

Gaza - Twenty Years Later



By Mkhaimar Abusada

The Gaza Strip, which is located on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, is no more than 365 square kilometers with two million people. Population pressure has been critical in an area with limited water and arable land, weak infrastructure, (e.g., roads, sewage system, and electricity network) and many internal and external barriers that have resulted from the Israeli siege and blockade, which has turned it into the largest open-air prison in the world.

The first issue of *This Week in Palestine* coincided with the golden days of Gaza in 1998. At that time, Gaza was the center of Palestinian politics after the signing of the Oslo Agreement in September 1993, and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. Gaza was promised by the international community to be the Singapore of the Middle East. Within a few years, Gaza's infrastructure began to develop, the economy was booming, and above all, there was greater accessibility to the outside world. The Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt was open 24 hours a day all year long. In 1998, the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat inaugurated the Gaza International Airport. Flights from Gaza to Cairo, Amman, Cyprus, and other countries connected Gaza with the outside world. The Gaza seaport that was under construction when the Intifada erupted was swiftly destroyed later by Israel.

The outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000, and the ensuing violence

and armed resistance against the Israeli army and settlers in Gaza triggered massive Israeli retaliation against infrastructure and the economy, and above all, completely destroyed the newly inaugurated Gaza International Airport and restricted the movement within and in and out of Gaza.

The heavy financial and military toll of the second Intifada pushed Israel to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza in September 2005. Israel claimed that Gaza was no longer under occupation, but it locked the gates of Gaza; and a year later, after Hamas kidnapped the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Israel instituted a tremendously restrictive siege and blockade against Gaza from all directions – land, sea, and air – leaving Gazans frustrated and desperate.

Things became worse after Hamas seized control of Gaza in June 2007, which marked the beginning of political division between the West Bank and Gaza.¹ As a result, Israel classified Gaza as a hostile entity in September 2007, and allowed the import of only badly needed food items to prevent starvation and humanitarian disaster in Gaza. The Israeli closure has steadily forced Gaza to become more and more dependent on outside aid for even the most basic items necessary for everyday life, and economic conditions have deteriorated, precipitating widespread poverty. Unemployment is at more than 40 percent, and UN figures put youth unemployment at critical levels.

The Israeli siege pushed Hamas and Gazans to construct tunnels that ran under the Egyptian border to bring in fuel, construction materials, and consumer goods. A new class of tunnel owners and smuggled businesses flourished in Gaza between 2008 and 2013. But in July 2013, the new Egyptian regime began a serious crackdown on the tunnels, causing shortages of many commodities in Gaza. Changes to Israeli restrictions on imports in 2010 after the Turkish flotilla resulted in a rebound in some economic activity, but regular exports from Gaza (e.g., agricultural produce such as citrus, strawberries, and flowers) and furniture are still not permitted. Standard-of-living measures in Gaza remain below the levels seen in the mid-1990s.

A United Nations report published in 2012 indicated that Gaza would not be livable in 2020, if the Israeli siege and blockade remained in force. According to the report, many Gazans are food insecure, due primarily to a lack of economic means rather than a shortage of food. Eighty percent of households receive some form of assistance from UNRWA, WFP, and other local and international relief agencies, and 39 percent of people live below the poverty line.

In addition to siege and closure, Gaza has come under three Israeli major aggressions (wars) between December 2008 and July 2014. The worst was

THIS WEEK IN PALESTINE TURNS TWENTY



Gaza was once a thriving city on the Mediterranean coast surrounded by citrus groves and fertile fields. Today, Gaza is fighting for its survival and glory. Gaza's symbol, the phoenix, represents the multiple rebirths of Gaza on the same site over the past 5,000 years.

in the summer of 2014, which led to the death of more than 2,200 people, many thousands injured, and massive destruction of civilian infrastructure and housing. Four years later, Gaza has not been completely rebuilt due to lack of international funding and continued Israeli restrictions on infrastructure materials.

However, the worst is yet to come. In April 2017, the PA instituted a number of measures that aim to put pressure on Hamas to give up its control over Gaza,ⁱⁱ further crippling the already extremely strained economy, after more than a decade under blockade, and push Gazans deeper into poverty and unemployment. But Gazans has survived the siege and PA measures by orchestrating a mass nonviolent protest along the fence between Gaza and Israel that began on March 30, 2017. The protest has led to the death of more than 200 Gazans, the majority of them civilians, and a handful of journalists, paramedics,

and persons with disabilities. The international community and Western human rights groups condemned the use of disproportionate force by Israel against Gaza civilians, but it did not stop Israel from targeting civilians.

The year 2017 marked 50 years of Israel's military occupation of Palestine and 10 years of Israeli siege and blockade of Gaza. With this grim milestone, many young people in Gaza consider Israel to be the source of their misery and suffering. The promised Singapore of the Middle East has turned into a nightmare for the Palestinians in Gaza. With unprecedented levels of poverty, unemployment, and no future, the dreams of Gaza's youth have been shattered. Suicide, drug addiction, and the crime rate have risen remarkably in the past two years – a consequence of despair. The overwhelming majority of Gazans have lost hope for a better future in Gaza and are ready to switch gears and make U-turns. Hundreds of youth have succeeded in leaving Gaza for Europe, and many others are trying. But not all Gazans are able to leave.

The only way to save the shattered lives in Gaza is to lift Israel's siege and blockade and end the Palestinian internal political division. This might be the path to restore normalcy and create hope for a better future.

Dr. Mkhaimar Abusada is an associate professor and chairman of the political science department at Al-Azhar University in Gaza. He has authored one book and many academic articles and short essays in local and internationally recognized newspapers and academic journals.

ⁱ Shortly after Hamas won the 2006 elections that were deemed open and fair by international observers, the international community stopped supporting the Palestinian government. Hamas was boycotted and pressured by the Quartet, Israel, and the PA with the demands to recognize Israel and the Oslo Agreement and condemn terrorism. Hamas refused because it saw these concessions as the only bargaining points left at their disposal.

ⁱⁱ Hamas claims to be engaged in unofficial negotiations with Israel and rumors regarding discussion points range from humanitarian measures to the reopening of the harbor and even the airport. Israel denies these claims. The PA as the official recipient of financial support for Palestinians protests that Hamas does not have the authority to engage in such negotiations on its own.



CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR'S EVE

JERUSALEM'S MOST MAGICAL SETTING

Christmas Eve dinner 24.12.18

Join us in the lobby from 18:00 for hot wine,
roasted chestnuts and Christmas carols at 20:00

Christmas Day buffet 25.12.18

Served from 12:30 until 16:00

New Years Eve celebration 31.12.18

Dance the night away with DJ Simon,
as we celebrate the promise of the new year to come!

RESERVATIONS: events@amcol.co.il

Tel: 02-6279777 / 054-7741718 | Fax: 02-6279779