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Why is Gaza so important in the Palestinian struggle?



Sources: Ctxt [Photo: First Intifada in the Gaza Strip, 1987 /Efi Sharir/Dan Hadani Collection, Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, National Library of Israel]

The history of the Gaza Strip reveals that the tiny enclave has long encapsulated Palestinian identity; That is why it is now the epicenter of the regional crisis.

More than half a century after Israel began its occupation of the Gaza Strip, there are growing indications that it is using its current military offensive to reshape the territory completely.

On October 30+972 published an official document from Israel's Ministry of Intelligence recommending the complete expulsion of all Palestinians from Gaza to the Sinai desert. After receiving reports that the Israeli government was pressuring Egypt to accept much of

Gaza's population, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed at a Likud party meeting that he was actively seeking to "transfer" Palestinians out of the Strip. The call for mass expulsion, which was already gaining supporters on the Israeli right before October 7, is finding increasing acceptance in the dominant discourse in Israel.

Attacks on Gaza's infrastructure and civilians They seem to corroborate these plans. UNRWA's Commissioner-General, Philippe Lazzarini, has stated that for the first time since its creation For 74 years, the agency has been unable to fulfill its mandate in Gaza. Some analysts argue that Israel's actions in Gaza [now constitute domicile](#): the massive and deliberate destruction of homes with the aim of making an area uninhabitable.

The Palestinian death toll since October 7 already exceeds the total number killed in all previous Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip this century. At the time of writing, Israeli forces have killed more than 22,500 Palestinians in Gaza, 70 per cent of them women and children; more than 51,000 people have been injured, and nearly 1.9 million people, the vast majority of the Strip's population, have been displaced.

While defending its actions in Gaza, arguing that they are necessary, and denying accusations of war crimes, the Israeli government defines its war in existential terms. The Hamas raid on October 7 was one of the deadliest attacks on Israel in the nation's history. For the first time since 1948, Israeli forces temporarily lost control of territory inside the Green Line, as Hamas killed more than 1,200 Israelis, wounded more than 5,000 and kidnapped some 240 people, most of them civilians. The impact on the Israeli psyche and the ensuing collective trauma have been profound.

Taking advantage of these sentiments, the Israeli Government, with broad public support, has framed the attack on Gaza as a battle for survival. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, "It's either them or us," calling the assault by land and air a "war for Israel's existence as a prosperous Jewish nation in the Middle East." Netanyahu has dubbed it "the second war of independence."

However, the grandiloquent statements clash with the fact that that Gaza, at least at first glance, is but a dot tiny on the map. How has such a small territory become –comprising less than 1.5% of historic Palestine and smaller than most U.S. cities – at the epicenter of a struggle national, regional and global of enormous importance?

For anyone familiar with the history of the Gaza Strip, this comes as no surprise. Indeed, over the past 75 years Gaza has always been at the heart of Israeli-Palestinian history. All the main issues of the Palestinian struggle – dispossession, occupation, uprising, autonomy and combativeness – are condensed in this coastal enclave. Thus, tracing the history of the

Gaza Strip through these milestones can shed light on the present moment and help explain the background to the current crisis.

Dispossession and exile

As originally a port city on the Mediterranean In eastern times, Gaza has a long history as a hub of activity with a key strategic location for the Middle East, the North Africa and Southern Europe. But the 40-kilometer "Strip" that we know today is a direct consequence of the Nakba.

Under the 1947 UN Partition Plan, 55% of the Palestine was to be destined for a new Jewish state; the remaining 45% It included Gaza City and a significant area of southwestern Gaza. Palestine stretching all the way to the Naqab/Negev desert. In In reality, of course, Palestine was going to face a very serious fate. different. In May 1948, after months of violence and expulsions, the The leader of the Jewish Agency, David Ben-Gurion, declared that the State of Israel, without specifying its borders. For the following year, Israeli forces had seized 78 per cent of Palestine.

The events of the Nakba formed the modern-day Gaza Strip both in territorial and demographic terms. Egypt, which had joined with other Arab nations to declare war on Israel in In 1948, it signed an armistice agreement with its new northern neighbor in 1948. February 1949. The armistice established the current borders of the The Gaza Strip – a significantly smaller expanse of land than the one determined by the UN in 1947 – which was under the Egyptian administration.



Palestinians flee their village in the Galilee after the entry of Zionist forces, 1948. / **GPO.**
The creation of the Israeli State, on the other hand, forcibly displaced and expelled at least three-quarters of the Palestinian population, resulting in 750,000 Palestinian refugees.

While this exodus transformed the demographics of the entire Levant, no place received more refugees per capita than the Gaza Strip. It had about 80,000 inhabitants before the Nakba, and by the end of the 1940s it had taken in more than 200,000 refugees and tripled the population of the area. The Strip's high population density in the 21st century, two-thirds of which are descendants of those early refugees, can be traced directly back to the impact of the Nakba.

For the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living in Gaza at the time, life was characterized by widespread impoverishment and hardship. Gazan refugees and locals alike had lost their farmland and property to the new Israeli state, and all were stripped of the entire Palestinian economy with which they had interacted until then.

The eight newly created refugee camps to accommodate thousands of refugees people along the Gaza Strip used to be crowded, as well as being unhealthy and tremendously uncomfortable. And while the humanitarian response tended to focus on refugees, many of whom The original Gazans themselves were just as impoverished; some had even been displaced, even within the Strip itself.

The beginning of the Gaza Strip's history encapsulates the Palestinian entity as well as dispossession. At the height of the Nakba in 1948, Gaza hosted the Palestinian National Council, which proclaimed the formation of the All-Palestine Government, an idea of exiled nationalist leaders and the first attempt to forge a Palestinian government in exile, albeit under Egyptian protection. In many ways, these were the last gasps of the old Palestinian elites, who lost relevance after the 1948 war.

Perseverance and entity

Determined to return to the homes and villages that had been taken from them, Many Palestinian refugees were sneaking across the border in the years later to reunite with loved ones, recover belongings, take care of their crops or simply to see again their old homes. As the exile continued, the fedayeen Palestinian (militiamen) were also increasingly crossing the border through the country. often to lay ambushes in Israel.

Since Israel did not distinguish between the various types of crossing, anyone entering from Gaza, or from any Arab territory, He was considered an "infiltrator" and was immediately shot and killed. They deported or killed him if they managed to catch him. It is estimated that between 2,700 and 5,000 Palestinians lost their lives in this way in the 1960s. after the Nakba.



Photo: Palestinian fishermen return after a night of fishing on the beach in Gaza, February 10, 1957.

At the same time, signs of perseverance and perseverance also appeared. even cultural flourishing in Gaza after the Nakba. In 1953, by For example, it hosted an exhibition by the painter and art historian Ismail Shammout (born in Lod and expelled to Khan refugee camp) Yunis in 1948), which would later be described as the first contemporary art exhibition from Palestine.

Gaza also produced a number of prominent poets in this period, including Mu'in Bseiso, Harun Hashim Rashid and May Sayegh. The three of them They fused cultural, social, and political themes in their works. reflecting the inescapably politicized nature of life in Gaza. Bseiso and Sayegh were also avowed activists in organizations the first as a communist and the second as a leader of the women's division of the Ba'ath Party.

Meanwhile, Gaza was becoming a hub of activity Fedayeen. The fedayeen belonged to a younger generation than the the figures behind the All-Palestine Government and tended to come from poorer environments; Many lived in refugee camps and were moved by their direct experience of displacement and dispossession.

Khalil al-Wazir, a prominent leader who organized fedayeen operations In this day and age, it is an example of this archetype. Al-Wazir had been expelled from his hometown, Ramla, in 1948 and then living in the Bureij camp. In the mid-1950s, he met a civil engineer who came from Egypt named Yasser Arafat, and both of them They connected because of their shared commitment to the Palestinian struggle. They joined forces with Salah Khalaf, another Gaza refugee from 1948, and went on to found al-Fatah, the party that dominated Palestinian politics for the rest of the 20th century.

Despite its separation from the rest of Palestine, Gaza is nonetheless remained intimately linked to the rest of the world in the decades of the fifties and sixties. It was integrated into the solidarity policy anti-colonialist movement in the Global South, especially after Gamal Abdel Nasser became president of Egypt in 1954 and mentioned He usually sees the Palestinian cause as the key to his leadership Arab.



PLO leader Yasser Arafat appears with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. Undated image / **Palestinian authorities via Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90.**

Consequently, this era saw leading figures of the anti-colonialism visit to the Strip, including Che Guevara in 1959, Jawaharlal Nehru in 1960 and Malcolm X in 1964. The three of them went to refugee camps when they were there, underscoring the importance of of Palestine refugees in the politics of the Gaza Strip and the national aspirations.

Still, this period was not one of liberation for the Palestinians. They continued to live as a stateless people under Egyptian control, first exercised by the autocratic monarchy supported by the United Kingdom until 1952 and then by the regime of the Free Officers that would come to dominate Nasser.

Egypt's military governors were still in charge of the Gaza Strip. although Nasser verbally supported the Palestinian cause, he was not a supporter of the Palestinian cause. of nationalist activism that could compete with its own authority. So, although the people of Gaza were temporarily liberated from the Israeli regime that would ruin their lives for years to come, their reality was far from the sovereign independent state by which it was They had fought on the eve of the events of 1948.

Occupation and settlements

Although 1967 is always mentioned as the starting point of the Israeli occupation, the Gaza Strip had already suffered an interlude of what was to come a decade earlier. In late October 1956, Israel invaded and occupied the Strip as part of a joint attack on Egypt with the United Kingdom and France, following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. The Israeli army invaded the Strip and confronted many of the Palestinian refugees it had expelled just a few years earlier.

However, that first Israeli occupation lasted only four months – ended on the orders of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, who threatened to sanction Israel if it refused to withdraw. Researchers have uncovered evidence from that time that points to Israel planned to extend its presence in the Gaza Strip and even lift the Jewish settlements. When the Israeli army reconquered Gaza, a decade later, in June 1967, they resumed these plans and gave The longest military occupation in modern history began.

The new regime had an immediate convulsive impact on the lives of Palestinians in Gaza. They became subject to the legislation Israeli military, with frequent searches, interrogations, and arrests. Israeli forces harshly suppressed Palestinian nationalism – both armed and non-violent – and its leading figures were arrested, deported them or made them disappear. Many Palestinian activists were expelled or fled, and those who remained were habitually held in administrative detention, without trial or charge. The Israeli deportations continued well into the 1970s. with more Palestinians forcibly expelled to the West Bank, Sinai and Jordan.

While the occupation was imposed in both the West Bank and Gaza, from the beginning, Israel's policies were not the same in both countries. Territories. The Israeli authorities saw the Gaza Strip as a reason to of particular concern, as they considered that the high numbers of refugees, high population density and poverty made it more susceptible to radicalism.



Photo: Israeli armored vehicles enter Gaza during the Six-Day War, June 6, 1967. / **Moshe Milner/GPO.**

Accordingly, Israeli leaders developed a series of policies at this time designed to reduce Gaza's population dismantling their camps and inciting large-scale emigration. They adopted various strategies to achieve the latter, such as trying to pay Gazans to start a new life in the Americas or diminish the quality of life in the Gaza Strip to such an extent that the people were forced to leave. The widespread refusal to cooperate among the refugees meant that Israel would not be very successful in its efforts. Attempts.

At the same time, and paradoxically, the imposition of Israeli rule meant that Gaza and the West Bank – the two parts of Palestine that Israel does not agree with. in 1948 – were reunified under a single force. Consequently those in Gaza were able to re-establish contact with their families and friends in the West Bank, as well as those inside the Israel, and vice versa. Crucially, refugees also They were able to visit the homes and villages they had lost for the first time from the Nakba, although many found that their homes were destroyed or that the Israelis who lived in them at the time did not They let them in.

Unlike the blockade and closures of the 21st century, the Palestinians in Gaza they had some freedom of movement at this time; The Border separating Israel and Gaza was relatively porous and both Palestinians and As Israelis, they could cross it quite easily. In fact, it was It was common for Palestinians to work in Israel, and many of them They learned to speak Hebrew fluently accordingly. The Israelis they also visited Gaza for its cheaper prices for shopping. its excellent mechanics and its famous seafood.

However, free movement at this time was far from being an exchange between equals. The Palestinian workers who worked in Israel were stateless non-nationals, which meant they enjoyed few rights and basically constituted cheap labor. Loop It was also a captive market for Israeli goods, which it stifled the economic development of the Strip itself. But maybe it More significantly, the increasing overlap brought with it the establishment of illegal Israeli settlements throughout Gaza as many as 21 – which displaced many Palestinians from their homes. expropriating their land to make room for Jewish settlers, all under continued martial law.



Photo: Busy street in front of Medina Square in Gaza, August 16, 1971. / **Moshe Milner/GPO.**

Survey and negotiations

Twenty years into the Israeli occupation, there was a whole generation of Palestinians who had grown up knowing nothing else. By the end of the 1980s, Israeli settlements were expanding and even thriving, while Palestinians remained stateless, impoverished. Israel's invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut in 1982, the Sabra and Shatila massacre that same year, the failure of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the shift to the right in Israeli politics that followed Likud's rise to power in 1977 all contributed to heightened Palestinian outrage.

Gaza, which was suffering the most severe forms of dispossession and military control, became the cradle of perhaps the most important Palestinian uprising of the last century: the First Intifada.

The flame was ignited in December 1987, when a vehicle from the Israeli army crashed into a Palestinian car in the Gaza Strip. Gaza and killed four people; Three of them lived

in the Jabalia, which housed refugees expelled from villages south of Palestine during the Nakba. Although the Israeli authorities insisted that the collision had been accidental, many Palestinians were skeptics given the widespread experience of brutality and disinformation by the military.



Photo: First intifada in the Gaza Strip, December 21, 1987. / **Efi Sharir Collection/Dan Hadani, Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, National Library of Israel.**

The ensuing uprising eventually spread throughout the country. Strip and West Bank. Largely taking on the appearance of a A campaign of mass civil disobedience to force an end to the occupation, the First Intifada saw the Palestinians refuse to pay the taxes imposed by Israel, boycott Israeli goods, and abandon the jobs offered by Israeli employers. It was characterized by also, and symbolically immortalized, by the image of young people Palestinians throwing stones at soldiers, tanks and other vehicles Israeli military. But they were met with Israeli repression that intensified even more after the then minister Defense Secretary Yitzhak Rabin ordered the army to "break their bones" those who were protesting.

The First Intifada shocked many Israelis and took away the idea that the occupation was reasonable and even beneficial. That's why it's recognized as an essential factor that gave rise to the first direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

Almost a year after the uprising, in November 1988, the PLO President Yasser Arafat announced the PLO's decision to recognize Israel, renounce armed struggle, and accept the two-state solution, with a future Palestinian state which would encompass the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem as its capital. Three years later, the Madrid Peace

Conference opened the doors of the avenues for diplomatic talks between the PLO and Israel with the image in mind.

In September 1993, Rabin, by now Israel's prime minister, shook hands with Arafat on the White House lawn when the two signed the Oslo Accords. Under the Oslo order, Israel would withdraw from parts of the West Bank and Gaza to pave the way for limited Palestinian autonomy. In practice, the Oslo Accords changed the structure of the Israeli occupation without actually ending it, prompting criticism from some Palestinians who pointed out that these terms only suited their subjugation.

Once again, the Gaza Strip played a key role in the Oslo process. In a move known as "Gaza First," the Strip became a key point for Palestinian provisional autonomy. In 1994 Arafat – who had been living in Tunisia since the PLO was expelled from Lebanon in 1982 – returned to Gaza, where his father was born. From there, he served as the first president of the newly created Palestinian Authority (PA), supposedly an interim entity designed to last five years prior to "permanent status negotiations" and the creation of a fully independent Palestinian state.

Paradox and disillusionment

The Oslo years were a paradoxical time for Gaza. On the one hand, The period was characterized by the hope that the new agreement would Bring peace and prosperity at last. Gaza was extolled as a future "Singapore in the Mediterranean" that was to attracting investment and foreign aid; In 1998, the airport Yasser Arafat opened his doors in Gaza. Some Gazans benefited from the resulting opportunities for employment and business, as new hotels and restaurants sprang up all over the Gaza Strip.

But for many others, the 1990s brought with it a deterioration in economic conditions. In the aftermath of the First Intifada, Israel began to institute new measures to restrict Palestinian freedom of movement, including nightly curfews throughout the Strip since 1988. Curfews were lifted when the PA arrived in 1994, but otherwise, the Oslo Accords did little to reverse Israel's increasingly draconian restrictions on Palestinian mobility.

The Israeli exit permit system, introduced in 1991, remained in force, which meant that no Palestinian wishing to leave Gaza could do so without an army-issued permit (a measure that did not apply to Jewish settlers in Gaza, who continued to enjoy full freedom of movement). From 1998 onwards, it became increasingly difficult to obtain these permits, making it difficult for Palestinians to work in Israel, as many did before.

The gradual separation of Gaza and the West Bank, through bans on freedom of movement between the two zones, also limited intra-Palestinian trade and economic ties.

Before In 1993, 50 per cent of the goods produced in Gaza were traded in the United States. West Bank; By the end of 1996, it had fallen to 2 per cent. The Protocol of Paris, which dealt with the economic provisions reached under the of the Oslo Accords, meant that Gaza would continue to be a market captive for Israeli products, which placed businesses in the even more disadvantaged.

To make matters worse, the Oslo Accords system was not long in coming in renegeing on his political promises. After Rabin's assassination at the hands of of an Israeli extremist in 1995, Benjamin Netanyahu took the helm of Israel for the first time and spoke openly of its goal of ending the with the Oslo process. As the Israeli government continued to expanding settlement construction in both the West Bank and the United States. Gaza, any possibility of a viable Palestinian state was gone making it more and more remote.

Meanwhile, Israeli public opinion was increasingly vocal hostile to the negotiations because Palestinian militants were launching indiscriminate attacks on Israeli civilians in the 1990s. The Late Attempts to Move Forward with Permanent Status Negotiations at Camp David in 2000 were also insufficient. Prime Minister Ehud Barak's "Generous Offer" Hid in His Deceitful the appellation far below the minimum requirements of the PLO for a viable category of state.

On the other hand, the PA, controlled by Arafat's al-Fatah party, It became known to many Palestinians in the occupied territories for its corruption, authoritarianism and collaboration with the Israeli state. Hostility was on the rise as the PA elites seemed to be while the majority of ordinary Palestinians continued to struggle to survive under the yoke of occupation. Both Gaza and Gaza The West Bank saw increased Palestinian hostility toward Palestinian leaders the PA, as they considered them incompetent, undemocratic, and alien to the reality.

There was a special resentment for the leading role that He was involved in the PA crackdown on activists and dissidents. The Palestinians in Gaza had to get used to the presence of the PA security forces, who often worked in collusion with the Israeli state. This growing disillusionment sweeping Gaza and The West Bank was to fuel the Second Intifada, which erupted in Jerusalem in September 2000. The environment also provided the This was the necessary breeding ground for the emergence of a political force alternative.



Photo: Houses in the settlement of Rafah Yam in the Gush Katif settlement bloc in the Gaza Strip, July 17, 2005. / **Moshe Milner/GPO.**

Combativeness and siege

Islamism in general, and Hamas in particular, have a past This is particularly true in Gaza, which comes in part from the proximity of the Gaza Strip with the Muslim Brotherhood bases in Egypt. Created as a offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood at the beginning of the First World War. Intifada, Hamas rejected the PLO's effort to negotiate with Israel and the ensuing Oslo Accords. Instead, they bet on a combative strategy against Israel, with indiscriminate attacks that They killed Israeli civilians as well as soldiers.

Hamas positioned itself as a genuine alternative to the elitist contributors to the PA and highlighted the populist and of their leaders, many of whom lived in refugee camps. refugees in the occupied territories. The movement won above all prominence, and notoriety, for its use of suicide bombings with bombs in the 1990s and during the Second Intifada, which involved considerably more violence than the first.

In 2005, a year after Arafat's death, Hamas claimed the victory when Ariel Sharon's government unilaterally dismantled Israel's 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip and removed 9,000 settlers Israelis in the territory... while at the same time redirecting the resources from the State to further expand the settlement project in the West Bank.

While the PA sought to see the Gaza withdrawal as evidence of progress in the Oslo Accords, the one-sided nature made the argument unconvincing. Moreover, while the displacement has always been defined as a "disengagement," in reality Israel retained full

control of the Strip's air, land and sea borders. That is why most legal scholars assert that Gaza remains under Israeli occupation to this day.

Shortly thereafter, Hamas announced its surprising decision to participate in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, after a decade of boycott them as part of their anti-Oslo stance. The Party Change and Hamas reform, which was presented on a platform against al-Fatah, won 44% of the vote in the 2006 legislative elections: a simple majority, not an absolute majority, as it is often pointed out. (It is important to note that Hamas did not win the elections.) elections exclusively in Gaza; Elections were held throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's successor in the al-Fatah party, was separately elected PA president for a four-year period in 2005).

The Hamas-led government, however, received immediate sanctions from Israel and Western governments, led by the Bush administration. After weeks of clashes with al-Fatah, which was trying to regain power with US support, Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip by force. In response, Israel imposed a total blockade on the entire Strip that choked the economy in a move that the UN Secretary-General called collective punishment. Egypt largely supports the blockade, which leaves more than two million Palestinians trapped on a tiny, crowded piece of land.

Since 2007, Gaza's history has been marked by violence continuous. The usual Israeli airstrikes were accentuated by particularly intense bombing campaigns in 2008-9, 2012, 2014 and 2021. New episodes of violence were experienced throughout the "border" between Gaza and Israel in 2018-19, when snipers Israelis opened fire on thousands of Palestinians marching toward the the fence surrounding the Gaza Strip during the weekly Great March of Return, demanding an end to the blockade and the enforcement of the right of the refugees to return.

As Hamas and other Gaza-based paramilitary groups continue to launching indiscriminate missile attacks on civilians in contravention of international law, Israel justifies its ruthless wars and calls them necessary defensive measures. But military campaigns constantly employ a force of disproportionately and are condemned by international observers and considered war crimes, in particular the 2014 war, which it is currently under investigation by the International Criminal Court.

Now that the death toll has surpassed 22,500 since September 7, 2015 In October, Israel's ongoing military offensive in Gaza has already killed more people. and has destroyed more infrastructure in the Gaza Strip than all of the others. previous attacks together since 2007. And sadly, it seems that the This figure will continue to increase significantly. With

a good deal of the uninhabitable Strip and threats of another imminent mass expulsion, the inordinate importance of Gaza in Palestinian and Israeli politics. It continues, and its people are the ones who are paying the price.

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