



**11 THINGS YOU
SHOULD KNOW**

**ABOUT ISRAEL'S
SIEGE OF THE
GAZA STRIP**

MIDDLE EAST MONITOR

Middle East Monitor is a not-for-profit media research institute that provides research, information and analyses of primarily the Palestine-Israel conflict. It also provides briefings on other Middle East issues. Its outputs are made available for use by journalists, academics and politicians with an interest in the Middle East and North Africa.

MEMO aims to influence policy and the public agenda from the perspective of social justice, human rights and international law. This is essential to obtain equality, security and social justice across the region, especially in Palestine.

MEMO wants to see a Middle East framed by principles of equality and justice. It promotes the restoration of Palestinian rights, including the Right of Return, a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and with democratic rights upheld. It also advocates a nuclear-free Middle East.

By ensuring that policy-makers are better informed, MEMO seeks to have a greater impact on international players who make key decisions affecting the Middle East. MEMO wants fair and accurate media coverage of Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries.

Title: *11 things you should know about Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip*

Cover: A Palestinian man outside his home after it was destroyed in an air strike carried out by Israeli forces in Gaza [Ashraf Amra/Apiimages]

First Published: August 2018

Reprint: January 2019

ISBN: 978-1-907433-38-2

Copyright © MEMO Publishers 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission of the copyright owner.

This report is available to download free of charge on the Middle East Monitor Website: www.middleeastmonitor.com



MEMO Publishers

1 Green Mews

Bevenden Street

London N1 6AS

t: +44 (0)20 8838 0231

e: info@memopublishers.com

w: www.memopublishers.com

What everyone should know about Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip

Rebecca Stead



An MA graduate of SOAS University of London studying in Middle Eastern Studies with Arabic, Stead focuses on the history, culture and politics of Israel-Palestine specifically and the Levant more broadly.

She has travelled in the region and studied Arabic in Jerusalem and Amman, and works in a freelance capacity for a number of journals and blogging platforms.

What everyone should know about Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip

For 11 years, Israel has imposed an unforgiving siege on the Gaza Strip. With severely restricted access in and out of the enclave — via land, air and, notoriously, sea — Gaza has effectively been sealed off from the world. The Strip is only 360 square kilometres in size, about the same as Las Vegas in the US or one-quarter the size of London. It is now home to almost two million Palestinians, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world and leading some to dub Gaza “the world’s largest open-air prison.”

According to [UNRWA](#), the UN body responsible for Palestinian refugees, 1.3 million of Gaza’s 1.9 million inhabitants are refugees. Most were [expelled from their homes in 1948](#) when the State of Israel was created, and many were uprooted again when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, Sinai Peninsula and Jerusalem during the [1967 Six Day War](#). A further 23,500 people continue to be internally displaced following Israel’s “Operation Protective Edge” military offensive against Gaza in 2014.

So what does the daily reality of the siege look like? Here are 11 aspects, one for each year that the siege has been imposed by Israel.

Movement of people is heavily restricted

Under the siege, the Palestinian residents of Gaza are required to obtain a permit to leave. Israel repeatedly refuses to issue such permits for exit via the Erez/Beit Hanoun Crossing. In the first quarter of 2018 alone, Israel [denied](#) 833 exit permit applications “on grounds of having family ties to Hamas,” the group which has ruled the Strip since winning the last Palestinian elections held in 2006. Compare this with 2017, when 21 applications were refused on such grounds throughout the whole year.



Gazans wait for a bus, which will transport them to Egypt, after Egyptian authorities opened the Rafah border gate on 8 February 2018 [Ali Jadallah/Anadolu Agency]

These restrictions also prevent those in need of medical attention from leaving Gaza via Israel. According to [Al Jazeera](#), “Israel was responsible for at least 54 Palestinian deaths in 2017,” having rejected hundreds of medical permit applications by people needing treatment in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Israel itself or abroad. A [report](#) by the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for the occupied Palestinian territories (OCHA OPT) found that the rate of denied or delayed permit applications to access health care outside Gaza reached 45 per cent in October 2017.

Crossings into and out of Gaza are closed

Israel has closed almost all of the Gaza Strip’s entry and exit points. There were formerly six crossings in and out of Gaza: Erez/Beit Hanoun, Nahal Oz, Karni, Sufa, Kerem Shalom/Karm Abu Salem and Rafah.

Until recently, only one commercial route into and out of Gaza remained: Kerem Shalom. However, in July, Israel also [closed](#) this crossing, citing incendiary [kites](#) and balloons flown into Israel from inside Gaza as part of the [Great March of Return](#) protests. Whereas previously 300-400 trucks would pass through the crossing every day, only 150 trucks of essential medical and humanitarian supplies were being allowed to pass.

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY



السلطة الفلسطينية

معبور رفح البري
RAFAH CROSSING POINT

لا انشاء جدار الفصل
عبدالرحمن السيد ربيع
وعمره ربيع بن الفريدي

الاساتد توفيق الفلاح
ممثل هو الشعب المعبر
للجانف الفلسطينية العرفي

كف للأغلاق
المعبر معن سر

صر من بانقلا العرفي
سبب لأغلاق المعبر
والمعبر معن معن سبب
المعبر

Palestinians hold banners demanding the permanent opening of the Rafah border crossing in Gaza City on 26 May 2015 [Abed Rahim Khatib/Apaimages]

Only a week later, cooking gas distribution companies in the besieged Strip [announced](#) that they had “run out of backup”.

In the south of the Strip is Rafah, the only pedestrian crossing open to Palestinians (Erez crossing, in the north, is reserved for journalists, medical staff, international diplomats and those in need of medical attention). An almost complete closure of the Rafah crossing has been imposed by Egypt since 2013, for “security” reasons but almost certainly at Israel’s behest. In 2017, the Rafah crossing was [closed](#) for 337 days.

Gaza’s access to the sea is restricted

On top of the restrictions Israel enforces on land, it also restricts access to the sea. According to an OCHA map (included in UNRWA’s report “[Gaza in 2020](#)”), since Israel’s three-week assault on Gaza in 2009 it has imposed a limit of three nautical miles on fishermen working out of the territory. This has been tightened consistently, even though a limit of 20 nautical miles was recommended by the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s. A no-entry zone of one and one and a half nautical miles, in the south and north respectively, has also been imposed, extending out from each of Gaza’s frontiers with Israel and Egypt.

In 2017, OCHA [estimated](#) that over 35,000 Palestinians still depended on the fishing industry for their livelihoods, but Israeli restrictions have all but destroyed Gaza’s once thriving fishing industry. Israel also targets Gazan fishermen, with international charity Oxfam [noting](#) that “in the first half of 2014, there were at least 177



incidents of naval fire against fishermen.” Many have been killed or wounded, and had their boats destroyed or seized by the Israeli navy.

Some have speculated that Israel's restrictions are motivated by the presence of gas reserves in the Mediterranean Sea. In 2015, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [signed](#) a deal to allow companies to begin extraction from the gas field. Thought to contain some 22 trillion cubic feet of gas, the discovery was hailed as a “gift from God” which could turn Israel into a “regional energy powerhouse.” Most of the gas fields are [situated](#) off Gaza's shore, meaning that the gas reserves and their revenue would belong to Gaza were it not for Israel's occupation, naval restrictions and blockade.

Israel imposes a strict naval blockade

Israel's naval siege also includes blockading vessels seeking to enter or leave Gaza. In July 2018, an international convoy carrying humanitarian and medical supplies, dubbed the Freedom Flotilla, tried to break Israel's siege of Gaza. Consisting of two ships – Al-Awda and Freedom – the flotilla was [intercepted](#) by Israeli naval forces in international waters amid [accusations](#) of violence by the troops involved.

This is not the first time that such flotillas have been hijacked in what have been called [acts of piracy](#) on the high seas. Infamously, in 2010 Israeli commandos boarded the [Mavi Marmara](#) taking humanitarian aid to Gaza and killed nine Turkish citizens; a tenth died later of his wounds.

Earlier this month (August 2018), images were [revealed](#) showing the construction of an underwater barrier stretching some 200 metres into the Mediterranean, separating Palestinian and Israeli territorial waters. Consisting of an underwater structure, an armoured stone base and a six-metre-high barbed wire fence, and at an estimated to cost the Israeli government of \$6.7 million, the barrier adds to the land and sea restrictions already imposed on Gaza under the siege.

A strangled economy means high unemployment

A recent report by the [World Bank](#) revealed a drop in Gaza's growth, from eight per cent in 2016 to 0.5 per cent in 2017. Much of this has been caused by



A Palestinian woman prepares the land for planting to commemorate Land Day on 16 April 2016 [Apaimages]

Israel's prohibition on goods and raw materials being allowed into Gaza, which has prevented the reconstruction necessary after three major Israeli military offensives waged on the enclave over the past decade. The World Bank also noted that the cuts to UNRWA funding [announced](#) early in 2018 have further hampered the chances for economic recovery.

Unemployment in the Gaza Strip is therefore one of the highest in the world; Israeli human rights organisation [B'Tselem](#) notes that the unemployment rate in Gaza reached 46.6 per cent in the third quarter of 2017. Among those aged 20 to 24, unemployment reached 67.8 per cent, and among women the rate was 71 per cent. Overcrowding and a predominantly young population have contributed further to this problem.

Gaza's agricultural potential is stifled

Gaza has huge agricultural potential, but much of this is stifled by the siege. Highly-fertile land means that fresh fruit including strawberries, tomatoes, peppers, as well as herbs, used to be huge contributors to Gaza's economy.

In his book [Gaza: Preparing for Dawn](#), former Jerusalem bureau chief for the Independent Donald Macintyre noted that even before the siege began officially, intensive Israeli security inspections often meant fresh produce “had rotted by the time [it] left Gaza.” With commercial crossings now closed; the lack of any potential for exporting via sea routes; and the lack of fresh water for irrigation purposes, much of this industry has failed.

Israeli herbicides kill Palestinian crops

Compounding the problem is Israel’s practice of spraying herbicides near the Gaza fence, which kills crops inside the territory. [OCHAopt](#) quotes the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture as saying, “A spraying operation in January 2018 affected some 550 acres of agricultural lands belonging to 212 farmers, with an estimated loss of \$1.3 million.” Israel insists the spraying is done on the Israeli side of the boundary, but has [refused](#) to consider claims made by Palestinian farmers for damage to their farmland.

Gaza receives only four to six hours’ electricity per day

Gaza receives just four to six hours of electricity per day because repairs have not been allowed to the territory’s only power plant, damaged by successive Israeli offensives. Fuel for the plant and emergency generators is also subject to tight import restrictions imposed by the Israeli siege. In 2017, [OCHAopt](#) reported that electricity shortages were directly affecting 14 hospitals and more than 140 health clinics in the Strip. In July 2018, patients from across Gaza’s hospitals [staged](#) a sit-in in front of the Erez crossing to highlight the shortages in medical equipment and resources, which prevent patients from receiving adequate care. These electricity shortages also impact schools’ capacity to provide education to Palestinian children, families’ ability to store food at home and employment opportunities in Gaza

96% of Gaza's water is undrinkable

According to [OCHA OPT](#), 40 per cent of Gaza’s population receives just three to five hours of water supply every five days. In addition, over 96 per cent of water extracted from Gaza’s aquifers is unfit for human consumption; the aquifers have been contaminated by sea water as well as chemicals from fertilisers washed down by rainfall from Israeli settlements.



A Palestinian boy does his homework using candle lights during a power cut in Gaza on 15 March 2015 [Apaimages]

This means that 90 per cent of Gazans have to buy desalinated or bottled water, imposing an additional cost burden on families already living under the poverty line. The water problem has been compounded by outages in electricity, which have led to sanitation difficulties and left untreated sewage to flow into the sea, contaminating 73 per cent of the shoreline.

Education is strained and graduates are jobless

Education has come under strain during the siege, with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [reporting](#) that to cope with ever-increasing demand, 70 per cent of public and UNRWA schools teach in double shifts, where one group of students attends in the morning and another in the afternoon. Yet despite the challenges facing Gaza's students, literacy rates remain among the highest across the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region.

However, unemployment is particularly acute among those with college and university education, with B'Tselem noting that among residents of Gaza with post-secondary education, unemployment in late 2017 was 52.3 per cent.

Israel didn't 'disengage' from Gaza

The official Israeli narrative states that Israel disengaged from Gaza in 2005, when it forced almost 8,000 illegal settlers to leave 21 settlements. Many settler families were given generous compensation packages in exchange, some amounting to almost \$200,000, but others had to be removed by force.

However, the extent to which Israel disengaged from Gaza has been undermined by its implementation of the siege since 2007. Some have suggested that Israel simply replaced its direct control of Gaza with a remote control occupation, squeezing the economy, natural resources and movement of people all without maintaining boots on the ground.

With its complete control of Gaza's air, land and sea borders, Israel remains technically and legally an occupying power in the territory. The occupation is still very much in place. This means, among other things, that Israel cannot claim that its military offensives are simply acts of self-defence; there is no such claim under international law for states involved in a military occupation, which those living under occupation have every right to resist.

MEMO
MIDDLE EAST MONITOR
Creating New Perspectives

middleeastmonitor.com

