

### Overview of the Gaza Strip



#### Basic History

The current form of the Gaza Strip dates back to the 1949 armistice agreement between Israel and Egypt following Israel's War of Independence. The borders were further adjusted in 1950, solidifying the present-day boundaries. Egypt maintained military control over Gaza from 1949 to 1967 but did not formally annex the territory. Subsequently, from 1967 to 1994, Israel held military authority over the strip, with local governors subordinate to the Israel Civil Administration. In 1994, as part of the Oslo Accords, civilian control was transferred to the newly-formed Palestinian Authority (PA) under the Gaza-Jericho Agreement. Israel's military presence continued until 2005 when Prime Minister Sharon's government decided on a *unilateral disengagement*. This move, one of Israel's most contentious decisions, was driven by both security concerns and diplomatic objectives. Ongoing terror attacks in the strip by various

Palestinian groups prompted the Israeli government to withdraw in an attempt to reduce civilian casualties. Simultaneously, Sharon aimed to stimulate Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and revive the faltering peace process. Neither Israel's security stance nor the prospects for peace improved following that step.

#### The Disengagement

Pulling out from the Gaza Strip entailed one of the worst social crises in Israel's history. Under political turmoil and a cloud of protests, Prime Minister Sharon ignored most advice and disregarded the warnings made by the defense establishment, sacked ministers who objected the move, and muscled the bill supporting the designment through the Knesset with a thin majority. Some experts claimed the move would significantly improve Israel's security stance and

the prospects for a final arrangement with the Palestinians, while strengthening Israel's stance in the world. Soldiers adjoined to the IDF's Home Front Command were given police authority to evacuate Israeli civilians and resettle them in temporary housing, where many of them still remain today. Over 8,000 Israelis were forcefully evacuated from 22 communities, alongside IDF bases. Not only that, but also cemeteries were evacuated with graves exhumed and re-buried elsewhere in Israel. Agricultural infrastructure including a flourishing greenhouse industry was left for Palestinians' use, in the hope for catalyzing economic growth in the Gaza Strip.

### Post-Disengagement Political Landscape

Following Israel's withdrawal in August 2005, the United States pushed for democratization in the PA and advocated for elections. Hamas emerged victorious in these elections, gaining significant support from the Gazan population, winning 76 out of 132 seats. The PA, reluctant to relinquish its authority, found itself in conflict with Hamas, and ordered the dissolution of parliament as the international community refused to cooperate with the newly-elected majority. This internal strife culminated in Hamas's military coup in the Gaza Strip in 2007, resulting in the elimination of PA bureaucracy and Fatah militants. Hamas pursued a brutal path, suppressing any opposition within Palestinian society and executing those suspected of collaborating with Israel or the PA, including by shooting the back of their knees and throwing them off rooftops, dragging their bodies tethered to vehicles around Gaza. etc. No elections were held in the parliamentary and presidential level among Palestinians ever since, given Chairman Mahmoud Abbas' clear indication, strengthened by all conducted polls, that such elections will undoubtedly result in a clear Hamas victory. Abbas himself has not set a foot in Gaza ever since.

### Security Situation

Abated by the lack of IDF presence in the territory following the 1994 withdrawal, Hamas initiated rocket attacks on Israeli communities in 2001,

producing its own home-made rockets. After Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza, the region became a hub for arms smuggling, facilitated through various routes, including the *Philadelphi Route* (a narrow, 14km-long strip separating Gaza from Egypt and previously controlled by Israel to prevent the inflow of weapons), the Rafah crossing (the only border between Gaza and Egypt), and the sea.

To address this threat, Israel imposed a naval blockade on shipments to Gaza, which was deemed legal and necessary by the 2011 Turkel Commission, although condemned by many in the international community. However, Israel exercised control over goods entering Gaza through the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings, provided humanitarian aid, and ensured a supply of electricity, water, and fuel to the territory, even while it was no longer legally obliged to do so under international law. This was done for humanitarian reasons, with the expectation that the Hamas-led government would manage the day to day life of Gazans. Goods were screened and vetted in the Ashdod port and other locations before being transferred to Gaza in around 500 trucks daily. Egypt, on the other hand, left the Rafah crossing almost hermetically sealed, while looking the other way as Hamas built and developed an underground tunnel network for smuggling weapons, goods, and human trafficking.

Israel also permitted approximately 18,000 Gazan workers to enter Israel to work every day, with the hope that economic opportunities, where wages could be over ten times higher than in Gaza, would deter Hamas from pursuing violent actions. According to the UN data, in 2022 there were over 200,000 exits and entries into Israel from Gaza. Despite claims that Israel blockaded Gaza, there was no de facto blockade over Gaza.

Notably, Israel supplied a substantial portion of Gaza's electricity, covering an estimated 50% of the territory's power consumption with 120MW daily – the rest originating in the Gaza power plant, private generators and solar panels. Israel also provided some portion of its water consumption, covering around 12% or 18 million cubic meters annually, the rest originating in aquifer water,

partially illegally dug. The bills are supposedly offset from the tax funds that Israel collects for goods shipped to the PA and enter Israeli ports, but mounting debts indicate Israel does not always enforce this arrangement in order to somewhat mitigate the economic burden on the Palestinians.

Israel even issued permits for Gazans to be treated in Israeli hospitals with better medical care. Reportedly, 2,000 medical requests are filed monthly from Gaza, with two thirds approved, mostly for complicated and costly medical procedures that are provided only in Israeli hospitals. The annual \$25 million USD cost for hospitalized Gazans in Israel is paid by the PA to Israel. Israel's overall strategy towards Gaza was focused on delaying the next confrontation with Hamas. Monetary contributions, such as Qatari funds exceeding a billion dollars, were intended to pressure Hamas. Regrettably, these funds were used by Hamas to arm itself and construct terror tunnels throughout the strip for attacks on Israel.

### Hamis Regime

Relying on foreign aid is Hamas' strategy of eternalizing the conflict while diverting world attention to focus on Israel. Throughout its rule in Gaza, Hamas received substantial financial support from international entities such as the UN, EU, UNRWA, and the US for humanitarian projects. Hamas also acquired concrete and construction materials through the Israeli border, which it primarily used to bolster its extensive network of terror tunnels, even as those went through an Israel-UN mechanism called Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM). Hamas recruited and trained children from a young age, indoctrinating them with jihadist ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Due to its terrorist nature, Hamas struggled to manage civilian affairs effectively, contributing to the region's dire state. The Gazan population is impoverished and heavily reliant on external aid. Many Gazans were employed either by the Hamas apparatus or within UNRWA-run schools and facilities, making UNRWA the largest employer of Palestinians in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see "The UNRWA Child Soldier", Badin Center for Near East Policy Research, <https://vimeo.com/589381818>

Hamis further radicalized Gaza's children, urging them towards jihad and glorifying acts of violence against Jews. Financial incentives were provided for those willing to participate in attacks, a practice similar to the Palestinian Authority's "Pay-for-Slay" mechanism that provides stipends to terrorists and their families.<sup>2</sup> Hamas also infiltrated and utilized the civilian population as human shields as part of its guerrilla warfare tactics against Israel. Munitions and arms are being hidden in schools, hospitals, mosques, and civilian homes, exploiting international media's inclination to condemn Israel for attacking these seemingly civilian structures that were, in reality, integral to Hamas's military infrastructure. Aid deliveries from the outside world were used as cover to smuggle weapons into Gaza. Importantly, there was no clear separation between the civilian and military wings of Hamas in its governance and operations. Furthermore, Hamas stole fuel and life-saving equipment from UNRWA, UNICEF, UNOCHA, jeopardizing the operation of hospitals and vital services.

Numerous evidence over the years showed Hamas' abuse of UNRWA facilities, schools, hospitals and other civilian sites for terrorist purposes. Hamas terrorists have been also using humanitarian aid to terrorist ends, at the expense of Gazans. For example, Hamas [dismantled multi-million dollar pipeline networks](#) contributed by UNICEF and the EU in order to build rockets and other terrorist equipment. Of the shared investment into rebuilding Gaza's infrastructure, Hamas contributes [only 5%](#) while international organizations and the PA foot 65% and 35% of the bill, respectively. The latest October 16 incident in which [UNRWA accused Hamas terrorists](#) of stealing fuel and medical supplies from its facilities only illustrates the invalidity of any humanitarian aid in a Hamas-controlled Gaza.

There were multiple similar reports over the years of Hamas' stealing of humanitarian aid intended for Gazans and their abuse of this equipment for terrorist ends, including in 2009, when UNRWA

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<sup>2</sup> For mor information see "Terrorist in the Civil Service", Israel Defense and Security Forum's Research Department, <https://idsf.org.il/en/papers/terrorists-in-the-civil-service/>

[reported](#) Hamas forces seized aid supplies including blankets and food parcels, a 2016 [report](#) by the Shin Bet that Hamas infiltrated charity groups and stole \$7.2 million USD per year, intended for food and aid programs, and a 2016 [report](#) that Hamas steals 95% of the cement coming into Gaza for military purposes. Recently, following UNRWA's complaint that they were running out of fuel, the IDF exposed fuel tanks containing 500,000 liters kept exclusively by Hamas inside Gaza, as well as a phone call with a senior official in the Gaza energy sector that exposed that Hamas keeps the bulk of the fuel underground.

### Israeli Strategy

Israel's approach to Gaza centered on containment. The Israeli security establishment believed that economic incentives and diplomatic pressure would delay the next conflict with Hamas. The Israeli military coordinator consistently warned of a looming humanitarian crisis in Gaza and emphasized Israel's interest in maintaining stability in the region.

For decision-makers, Gaza was not considered a major strategic threat but rather a recurring nuisance that required periodic small-scale aerial strikes to deter retaliation. During the intervals between confrontations, Hamas continuously strengthened itself and acquired new capabilities. The Israeli government was hesitant to engage in large-scale ground offensives, understanding the potential for soldier kidnappings, which would be costly both in terms of lives and public sentiment. The Israeli public was extremely sensitive to the loss of soldiers, making the prospect of a major ground operation a significant challenge. In 2011, Israel released 1,027 Hamas terrorists to secure the release of Gilad Shalit, a soldier kidnapped by Hamas in 2006. Hamas exploited this Israeli sensitivity to hostages. Consequently, Israel only executed two major ground offensives in Gaza since Israel's disengagement.

To mitigate various threats, Israel developed tactical solutions such as the Iron Dome system for countering rocket attacks, an underground barrier to counter tunnel threats, and a

sophisticated fence equipped with state-of-the-art monitoring systems to counter infiltration. Israel also contained the recurring riots on the fence, called "the March of Return", where Hamas cynically used civilians to taunt Israeli forces, while also planting its own terrorists to fire live ammunition at Israeli forces and throw IEDs at the fence. Explosive balloons and kites were also used to burn down crops on the Israeli side of the border, even occasionally hitting kindergartens. Even the muted Israeli response, that resulted in minimal casualties on the Palestinian side which only targeted those rioters who constituted direct danger to the troops, was heavily criticized by the international community. It seems likely that the pressure on Israel to mitigate its response to Hamas terrorists approaching the fence set the conditions for the large-scale October 7 massacre.

In summary, when Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza in 2005, the Gazans had the opportunity to create a life based on prosperity and security – a Singapore Strip, but instead the Palestinians have lived under the oppressive Hamas regime since 2007, are subjected to extreme anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, radical jihad propaganda, in their schools, camps, media and throughout their society. They have watched Hamas and other terrorist entities embed their military apparatus into the civilian population. They have lived through numerous rounds of fighting where they are used (both voluntarily and involuntarily) as human shields. They have lived in a state of conflict, violence, and oppression since 2007. Israel adopted a containment strategy in Gaza, striving to manage the situation due to the high cost, both in terms of lives and international condemnation, associated with large-scale offensives. The devastating result of the pullout and containment strategy in Gaza should therefore never be implemented in Judea and Samaria ("West Bank").

Based on all of this, it should not be surprising that Israel has concluded that it has taken too many security risks for peace in the past, and now, has no other choice but to completely eradicate Hamas.

Israeli residents evacuated from their Gaza homes by Israeli security forces, while entrenching themselves on rooftops, in synagogues and outdoors. The highly controversial 2005 Disengagement Plan from the Gaza Strip communities, initiated by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, saw 22 communities and 8,600 residents evacuated within days. | Photos: Israeli GPO (Government Press Office)



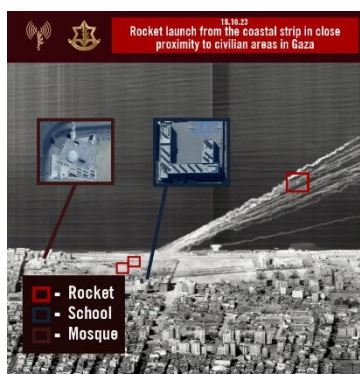
The signing of the Cairo Agreement, also known as “Gaza and Jericho First”, 1994. Left to right: Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and US Secretary of State Warren Christopher trying to convince Arafat to sign the maps | Credit: Tsvika Israeli, GPO



In 2011 Hamas official Yahya Sinwar was released from Israeli prison as part of the Shalit Deal, and has since become the chief of Hamas in Gaza | Photo: Shutterstock.com



Tens of thousands of rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israeli cities since 2001, in many cases launched from locations within civilian setting | Photos: IDF Spokesperson, Israeli Police



On October 7, Hamas has launched the deadliest attack in Israel's history, a massacre that claimed the lives of over 1,400 Israelis, with at least 3,000 wounded and at least 240 taken hostage, including both soldiers and civilians. In response, Israel has declared a state of war, dubbed Iron Swords, for the first time in 50 years since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, that includes air strikes and ground offensive in order to topple the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip | Photos: Shutterstock.com, IDF Spokesperson

