

The Truth about Gaza:

The Occupation, the Siege, and the Context for War

On Wednesday, 14 November 2012, the Israeli military launched a new military offensive on the Gaza Strip, the first large offensive since Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009. This latest offensive, named "Operation Pillar of Defense," with a stated purpose to halt rocket fire from Palestinian militant groups operating in the Gaza Strip, left over one hundred individuals dead and more than one thousand injured. Recent reports of UN OCHA estimated that 90 Palestinian civilians were killed in Gaza, including 26 children and 12 women. Four Israeli civilians were also killed by rocket fire. A ceasefire, reached on the evening of 21 November 2012, called for the cessation of all hostilities by both the Israeli military and the Palestinian armed struggle groups in Gaza. The ceasefire appears to be holding, but the circumstances that led to both the most recent as well as the previous wars remain unaddressed by both the local and international community.

Widely perpetuated myths that Israel neither controls Gaza nor has any responsibility to the Palestinian residents living there under occupation obfuscate a reality of devastating restrictions on the right of Palestinians in Gaza to live a life of dignity, and confuse any analysis of both the applicable legal standards and the just solution. The following list is certainly not exhaustive, but rather addresses the most widely disseminated myths about the occupation, the siege, and the context of war.

MYTH: Since the disengagement in 2005, Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip has ended and Israel no longer controls Gaza

TRUTH: While Israel's 2005 "Disengagement Plan" entailed the unilateral withdrawal of the Israeli army, and the evacuation of the military installations and civilian settlements out of Gaza, under national and international law and agreements, Israel maintains its occupation of Gaza. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, constitute a single territorial entity with political, legal, economic and territorial unity. These areas were occupied in 1967. Neither Israeli laws, the Oslo Agreements nor the Disengagement Plan changed the legal status of the single occupied Palestinian territory. Further, soon after the disengagement, a comprehensive blockade was imposed on the Strip.¹ This blockade allows Israel to maintain significant control over the Strip and key aspects of the lives of its residents.² Israel maintains control over:

- **Land:** Israel exercises complete control over the crossings between it and Gaza.³ Even the Rafah crossing located on the land border between Gaza and Egypt is bound to agreements and understandings with Israel.⁴
- **Air:** Israel completely controls Gaza's airspace. No air traffic is allowed into or out of the Strip. The only aircraft that fly over Gaza are Israeli-owned and used for military intelligence or attacks.⁵

- **Sea:** Israel also has complete control over Gaza's territorial waters and prevents the movement of people and goods by sea. On 3 January 2009, during Operation Cast Lead, Israel declared a maritime blockade on the Gaza coast. This blockade is still in force.⁶
- **The Buffer Zone:** Israel physically controls the area in the Strip near the fence along the border. This area, known as the "Buffer Zone", extends in some places as far as 1,500 meters from the border. The Buffer Zone, which includes a "high-risk, shoot-to-kill" zone where Israel fires at anyone who ventures inside, covers 17% of the entire Gaza Strip and 35% of its agricultural lands. Israel conducts routine incursions into the Buffer Zone, levelling and destroying property including trees and crops.⁷

In addition to maintaining control over the land, air and sea, Israel uses its power to collectively punish the Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip and deny their rights to life, liberty and dignity. Israeli aircraft are used to spy on and bomb the Gaza Strip. Israeli naval forces continuously patrol the coast not just to prevent outsiders from reaching Gaza from the sea but also to prevent Palestinian fishermen from fishing in Gaza waters.

MYTH: Palestinians control basic infrastructure in Gaza

TRUTH: Israel controls infrastructure including water, electricity and sewage. The electricity system in Gaza has been largely dependent on power supplied from Israel since 1967. While an independent power station was built in Gaza in 1998, its capacity was severely limited when Israel bombed it in 2006 and blocked its full repair through the blockade.⁸ In 2007, Israel decided to reduce the supply of gas and electricity to Gaza, subjecting residents in Gaza to power cuts, scheduled blackouts lasting between 6 and 18 hours a day, and random unscheduled cuts.⁹ These power cuts exacerbate the already difficult living conditions in Gaza and disrupt almost all aspects of daily life, including health services, education, water and sanitation services, and household maintenance.¹⁰

Water and sewage lines are connected to the same electricity source in order to pump water from wells into homes, and pump the sewage out from homes into the sewage treatment facilities.¹¹ Because of power cuts, water supply for domestic use is insufficient, which raises substantial health and hygiene concerns. Almost all the households in Gaza receive water only for few hours a day.¹² 90% of the water extracted from the aquifer is considered undrinkable when compared to WHO safe drinking water standards.¹³ Daily power cuts also disrupt sewage treatment and hinder the completion of the treatment cycle, with the result that partially treated and untreated sewage is discharged into the Mediterranean Sea, in order to avoid sewage flooding residential areas.

MYTH: Palestinian residents of Gaza are free to pursue their livelihoods

TRUTH: Israel controls many aspects of the lives and livelihoods of people in Gaza. Israel controls the Palestinian registry for the population of the West Bank and Gaza. Any change in the registry requires Israel's approval, including births, marriages, divorces, deaths and address changes.¹⁴ The address listed on an individual's Israeli-approved ID card determines where its holder may reside

and has resulted in the forcible transfer of West Bank residents to Gaza.¹⁵ In 2000, Israel froze the population registry entirely so no subsequent changes in the population are reflected in the population registry, save for changes to the children's registry.¹⁶ Since 2000, tens of thousands of Palestinians live as status-less in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Today, more than 10,000 people living in Gaza are without IDs, effectively trapping them within the Gaza Strip.¹⁷ By controlling the population registry and movement into and out of the Strip, Israel controls the livelihoods of the people living there, including their family lives, education, health care, and employment.

Israel's restrictions on Gaza's land and sea prevent thousands from earning their livelihoods. According to UN OCHA and the International Committee of the Red Cross, 35% of Gaza's farmland and 85% of fishing waters are totally or partially inaccessible due to Israeli policies. Approximately 113,000 people are affected by access restrictions to the land areas along the fence, and around 65,000 people are affected by sea access restrictions.¹⁸ Fishermen in Gaza are particularly hurt by the restricted fishing area, which has been limited to three nautical miles from the Gaza coastline since 2007. The Israeli navy has consistently fired on fishermen, even within the allowed fishing area, causing both injuries and death. Additionally Israeli military and security forces harass fishermen, subject them to humiliating interrogations and arrests, and intercept and confiscate their boats and fishing equipment.¹⁹ The tiny fishing area, coupled with attacks and fishing boats confiscations, deprives the fishermen and their families of their main source of income.²⁰ Recent reports claim that Israel has agreed to double the fishing area to 6 nautical miles as a result of ceasefire agreement,²¹ but this is still far less than the 20 nautical mile limit guaranteed to Gaza fishermen in the Oslo Accords.

Israel also controls taxation in the Gaza Strip, which is part of a single customs envelope along with Israel and the West Bank. Israel is responsible for setting, collecting and transferring customs and VAT to the Palestinian Authority, influencing product prices and Palestinian fiscal policy. Israel decides if and when to transfer Palestinian tax revenue²² which in turn affects the Palestinian Authority's ability to fund and pay for public services and salaries in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip such as electricity, health care or the education system.

MYTH: Palestinian residents of Gaza are able to enter and/or exit Gaza

TRUTH: The Palestinian population in Gaza cannot move freely in or out of Gaza. Israel prevents any movement to and from Gaza via the airspace or the sea, and only allows exceptional crossings over land. Through its control over the population registry, Israel decides who enters or exits Gaza. Without an Israeli-approved ID or passport, one cannot move through Rafah or Erez border crossings. In September 2007, after Hamas took over Gaza, Israel tightened restrictions on the movement of people and goods to and from the Gaza Strip. Since then Israel declared that **only exceptional humanitarian cases can enter from Gaza to Israel**. Despite the declared humanitarian policy, the following people are not allowed to leave:

- Many patients who need medical treatment that is not available in Gaza;²³

- Individuals who want to reunite with their families in the West Bank to visit sick relatives or to take part in funerals;
- Brides who are engaged to be married in the West Bank;²⁴
- Students who want to continue their studies outside Gaza;²⁵
- Businessmen who want to promote their businesses, or farmers or industrialists who want to export their goods;²⁶

All Palestinians in Gaza that Israel does not deem “exceptional humanitarian cases” are not allowed to enter to Israel by any means.²⁷ Once Israel forbids an individual from entering the West Bank, they cannot even enter by way of Egypt and Jordan because Israel controls all borders with the West Bank. Israel prevents Gaza residents from maintaining normal family ties with their relatives in the West Bank, and from taking advantage of available higher education, employment, and business opportunities.²⁸

MYTH: Israel allows all essential goods to enter and exit Gaza

TRUTH: Since 2007 and until the attack on the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza in 2010, Israel imposed restrictions on importation of various products into the Gaza Strip ranging from herbs to toys. A recently-revealed document showed that Israel calculated the minimum number of calories necessary, in Israel’s view, to keep Gaza residents from malnutrition.²⁹ After pressure from the international community, Israel eased these restrictions. However, Israel maintained the restrictions on movement of goods, prevented Gaza from exporting goods, blocked trade between Gaza and the West Bank, and ultimately kept thousands from having dignified, productive work to support themselves and their families.³⁰ As a largely urban area, Gaza cannot be self-sufficient and is thus dependent on trading goods and services. Because of the trade restrictions, Gaza’s economy depends on external aid. Many Gazans are food-insecure, due primarily to a lack of economic means rather than a shortage of food. More than half of households in Gaza are either food insecure (44%) or vulnerable to food insecurity (16%) even when taking into account UN food distributions to almost 1.1 million people.³¹

Sources:

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