

ADL International Report...

The Gaza Strip:

An Age-Old Problem

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Gaza problem has lain solely in the hands of its Israeli inheritors. While Israel has done more than any previous occupier to improve the quality of life in the area, all the world's hospitals, vocational schools, automobiles and telephone lines cannot calm Gazan political frustrations. For that, the solution remains unchanged: only Arab recognition and willingness to negotiate with Israel can solve the continuing tragedy of Gaza.

Historical Overview

Here follows a brief historical background highlighting Gaza's role and condition in recent Middle East history. Comparison of Egypt's and Israel's administration of the area should prove helpful in responding to claims that responsibility for the current unrest lies solely at Israel's doorstep.

The War of Independence

On May 15, 1948, Arab armies invaded Israel in an effort to crush the newborn Jewish state. By the war's end in early 1949, Israel had gained control of more territory than had been originally allotted to it in 1947 under the UN partition plan. The plan, which proposed the division of Palestine into two states — one Jewish, one Arab — was adamantly opposed by Arab leaders who chose war instead and lost. As a consequence of this rejection, the UN's proposed Arab state never came into existence. Instead, part of the area designated by the UN plan as Arab Palestine was seized by Transjordan which took the territory west of the Jordan River and the Old City of Jerusalem, and by Egypt, which occupied the Gaza Strip.

In early 1948, Gaza's population totalled 60,000. But months later, Arab calls to Palestinians within Israel to flee the newly established state resulted in a massive migration of refugees into the area, boosting the narrow Strip's population to an estimated 200,000. With no economic infrastructure or administrative authority concerned about refugee absorption, Egyptian rule over Gaza is remembered bitterly by the Palestinians as a period of extreme neglect. Indeed, in 1949, it was UNRWA, not Egypt, that built the camps and established the

expansive aid program for the refugees which remains in existence today.

Like most Arab leaders, Egypt's Nasser refused to resettle the refugees who fell under his control. Claiming instead that Palestinian absorption into Egypt would detract from the struggle for their homeland, he left the territory undeveloped. Its residents, moreover, were kept in squalid, exceptionally crowded conditions, restless and ready to serve as pawns in the Arabs' continued war against Israel.

Gaza Under Egyptian Rule

Throughout Egypt's 19-year trusteeship of the Strip, Gaza was governed according to military law. During that period, the area served primarily as a free port for smuggling contraband into Egypt, and as a base for training young Palestinian terrorists. From 1952 onward, the Strip became the main staging ground for terror attacks on nearby Israeli settlements. Although begun as unorganized raids, by 1955, the Egyptian High Command established a 700-man unit in Gaza to stage attacks against Israel.

Indeed, throughout Egypt's administration of the area, terror was among the leading sources of income for the residents. Egyptian intelligence paid handsomely for each armed foray into Israel, and for every murder or act of plunder. This mode of employment continued with the PLO's formation in Egypt in 1964. As the PLO's principal financial and military backer, Egypt had a vested interest in the organization's success. It was toward that end that Gazan refugees under Egypt's control were forcibly conscripted to form the core of the PLO's early recruits.

In addition to smuggling and terror, citrus production and employment through UNRWA were among the few alternatives to joblessness in Egyptian-controlled Gaza. Egypt not only did little to relieve the endemic poverty of the Strip, it placed tight political and economic restrictions on the refugees and severely hindered their chances for personal or commercial growth.

Unlike the Palestinians of the West Bank who were granted citizenship by their Jordanian occupiers, Egyptian citizenship was denied to the Gazan refugees. And only limited numbers of Palestinians were allowed to enter Egypt each year. But for these few life was no easier: Gazans permitted to work in Egypt were banned from government jobs and denied all union benefits afforded to native and other foreign workers.

Perhaps most debilitating to the area's economic and psychological welfare was the impact of a permanent night time curfew and travel restrictions imposed throughout Egypt's 19-year rule. Although several thousand refugees were permitted to study abroad and work in under-populated countries in the Mideast and North Africa, the majority remained isolated from the outside world. Due to concerns that a large influx of Palestinians would threaten internal stability, most Arab governments followed Egypt's lead by limiting the number of refugees allowed through their borders each year.

Gaza Under Israeli Rule

When Gaza passed into Israeli hands in June 1967, unemployment was as high as 48% among men in the refugee camps and 40% in nearby villages and cities. During the initial phase of its administration, Israel, which, like Egypt, governed the area in accordance with military law, sought to improve living conditions in Gaza and, at the same time, to neutralize the terrorist network in operation there.

Toward this end, the evening curfew that had become a permanent fixture under Egyptian occupation was lifted almost immediately. For the first time in nearly 20 years, the Allenby Bridge was opened and Gazans were free to receive visitors from neighboring Arab states. Also, in sharp contrast to Egyptian policies, Israel encouraged Gazans to conduct trade outside the Strip. In addition to affording a commercial link essential for economic growth, the open-bridge policy significantly eased the sense of isolation that had plagued Gaza's residents for so long.

The open-bridge policy was only one method employed by Israel to improve Gaza's economy. Realizing that it was to its advantage that life in the Strip be normalized, Israel rapidly created new jobs for the refugees. Whereas under Egypt, all administrative posts were filled by the occupying authorities, within two months of the Six-Day War Israel decreased the number of officers involved in Gaza's administration, leaving the management of most local affairs and thousands of jobs to the residents. Three months later, the first residents of the area were offered work in Israel. In contrast to the obstacles posed by Cairo to prevent Palestinians from entering Egypt during its rule over the area, Gazans need apply only with Israel's Labor Ministry to travel and receive work permits inside Israel.

Critics argue that this step was taken to relieve Israel's need for a large pool of unskilled labor. In actuality, the move was part of a broad-based plan conceived by then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan to curtail terror against Israel. Based on the belief that all but a few radical Palestinians would choose making money to planting bombs, Dayan's policy was aimed at raising the standard of living and restoring the personal dignity of the residents of the territories.

Under Dayan's plan, workers from the administered areas received the same wages as Israelis and qualified for all social benefits, except those solely applicable to members and former members of Israel's armed services. Furthermore, it was decided that all collective wage agreements and cost-of-living increments would

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