, when Israel agreed to the PA’s request to **reduce electricity** to Gaza as a means to pressure the Hamas government to relinquish its control. The two sides traded blames: Hamas accused the PA for withholding payment for the fuel, which is supplied via Israel, while the PA claimed that Hamas had failed to transfer money collected from the sale of medicine to patients in Gaza, which the PA uses in turn to buy the fuel.

²⁹ Oxfam, “Vital building in conflict damaged Gaza to take more than a century at current rate”, 26 February 2015.

³⁰ World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee*, May 2015.

³¹ UNICEF, *State of Palestine Situation Report*, April-June 2017.

³² World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee*, May 2015.

³³ UN OCHA, *2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview - Occupied Palestinian Territory*, November 2017.

³⁴ Oxfam, “Failing Gaza: undrinkable water, no access to toilets and little hope on the horizon”, 15 April 2017.

³⁵ UNSCO, *Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee*, 20 March 2018.

As a result, Gaza's inhabitants face **electricity outages** of up to 22 hours a day³⁶ since more than a year now with catastrophic effects on all aspects of life – food rots, there is no (clean) water, electrical appliances do not function in home or offices, and candles for lightening and open fires for heating and cooking bear the danger of setting ablaze homes and have already claimed human lives. Households with generators often cannot get the necessary fuel to power them.



Children studying by candle light

It is estimated that only 26-46% of Gaza's **energy demand** is currently met;³⁷ and according to OCHA, \$6.5 million is required to provide 7.7 million liters of emergency fuel in 2018 - "the bare minimum to stave off a collapse of services."³⁸

EDUCATION

The blockade and military escalations make the provision of safe, child-friendly school environments almost impossible, but have instead resulted in the damage and destruction of schools, the deaths of students and teachers, and enormous psychosocial stress among children.³⁹ Paired with the fact that over 65% of the schools in Gaza operate on a double or triple shift system with reduced instruction times as well as the frequent power cuts, these circumstances severely restrict the pupils' ability and time to focus on their studies. Taking into consideration that an estimated 900 new schools and additional 23,000 teachers will be required in Gaza by 2030,⁴⁰ this situation will further deteriorate.



Schoolchildren passing by a destroyed school

Although the Palestinian education system was designed to serve all Palestinian students, Israel categorically refuses to allow students from Gaza to study at universities in the West Bank. Another emerging problem is that while education and training schemes are usually welcome means for unemployed youth, the number of youth not in employment, education or training is rising sharply, reaching nearly 40%.⁴¹

ECONOMY

From the outset of the occupation, Israeli policy and strategies in the Palestinian Territories served only its own economic interests. Investment in Palestinian infrastructure and development were almost non-existent and Palestinian economic activities restricted, especially in fields that competed with Israeli businesses. In the wake of the First Intifada and the 1991 Gulf War, Israel began gradually barring all Palestinians from traveling unless they obtained special permits. In 1995, when Israel built a military fence around Gaza, the share of Gaza's **workforce employed in Israel** decreased from some 45% in the 1980s to 6% in 1996.⁴² Prior to the Second Intifada, some 30,000 workers from Gaza were employed in Israel,⁴³ but since April 2006, they were no longer eligible to obtain the necessary permits.

³⁶ UN OCHA, *Allocation Strategy Paper, oPt Humanitarian Fund*, 2018 2nd Reserve Allocation, June 2018.

³⁷ UN, *Gaza Ten Years Later*, July 2017, https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/gaza_10_years_later_-_11_july_2017.pdf.

³⁸ "Gaza Health Services Face Shutdown in 10 Days, UN Says," *Haaretz*, 6 February 2018.

³⁹ According to estimates nearly 300,000 children require some form of mental health support or psychosocial intervention. UN OCHA, *2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview - Occupied Palestinian Territory*, November 2017.

⁴⁰ Prime Minister's Office, State of Palestine & UNFPA, *PALESTINE 2030: Demographic Change: Opportunities for Development*, December 2016.

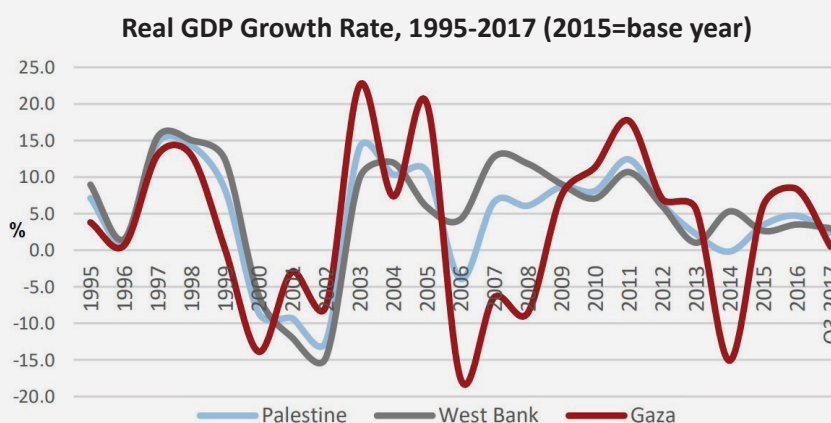
⁴¹ ILO, *The Situation of Workers of the Occupied Arab Territories*, 1st edition 2018.

⁴² Bashi, Sari, "Can Gaza Survive?" *Jacobin*, 25 April 2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/gaza-strip-palestine-israel-occupation-blockade>.

⁴³ PCBS.

In addition, since Hamas seized control of Gaza in mid-2007, the Karni truck crossing is permanently closed, Israel only permits basic humanitarian goods to enter, and refuses the operation of both an airport and seaport. Moreover, “vital projects to reconstruct Gaza’s infrastructure or improve the provision of even basic public services are routinely delayed due to insufficient funds or by Israeli restrictions, delays or denials on the entry of raw materials, equipment, spare parts, and technical experts.”⁴⁴

This publicly declared “economic warfare” (“*lohama kalkalit*”) to cripple Gaza’s economy⁴⁵ has had its toll. In its most recent report the World Bank summarized this as follows: “Over the past 20 years Gaza has undergone **deindustrialization** [...]. The productive base of the economy has been eroded with the combined size of the manufacturing and agriculture sectors falling from 27% of GDP in 1994 to 13% today.”⁴⁶ In 2017, the **unemployment** rate increased to 43.6% (with 63% being unemployed for a year or longer); unemployment among women has reached a soaring 69% and among youth almost 65%.⁴⁷ The average number of **truckloads of goods** entering Gaza each month during 2017 declined by 3% over 2016 to 9,724; the average monthly number of truckloads exiting Gaza rose from 178 to 218, but that’s just a hint of the pre-2000 truckload of 1,300 per month.⁴⁸



Source: World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the AHLC*, March 2018 (figures from PCBS)

Seeking alternative ways for survival, Palestinians in Gaza have turned to what has been termed “**tunnel economy**”, digging underground smuggling passages to Egypt and bringing in all kind of goods from kerosene to livestock, until Egypt, pressured by Israel and the US, shut them down. There have also been numerous other attempts to break the siege and bring humanitarian aid by sea, such as the Freedom Flotilla, but all were stopped – more or less violently - by the Israeli navy.⁴⁹



Smuggling tunnel in Gaza

According to *The Economist*, “in real terms, Gazans are about 25% poorer today than they were at the time of the Oslo Accords” with a **GDP per capita** of \$1,700 a year compared to Israel’s \$35,000.⁵⁰ World Bank analysis, in turn, suggests that lifting the Gaza blockade could lead to additional 32% cumulative growth there.⁵¹

Besides Israeli restrictions on the entry of essential goods and building materials⁵², **appeals for funding** persistently fall short of targets and donors are not fully delivering on the pledges made at the 2014 Cairo Conference for Gaza’s reconstruction. As a result, the socioeconomic conditions in Gaza are “deteriorating at a much faster rate than available donor funds can contain them.”⁵³

44 *Three Years After the 2014 Gaza Hostilities Beyond Survival: Challenges to Economic Recovery and Long Term Development*, UNDP, May 2017.

45 Bashi, Sari, “Can Gaza Survive?” *Jacobin*, 25 April 2018.

46 World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the AHLC*, March 2018.

47 ILO, *The Situation of Workers of the Occupied Arab Territories*, 1st edition 2018.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Most “famously” remembered is the deadly Israeli attack on the “Mavi Marmara” ship on 31 May 2010, when Israeli forces killed nine mostly Turkish activists and arrested over 800 others.

50 “Israel’s economy is a study in contrasts,” *The Economist*, 18 May 2017.

51 World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the AHLC*, September 2017.

52 Especially those that fall under the “dual-use” list system and require the time-consuming approval of Israel.

53 *Three Years After the 2014 Gaza Hostilities Beyond Survival: Challenges to Economic Recovery and Long Term Development*, UNDP, May 2017.

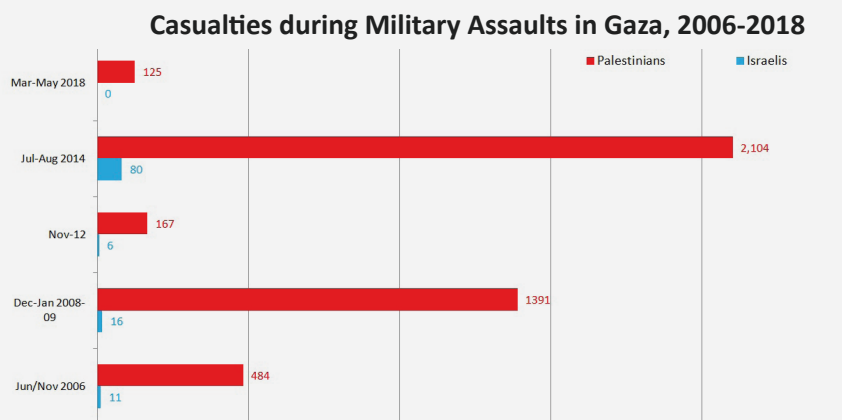
The already smoldering economic crisis is further compounded by US President Trump’s announcement to cut \$250 million from its budget to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees, which has triggered an unprecedented financial shortfall in its services.

The Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem has aptly summed up the overall situation as follows: Israel is “consigning [Gaza’s] residents to living in abject poverty under practically inhuman conditions unparalleled in the modern world,” stressing that “this is not some sort of natural disaster. [...] Had that been the case, Israel would have likely sent in a humanitarian aid mission. Instead, the reality in Gaza is the result of Israel’s handiwork, achieved by its decade-long implementation of a brutal policy.”⁵⁴

War and Violence

Besides the blockade and humanitarian disaster, Gazans are also subject to violence and war, exposed to heavy, indiscriminate shelling and bombing with nowhere to flee. While it is true that there have also been rockets launched from within Gaza at Israeli targets, they have not caused anywhere near the damage and death the Israeli military might has unleashed on Gaza. One must also not make the mistake to put Israel, the state, on equal footing, with a mostly unarmed population of two million legitimately resisting their imprisonment and the injustices they have experienced for far too long. By claiming it is acting in “self-defense”, Israel is “blaming the victims of its military aggression for their own misfortunes. Yet the basic cause for this war is the [...] Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.”⁵⁵

It is not by chance that Israel was repeatedly condemned for its use of excessive force and asked to hold to account those responsible for the many Palestinian deaths and injuries,⁵⁶ but unfortunately, as (almost) always when Israel sits in the “dock”, it remained merely condemning.



Source: UN, B’Tselem.

Military circles believe that the four years of relative calm since the Gaza War of 2014 have come to an end and the choice ahead is a new war or some kind of economic-security arrangement, which would include “aspects of a long-term stable ceasefire and restrictions on the military arming of the strip’s armed groups.” Apparently, the army is “already considering alternatives to the Hamas government,” should the latter not cooperate in such a deal and turn from a resistance movement to a civilian authority.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ B’Tselem, Press Release, 13 June 2017; https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20170613_gaza_electricity.

⁵⁵ Shlaim, Avi, “What’s the use of the word ‘balance’ in such an asymmetric war?” *The Independent*, 27 July 2014, independent.co.uk/voices/comment/israel-gaza-conflict-whats-the-use-of-balance-in-such-an-asymmetric-war-9630766.html.

⁵⁶ Most recently, on 13 June 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to deplore the use of excessive force by Israeli troops against Palestinian civilians and asked UN chief Antonio Guterres to recommend an “international protection mechanism” for the occupied Palestinian territory.

⁵⁷ Ben Yishai, Ron, “War or an agreement: Israel’s critical dilemma vis-à-vis Gaza,” *Ynetnews*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5295153,00.html>.

Initiatives & Plans: What's Next for Gaza?

As much as Gaza has been in the headlines, as much has been discussed – within governmental, army, academic and donor/aid circles alike – what should be done with the “problem” of Gaza. For Israel, Gaza is only important because it sits at its border. It is insignificant economically (it only costs a lot in military/security terms), religiously/historically (with no chief Jewish or historical sites), and strategically (no military-strategic value), and the last thing Netanyahu and his right-wing allies are interested in is a functioning united Palestinian unity government, which to undermine is one of their undeclared objectives. Thus, the Israeli discourse revolves around three options: (1) managing the situation (probably its preferred option as Israel could live with and manage the current conflict in the long run), (2) toppling Hamas and retaking the Strip (which would lay the security focus on Gaza at a time where threats in the north are more serious), or (3) jumping on the international community’s reconstruction “wagon” (with the eye on their funding role).

The majority of these **reconstruction proposals** for Gaza revolve around initiating a program of economic development, some of them requiring the cooperation of Egypt. One new initiative was recently outlined by a former Israeli commander of the Gaza Division, who envisions the establishment of a Palestinian state in Gaza and an adjoining section of the northern Sinai Peninsula as part of a “modern-day Marshall Plan” along an expanded coastline, which at the same time would help Egypt to fight ISIS in the region.⁵⁸



Gaza - a perpetual cycle of destruction and reconstruction

Back in July 2017, former head of the IDF’s Southern Command, Major General Sami Turgeman, already recommended (supported since by Military Intelligence, the Shin Bet and several prominent politicians) to deescalate the situation in and around Gaza by opening the border crossings, lifting trade and movement restrictions, and giving Gazans the opportunity to return to Israel for work, while assisting Hamas in easing the sewage, water and electricity crises.⁵⁹ A recent study by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) on how to get out of the “Gaza crisis” has also suggested development and “reconstruction in exchange for demilitarization [...] “in a coordinated manner under regional and international leadership.”⁶⁰

Another plan in late 2017 by Israeli officials (including cabinet ministers Yisrael Katz and Yoav Galant) proposed to the construction of a seaport (which was already foreseen in the 1993 Declaration of Principles), arguing it would provide for the Gazans’ relief as well as for Israel’s security needs. The seaport could be either constructed on an artificial island off Gaza’s shore or dedicate quays in the existing nearby ports of Al-Arish (Egypt) or Ashdod (Israel)⁶¹; a port on Gaza’s coast is out of question for fear that Hamas could use it to import weapons.

Currently reported US plans are to secure hundreds of millions of dollars in funding from the Gulf states for major energy and industrial development projects, including a seaport, a power and a desalination plant, and a free trade zone between Gaza and Al-Arish, all aimed at improving the economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza while excluding and ignoring issues of human rights, freedom and self-determination. Here, too, one angle is on an improved security situation in northern Sinai, and the idea is to keep the Hamas-controlled government in Gaza but in full coordination with Egypt. Similar plans were also presented by Yoav Mordechai, then Israel’s former Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), at a summit on Gaza, hosted at the White House in March.⁶²

It should be noted that all these schemes have already been applied to the West Bank, which - divided into “cantons” - is almost absolutely controlled by Israel. This is one of the reasons why the President Abbas/the PA/

⁵⁸ Brigadier-General Shmuel Tzaker (Res.) A plan neglecting Gaza is no plan at all,” *Ynetnews*, 27 May 2018, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5272347,00.html>.

⁵⁹ Goldman, Lisa, “The Racism of Blaming the Palestinians for their Own Deaths,” *Forward*, 17 May 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/401486/the-racism-of-blaming-palestinians-for-their-own-deaths/>.

⁶⁰ Kurz, Anat, Udi Dekel & Benedetta Berti (eds.), *The Crisis of the Gaza Strip: A Way Out*, Institute for National Security Studies, 2018, p. 15.

⁶¹ Tibon, Amir, “A Gaza Seaport That Doesn’t Endanger Israel?,” *Haaretz*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-a-seaport-for-gaza-not-a-pipe-dream-with-this-plan-1.5455010>.

⁶² Winer, Stuart, “US said seeking to raise \$500 million for Gaza from Gulf states,” *The Times of Israel*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-said-seeking-to-raise-500-million-for-gaza-from-gulf-states/>.

PLO have already rejected the US plans, being undoubtedly convinced their real goal was to “buy” the Gazans and achieve some progress on the ground before revealing President Trump’s “ultimate” peace plan, while further dividing Palestinians and consolidating the separation between Gaza and the West Bank. However, it is doubtful how and to which extent the Palestinians will be actually able to rebuff those plans in the making and whether it indeed would oppose infrastructural and civilian projects in Gaza.

Regional players disagree about the plans currently discussed. Egypt, for the time being, has stressed that any economic plan for Gaza is no substitute whatsoever for a mutually accepted peace plan with East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital. According to Arab sources, Saudi King Salman is worried about the reaction that abandoning the principles laid down in the 2002 Saudi peace initiative would bring about, while his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is not opposing the US “deal,” including the Gaza-West Bank separation, at all. King Abdullah II of Jordan, meanwhile, fears the future of Jordan’s custodianship over the holy places in Jerusalem as well as the envisioned Israeli control over the Jordan Valley.⁶³

Outlook

The situation along the Gazan-Israeli separation fence may have simmered down for now, but the Gaza Strip remains a powder keg that can explode into armed conflict at any time as Israeli army intelligence has been warning time and again.⁶⁴ Against all odds, Gazans remain resilient and Gaza a symbol of Palestinian resistance to Israel’s decade-old policies of displacement and dispossession.

Making Gaza livable in 2020 will require staggering efforts, but while Gaza stands on the verge of a wide-scale man-made disaster, the world yet again is looking on, unable or unwilling to do enough to protect the life, health and dignity of almost two million people who have nowhere else to go and who, 70 years after the Nakba, still wait for freedom and justice.

In the meantime, Israel continues in blatant violation of international law to pursue its goal, which, in the words of Avi Shlaim is “to bomb Hamas into a humiliating surrender. Israel’s ultimate aim seems to be not just a peace but the re-imposition of the status quo with a fragmented Palestine and with itself as an imperial overlord.”⁶⁵ It is thus imperative to seriously consider the Palestinian demand for international protection; the recent UN General Assembly Resolution’s call on UN Chief Guterres to propose “ways and means for ensuring the safety, protection and well-being of the Palestinian civilian population under Israeli occupation” is hopefully a first step.

Not least as yet another generation is now rising in Gaza under utterly unacceptable conditions, deprived of their childhood, growing up with bombings, airstrikes, destruction on an incomprehensible scale, and endless human tragedies. One cannot but wonder what the children and youth of today, which make up the majority of Gaza’s population, will be like when they grow up, if and how they recover from the traumas they have suffered, and where their anger and frustration will vent, if the situation is not radically changing.

Urgent action must be taken to speed up the reconstruction process, reconcile the Palestinian political division, lift the Israeli blockade (as called for by the UN Security Council Resolution 1860), and reverse Israeli restrictions on the movement of people and goods as well as on access to their resources and outside markets. Without such changes, any external funding and technical support will only delay the collapse of the Gaza Strip. Thus, as a recent UNDP Study pointed out, “a more assertive role by the international community is needed beyond the provision of financial and technical support, in order to secure political and security stability for short-term recovery and long-term development.”⁶⁶

⁶³ See, for example, Bar’el, Zvi, “Trump’s ‘Deal of the Century’ for the Middle East Might Live or Die in Cairo,” *Haaretz*, 26 June 2018.

⁶⁴ For example, former head of the Southern Command, Major General Sami Turgeman, told *Channel 2 News* in July 2017 that it was “completely clear that severe economic hardship creates potential for escalation, potential for a situation where one has nothing to lose any more.” Quoted in Goldman, Lisa, “The Racism of Blaming the Palestinians for their Own Deaths,” *op.cit.*

⁶⁵ Shlaim, Avi, “What’s the use of the word ‘balance’ in such an asymmetric war?” *op.cit.*

⁶⁶ *Three Years After the 2014 Gaza Hostilities Beyond Survival: Challenges to Economic Recovery and Long Term Development*, UNDP, May 2017.

UNDERSTANDING GAZA



GAZA STRIP



1 Buffer Zone and Northern No-Go Zone

- 150 to 500 m buffer imposed by the Israeli forces; movement is restricted by frequent army warning fire.
- Covering the former northern settlement bloc, movement in this area is restricted to residents and international organizations since 28 December 2005.

2 Seaport

Construction of a seaport was begun during the Oslo process, halted in 2000, and started again in 2005. The unfinished port was partially destroyed by the Israeli Army during the second Intifada, and it remains unoperational today due to the Israeli siege.

	Palestinian Localities		Industrial Area		Minor Crossing Points
	Former Israeli Settlement Blocs pre-2005 Disengagement		Philadelphia Corridor		Major Crossing Points
	Palestinian Coastal Strip Cultivation (Al-Mawasi)		Palestinian Road		500 metre Buffer Zone
	Greenhouse Zone		Israeli Road Link		150 metre Buffer Zone and Northern No-Go Zone
			Double Wire Fence with Watch Tower		



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