

GAZA

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Is Gaza just a product of the 1948 and 1967 refugee problems?

Absolutely not, Gaza's roots can be traced back to antiquity, and its place atop the headlines of today would be no surprise to those who have inhabited the land over the last few millennia. As is the case with Jerusalem, the first written mentions of Gaza come from the Egyptians. At one time or another, this lucrative strip of coastline has served as an important part of Egyptian, Philistine, Israelite, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, Hasmonean, and Arab societies. It has religious significance for all three monotheistic faiths and exchanged hands on numerous occasions during the Crusader period. Thus, the violence of recent years is nothing new for an area that has rarely seen peace.

Location has played a central role in Gaza's importance to conquering entities. As Gaza is essentially a bridge between three continents, its cities were originally coveted as valuable ports, and it served as the main Egyptian lifeline to European and Middle Eastern powers. Its allure as an economic artery brought subsequent invaders, and the area was often caught up in the other conflicts that came to historic Palestine.



Gaza's historic Gold Market

The area also holds certain religious significance in the Christian and Muslim faiths. The Bible puts Gaza at the center of the lives of Samson and Deliah, making it a target for the Crusaders in the 12th century. The armies of the Islamic Empire continued on to Gaza soon after retaking Jerusalem from the Crusaders, in part because Hashim Ibn Abd al-Manaf, the great grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad, is supposedly buried there (hence the historical Arab reference "Ghazzet Hashim").

How has Gaza changed hands in modern times?

Gaza, along with the rest of Palestine, has effectively been an occupied territory for the last 500 years. The Ottoman Empire conquered the area in 1517, and their rule continued until it fell to the British in the Third Battle of Gaza during the World War I (WWI). The First and Second Battles of Gaza had ended in stalemates. After WWI, the territory came under the British Mandate of Palestine and remained so until 1947, when the British submitted the Palestine Question to the United Nations (UN). In the immediate aftermath of the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948 and the subsequent partition of Palestine, the population of Gaza jumped from just under 100,000 people to nearly 300,000 due to the influx of refugees, most of whom were fleeing the advancing Zionist forces from the Jaffa area and the Negev. Post-war Gaza found itself under Egyptian rule, while the West Bank was controlled by Jordan, marking the beginning of Palestine's division into two separate geographic entities.



Rafah Camp, 1950

When was Gaza reduced to the strip of land that it is today?

Before 1948, Gaza was just one part of the continuous area known as historic Palestine, and its main population center was an important coastal city in the Ottoman Empire. The 1947 UN Parti-



tion Plan had designated a large area of the coast and Negev area Gaza, along with the West Bank, as the home of a new Arab state; this plan was largely rejected in the Arab world, and the 1948 War was the result. By the time the Egyptian-Israeli General Armistice Agreement was signed on 24 February 1949, Egyptian forces had made their way through Gaza on their way to Tel Aviv, and the territory was consequently created as a smaller entity placed under Egyptian control. The current border between Gaza and Egypt was formally established by the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Agreement.

When did Egypt's influence in the area known as Gaza begin?

As far back as we can trace the existence of Gaza, so can we find an Egyptian presence there. Groups coming from Egypt may have settled there as early as 3000 BC, and the first mention of the name Gaza dates from 1484 BC, when the area came under the domain of Pharaoh Thutmose III. Though the territory passed through many hands in the centuries that followed, Egypt maintained a political and social presence in Gazan affairs. The Fatimid dynasty – a Shi'a Caliphate based in Cairo – gained control in the 10th century, and Gaza became part of Egypt in 1832 under Mohammad Ali. Ali and his son, Ibrahim Pasha, modernized much of the economic, social, and political practices in all of Palestine during their short reign that lasted from 1832 until Ibrahim's death in 1848.



Mohammed Ali of Egypt

Has Egypt had a hand in Gazan affairs in modern times?

Gaza came under Egyptian control once again as a result of the events in 1948. It was never annexed, however, and its residents were still issued passports by the semi-official All-Palestine Government until the territory was lost to Israel - invading with French and British cooperation - in the October 1956 Suez War.