

GAZA

A Fence Away from Freedom

There is a fence around Gaza. It stretches from the north to the south. From a distance, the fence looks innocent; it is not a tall, imposing structure with deep ditches or piercing floodlights. Neither does it appear impenetrable. Yet the fence looks out of place, uncomfortable, dividing land that otherwise flows gently as far as the eye can see. And as everyone in Gaza knows, any seemingly benign features belie the fact that the fence constitutes an absolute – separating people from productive livelihoods, family members, higher education, and, indeed, freedom itself in the form of access to the rest of the world beyond it.



Approximately 1.5 million people live on the narrow stretch of land known as the Gaza Strip. Given Gaza's size of 360 square kilometres, local complaints about population density and lack of open space for recreation are easy to understand. Located on the Mediterranean, at the crossroads between major Middle Eastern cities, Gaza has always had an important role in the political, military and commercial pursuits of regional and local powers.¹ Set in such circumstances, it is no wonder that Gazans traditionally have been cosmopolitan in outlook, wise about the world, and strategically savvy.

These days, after more than two full years of an Israeli-imposed closure, Gazans wonder when their confinement will end and life can start again.² Erez, the crossing point used by people as they exit Gaza and enter Israel, remains closed except for a limited number of medical and humanitarian cases and staff members of international organisations. Moving across the desolate terminal area, there is no trace of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers who in decades past and as late as the year 2000, used to make their way to work in Israel on a daily basis.³ The emptiness is the embodiment of policy. As outlined in the Israeli June 2004 cabinet resolution on Gaza disengagement "the State of Israel expects to reduce the number of Palestinian workers entering Israel, to the point that it ceases completely".⁴ With economic opportunities in Israel curtailed, Gazans prevented from such productive activities intuitively

look to the local market in search of making a livelihood. But what meets the eye is a series of blows under a perpetual stranglehold that has culminated in what can only be described as total devastation. The ongoing closure has led to private sector collapse, as Gaza's businesses can neither import goods nor export their products.⁵ The industrial area in the north lays bare; around 700 factories and workshops were effectively levelled during the last days of the recent conflict.⁶ Maintenance, rehabilitation and reconstruction are words only; as long as a ban on the import of building materials remains in place.⁷ Having a job, the basic marker of dignity and self-worth, has become a pipe dream or mere nostalgia here in Gaza. Outside the framework of the United Nations, the public sector and a thriving black tunnel economy there really are no jobs at all. For most ordinary people, current circumstances have given rise to a previously unthinkable situation. After years of socio-economic decline, the closure has left them destitute. More than three-quarters of the entire population are food insecure and depend on receiving food assistance from the United Nations in order to fend off starvation.⁸ The daily average of goods allowed into Gaza during the years of the blockade has been reduced to less than one-fifth of what was allowed in the months before it was imposed.⁹ By way of example, in the month of August 2009, less than 1,800 truckloads entered Gaza for the local market, alongside some 642 truckloads of grains and animal feed.¹⁰ This left 1.5 million people with around sixty truckloads of food and less than twenty truckloads of grains to serve their daily needs. Having reached this point, it is time we remind ourselves that what we are faced with in Gaza is a man-made human dignity crisis. Every day ordinary Gazans pay the price for political failure. In the words of John Holmes, the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, "[In] Gaza, humanity has taken a back seat to politics. A measly trickle of items has become the most the world can offer civilians trapped by a political stalemate."¹¹

Beyond the fence lies a different reality. Beyond the fence lie opportunities for people to meet, gain new skills, and have the seemingly unattainable privilege of free exchange with fellow human beings. The mobile phone has become the most precious item for any Palestinian family whose members are divided between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. An hour away by car, the West Bank may seem as distant as Europe, as a permission to enter simply can not be obtained. For the high-achieving student who dreams of further knowledge and of the sharing of ideas, Gaza's isolation translates into acute frustration. An Israeli announcement in 2008 to the effect that no Gazan student would be allowed to exit Gaza to pursue tertiary education has only been slightly amended, allowing a limited number of students to leave for taking up scholarships at 'recognised' universities.¹² The closure of borders narrows space. It also narrows people's choices, and, in time, their minds.

Children are fragile. Yet they have a thirst for life and are recognised by all as our common future. For a fenced-in Gaza, education has perhaps never been as important as now. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) recognises this and does everything it can to prepare the next generation to become global citizens, respectful of one another and of differences among people. The introduction some years ago of Human Rights education to the 208,000 students in Gaza's UNRWA schools is only one of several initiatives intended to enhance knowledge and enrich their educational experience. Having operated in Gaza from the very outset of the Palestinian refugee problem in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Agency seeks to fulfil its humanitarian and human development mandate through a combination of basic material assistance, health services, the provision of economic opportunities, and education – all in the hope that it can serve for a better future for Palestinians.

The fate of the people in Gaza and efforts to fulfil UNRWA's mandate are both intrinsically linked to what we all are as human beings and what the United Nations means to each and every one of us. Today's isolation has led many Gazans to wonder how it came to this. Former colleagues and friends in Israel still make calls to ask what life is like. Separated from normal day-to-day interaction for almost a decade, it is only the older generations on both sides who still remember, who still can put a name or a voice to a seeming stranger's face. The Hebrew is broken, and so is the face – in a smile – when reminiscence takes over from the hardships of current survival. "I know my neighbour, but my children don't."

The current blockade of Gaza has not appeared out of a vacuum. Along with the Oslo Accords of 1993 came a series of restrictions on movement, a stringent permit system, and, from 1995, a fence. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a similar structure defines the day-to-day reality of everyone in Gaza. Ordinary people's experience of opportunity, hope and common humanity is all connected to the perpetuation of the fence encircling this narrow piece of land. Even looking out on the Mediterranean horizon, everyone will know the existence of a liquid fence, a few nautical miles from shore, beyond which one's life is in peril. In Gaza, the human condition is precarious. It is up to the world to change that, to protect people and their futures, and to make it possible for Gazans to live – once again.

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(1) Gerald Butt, *Life at the Crossroads. A History of Gaza*, 1995, 2009, p. 14.

(2) An Israeli-imposed closure on Gaza has been in place since June 2007. The closure was imposed after the Hamas takeover of Gaza and the Israeli government's subsequent decision to declare Gaza 'hostile territory'. See *The Jerusalem Post*, 'Government declares Gaza 'enemy entity'', accessed on 28 September 2009, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?ci d=1189411435664&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.

(3) According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, about 30,000 Gazans worked in Israel in the third quarter of 2000, before the onset of the second intifada. See A. Arnon and J. Weinblatt 'Sovereignty and economic development: The case of Israel and Palestine' in *The Economic Journal*, 111 (June), F291-F308, F300. The Royal Economic Society 2001. Accessed on 28 September 2009.

http://www.econ.bgu.ac.il/facultym/arnona/Sovereignty_and_Economic_Development.pdf

(4) Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Item 10. Economic Arrangements' in 'The Cabinet Resolution Regarding the Disengagement Plan', 6 June 2004 (as published by the Prime Minister's Office), accessed on 26 September 2009, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Reference+Documents/Revised+Disengagement+Plan+6-June-2004.htm>.

(5) Apart from a few exceptions, there has been a total ban on exports from Gaza since the imposition of closure in June 2007. This has led to the discontinuation of an estimated 95 percent of industrial establishments (some 3,750 establishments) and the layoff of 94 percent of workers (approximately 33,000). See Private Sector Coordination Council Gaza Governorates, 'Gaza Private Sector. Post-War Status and Needs. Preliminary Assessment Report', 25 February 2009, p. 1.

(6) *Ibid*, p. 1.

(7) The current blockade regime includes a prohibition on the import of construction materials such as cement, wood, glass and steel bars. About 6,400 homes were destroyed or sustained major damage during the recent conflict in December 2008-January 2009, with minor damages to another 52,900 homes. In addition, there are several thousand housing units awaiting reconstruction and rehabilitation as a result of previous Israeli military operations. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory, 'Special Focus August 2009. Locked In: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip', 14 August 2009, p. 14.

(8) Around 75 percent of Gazans (more than 1.1 million people) are food insecure, according to UN OCHA. See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory, 'Special Focus August 2009. Locked In: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip', 14 August 2009, p. 3. Of those who receive food aid in Gaza, UNRWA assists some 750,000 Palestine refugees, while the World Food Programme assists another 365,000 nonrefugees. Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, 'Statebuilding in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Opportunity for Recovery and Development Challenges. Report of the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator', 22 September 2009, p. 18.

(9) United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory, 'Special Focus August 2009. Locked In: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip', 14 August 2009, p. 5.

(10) State of Israel, Ministry of Defense, Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories, 'Monthly Gaza Strip Merchandise Traffic and Humanitarian Aid Report for the Month of August, 2009'.

(11) 'Life and livelihoods in Gaza are being made impossible', Op-Ed by John Holmes in *European Voice* (Brussels), accessed on 5 May 2009, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MWAI-7RM3K8?OpenDocument>.

(12) United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory, 'Special Focus August 2009. Locked In: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip', 14 August 2009, p. 3.

(13) The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East was established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to provide humanitarian relief to the more than 700,000 refugees and displaced persons who had been forced to flee their homes in Palestine as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The Agency began its operations in May 1950, pending a just and lasting resolution to the refugees' plight. From normal day-to-day interaction for almost a decade, it is only the

older generations on both sides who still remember, who still can put a name or a voice to a seeming stranger's face. The Hebrew is broken, and so is the face – in a smile – when reminiscence takes over from the hardships of current survival. “I know my neighbour, but my children don't.” The current blockade of Gaza has not appeared out of a vacuum. Along with the Oslo Accords of 1993 came a series of restrictions on movement, a stringent permit system, and, from 1995, a fence. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a similar structure defines the day-to-day reality of everyone in Gaza. Ordinary people's experience of opportunity, hope and common humanity is all connected to the perpetuation of the fence encircling this narrow piece of land. Even looking out on the Mediterranean horizon, everyone will know the existence of a liquid fence, a few nautical miles from shore, beyond which one's life is in peril. In Gaza, the human condition is precarious. It is up to the world to change that, to protect people and their futures, and to make it possible for Gazans to live – once again. * Trude Strand is Special Assistant to the Director of UNRWA Operations, Gaza. ©