

Blockade of Gaza: 11 years on

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In 2007, Israel declared Gaza a hostile entity following Hamas' takeover of the coastal strip. The stifling blockade that ensued still plays a major role in Gaza's protracted crisis. The following decade was the bloodiest for Gaza under Israeli occupation during which the population experienced three major military operations in 2008/2009, 2012, and 2014, with the latter claiming the lives of over 2,000 Palestinians and leaving over 17,000 housing units destroyed or severely damaged. The UN, in agreement with Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), set up the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism to rebuild homes and develop public projects in the devastated enclave. The mechanism proved so inadequate that after almost four years the devastation can still be seen and over 22,000 people remain internally displaced, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

The blockade also severely hampered movement of people in and out of Gaza, with a policy so strict it even affected patients seeking life-saving treatment in the West Bank and Israel. In 2017, Israeli authorities granted travel permits to less than fifty-five percent of patient applications, and the year ended with over forty recorded deaths of patients whose application for permits were either rejected or delayed beyond reasonable time. Another aspect of the blockade has been forcefully imposing a six nautical miles fishing zone off the coast of Gaza with complete disregard to the Oslo Accords which grant Palestinians freedom to sail and fish to up to twenty nautical miles where fish population is significantly more abundant and diverse. On 14 November 2018, Israeli authorities informed the Palestinian Civil Liaison Office of new limitations on Gaza's fishing zone. Palestinian fishermen would now be prohibited from working in the waters between the demarcation line in the north of the Gaza Strip and Gaza City's port. The new restrictions reduce Gaza's fishing zone by about one third and will likely entail economic repercussions for Gaza's fishing community—eighty percent of whom already live below the poverty line.

Israeli navy has also been attacking fishermen on daily basis even within the six nautical miles limit. Between 2016 and 2017, Israeli navy opened fire at Palestinian fishermen over three hundred times, fatally wounding two and injuring forty. The navy also arrested 148 fishermen and confiscated fifty-six boats. These practices turned the fishing industry in Gaza into a high-risk, low-return business, driving fishermen whose families had been fishing for generations to abandon the profession.

Buffer zone

Similarly, Israel has been militarily imposing a buffer zone within Palestinian land in Gaza extending along the entire inland Gaza-Israel border. Although Israel has repeatedly declared the zone to be three hundred meters deep within Gaza, facts on the ground indicate that Israel is enforcing a 1.5 kilometre buffer zone, thus rendering access to thirty-five percent of Gaza's arable land impossible or highly risky thereby posing detrimental challenge to the agriculture sector in the Gaza Strip. With the future of the two cornerstones of local economy, fishing and farming, in question, the economic reality of Gaza was bleak but it continued to function nonetheless. However, in 2017, this reality became unbearable after the Palestinian president slashed the salaries of government employees in Gaza by thirty to fifty percent, affecting over 25,000 public servants and 35,000 members of PA security forces.

In December 2017, the American President dealt a heavy blow to the international community's consensus by recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel putting the establishment of a future Palestinian state and the refugees' right of return in jeopardy. The next month, President Trump cut U.S. funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

(UNRWA) down to \$60 million, a catastrophic decline compared to U.S. funding in previous years, which amounted to \$350 million, leaving UNRWA to deal with an unprecedented deficit threatening to bring the provision of services to a halt. By the end of February 2018, the U.S. unveiled that its embassy will be moved to Jerusalem in May to coincide with celebrations marking seventy years of the establishment of Israel. This added fuel to the fire as the period marks the Nakba for the Palestinians when they were exiled from their land seventy years ago and denied their right of return.

The economic repercussions of Israel's blockade, PA sanctions, and U.S. aid cuts coupled with the political consequence of President Trump's decisions drove thousands of Palestinians in Gaza to answer calls for demonstrating along the Gaza-Israel border to reaffirm their right of return under what the organizers called the "Great March of Return." The demonstrations erupted along the Gaza-Israel border on 30 March 2018 and have been taking place on a weekly basis since then. Monitoring and documentation of breaches of international human rights law committed against protestors has been the focus of Al Mezan's Field Work Unit for the past few months. As of March 2018, according to Al Mezan field data, the number of Palestinians killed had reached 174, including thirty-three children, one woman, two journalists, three paramedics, and six people with disabilities (including one child). A reported 12,482 were wounded, including 2,394 children, 515 women, 134 journalists, and 136 paramedics. Of those wounded, 6,964 were hit by live-fire; including 1,277 children and 142 women.