

Timeline of Gaza Marine Zone, Fishermen and Natural Gas Deposits.

An Update

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There is an historical connection between the Gazan community and the off shore fishery. In recent times some 3000 fishermen in over 700 boats made their livelihood in the waters off the shores of Gaza. Before 1978 when the fishing area included the sea off the Sinai coastline the area covered some 75,000 square kilometers.

The larger boats are about 20 meters in length and usually carry a crew of 7. They are typically trawlers using downriggers to lower their nets to the ocean bed. Currently their main catch is bream or sardines that average between 8 and 14 inches. Smaller craft, hassakas, normally deploy their nets a few hundred meters off shore. The nets are then hauled in by hand. These catches are very modest.

On September 13, 1993 the Oslo Agreement was signed marking the basis for a peaceful accord between Israel and the Palestinians.

The 1994 GAZA-JERICHO AGREEMENT outlined specific steps needed to realize the general provisions of the Oslo Agreement. Under its terms the Gazan fishermen were free to use a marine corridor extending 20 nautical miles from the Gaza shore bounded by restricted zones to the north and south abutting Israeli and Egyptian waters.

Beginning in late 2000 the Israeli military initiated a continuing campaign of intimidation and harassment against fishing boats that ventured near or beyond a 6 nautical mile limit. Their patrol boats attacked and harassed the Gazans on a daily basis. To date the Israelis have killed 15 and wounded over 200 fishermen

Among the warships used were ones in the Dabur and Dvora classes. Their armaments include 20 mm to 30 mm cannons, machine guns, automatic grenade launchers plus high-pressure water cannons. Some have 700-mile ranges and top speeds of 52 knots. Originally they were built in the US but in recent years they are constructed by Israel Aircraft at a plant in the Negev.

No formal notice or explanation of restrictions was ever given to the Palestinians. Instead any regulations have been written and enforced by Israeli machine guns and water cannons. Since the Operation Cast Lead "ceasefire" their attacks have become more aggressive, often occurring within a few hundred yards of the shore. Even Gazans walking on their beaches have been wounded by gunfire intended for the fishing boats. The fishermen continue to be killed, wounded or arrested. Their boats continue to be targeted or impounded. The noose of the siege grows tighter.

Link to Israeli attack on Gazan fishing boats¹

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAUzugKX1AE>

WHY? A TIMELINE:

For the first 50 years after Israel's founding the country explored extensively for natural gas or oil deposits with little success. Approximately 400 onshore and 25 offshore mainly exploratory wells were dug during that period. Israel was obliged to import 85 percent of its energy needs by buying coal and petroleum products from Egypt, Russia, Mexico and elsewhere.

- September 13, 1993 - The Oslo Agreement was signed laying the basis for peaceful relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

- May 4, 1994: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed The Gaza-Jericho Agreement as part of the subsequent procedures called for in the Oslo Agreement.

Article XI established three Maritime Activity Zones that extended 20 nautical miles out to sea from the coast of Gaza.² Two narrow Zones running parallel to the boundaries of Egyptian and Israeli waters were designated No Fishing Areas. Under the terms of the Agreement the larger remaining Zone "will be open for fishing, recreation and economic activities." For the next 6 years the Gazan fishermen operated freely within the Zone with no major confrontations by the Israelis.

In addition the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Part V, describes an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that would grant Gaza control of all seabed assets up to 200 nautical miles from its shore.³ There is speculation that vast deposits of natural gas are located beyond the 20-mile Maritime Activity Zone. Such a resource would give Gaza the potential of becoming another Dubai in a relatively short period if they were allowed to develop their own deposits.³

Link to an interview regarding Maritime Activity Zone and EEZ:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyPtd6qKLVE>

- 1999 - The British Gas Group (BG Group) discovered a vast deposit of natural gas within Gaza's Maritime Activity Zone: Over 1.3 trillion cubic feet equal to 150 million barrels of oil were estimated to be there. Located about 15 miles off the coast, the deposits were named Gaza Marine 1 and 2. It was estimated that there were sufficient reserves to generate electric power for all Palestinian needs for a decade and still have a surplus to export.⁵

- On 11/8/99 Chairman Yasser Arafat signed an agreement giving BG Group 90 percent interest and 10 per cent to Consolidated Contractors Company, an Athens based Palestinian entity connected to the PLO. They and the Palestinian Investment Fund (PIF) had the option to later assume up to 40 per percent interest. A final allocation of the rights continues to be contested between BG Group, Israel, Egypt and the Palestinians in obscured ongoing negotiations.

- July 25, 2000: Yasser Arafat walked out on the Camp David meeting.⁶

-September 27, 2000: Yasser Arafat traveled 19 miles off the Gaza coast to light the first flare stack flowing up from the natural gas deposit. An Israeli oil consortium had contested the Palestinian rights to the gas but was overturned in an Israeli court. Original estimates for development and production expenses were in the area of 2 billion dollars. Profits were estimated at another 2 billion dollars.

In the initial stages BG considered running an underwater pipeline 20 nautical miles from Gaza Marine directly to Gaza where it would be used in retrofitted generators to provide power. Excess gas would be piped to the West Bank or converted to Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) for export to foreign buyers.⁷

This plan was abandoned when Sharon announced that the Israelis would never buy the gas directly from the Palestinians. At that point the BG Group negotiated with Egypt to run an undersea pipeline to a plant at El-Arish. The gas would then be piped to Israel so that they would not have to deal directly with the Palestinians.

Under pressure from Tony Blair BG Group was forced to negotiate with the Israelis instead who wanted the pipe to run directly to Ashqelon. Those discussions were so long and contentious that ultimately the BG Group closed their Israel office and again began dealing with Egypt.^[viii]

- September 28, 2000: Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount despite warnings by Arafat and other leading Palestinians. The predictable riots and deaths following this provocation marked the beginning of 2nd Intafada. As a result Sharon was elected Prime Minister in February 2001.⁹ He reaffirmed that Israel would never buy gas from the Palestinians. After the outbreak of the 2nd Intafada the Israelis began an ever-tightening blockade of Gaza with fewer and fewer trucks and no foreign boats allowed to enter.

- Late 2000: Attacks by Israeli patrol boats against Gazan fishing boats began and have continued to this day. These attacks started only after the discovery of the natural gas deposits and 5 years before Hamas freely won the legislative elections on January 25, 2006.¹⁰ It is apparent that these assaults on the fishermen had nothing to do with security or with Hamas. Instead it had everything to do with Israel controlling a 4 billion dollar resource belonging to the Palestinians.

-In the late 1990's Noble Energy, based in Houston, TX, began explorations for natural gas off the Israeli coast in conjunction with Israeli partners Avner Oil and Delek Drilling.

March, 2000: Nobel Energy announced the discovery of the Mari-B natural gas deposit located approximately 15 miles off shore and close to the Gaza Marine Zones. Initial estimates projected reserves exceeding 1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. In 2003 a platform was completed and gas began flowing through a pipeline to Ashqelon. Until 2009 the Mari-B reserve remained the only sizable reserve found in Israeli territory. Although it was a significant deposit it did not approach meeting Israel's energy needs and was a finite resource.

While there is no hard evidence supporting speculation at this time it appears quite possible for the Israelis to access the gas deposits located in Gaza Marine from the Mari-B platform. Slant drilling techniques now allow bits to reach up to 25,000 feet horizontally from a standing platform. Iraq accused Kuwait of stealing its oil using such a technique before the 1st Gulf War. ¹¹

October, 2001 – Following the 9/11 attacks the U. S. State Department included both Hamas and Hezbollah on their terrorist list.

– August, 2002: In response to a request from Prime Minister Sharon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations appointed Ms. Catherine Bertini as his Personal Humanitarian Envoy to assess humanitarian needs of the Palestinians. At the end of her visit to the area she made numerous recommendations including one that dealt with the fishing boats. In her report she included a list of “Previous Commitments Made by Israel”. Item 2 states: “The fishing zone for Palestinian fishing boats off the Gaza coast is 12 nautical miles. This policy needs to be fully implemented.”¹² But it never was!

Despite Bertini’s recommendations Israeli attacks became more frequent on fishing boat that passed a 6-mile limit. Most boats carried GPS’s in order to know their exact positions. Some captains were intimidated by the Israeli threats and turned back before crossing the “No-Go” line. Others continued to go further out despite the increased danger of attack. The fishery closer to shore has collapsed after so many boats were forced to operate in such a limited area. In addition the waters near shore are polluted due to sewage pouring in from broken pipes. This is one more example of an infrastructure crippled by the Israelis.^[xiii] Before the siege Gaza’s fishermen caught 3,000 tons of fish each year. Now it is less than 500 tons.

The most productive fishing months for the Gazans are in the winter and spring. At that time an annual migration of fish traveling from the Nile Delta to Turkish waters pass through the Zone 10 miles and further from shore. The incentive to go beyond the 6-mile limit is very strong.

In addition to firing cannons and machine guns at or near the fishing boats the Israelis periodically introduce noxious chemical substances into the water fired from their boats that leaves a foul odor on any fish or crewmen on deck. It is probable that the chemicals are the same used by the Israelis in crowd control on land. Under the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1997 it is specified “Each state party undertakes not to use riot control agents as a method of warfare.”¹⁴

On occasion the patrol boats have purposely rammed into fishing boats, damaging the vessels and endangering the crew. Numerous times the Israelis have forced fishermen to jump into the water and remain there for up to three hours until they are exhausted and close to hyperthermia.

Periodically the Israelis impound fishing boats and take them and their crews to Ashdod or some other port. The crewmen are generally released after being photographed and interrogated. The boats are held for indefinite periods. Captured fishermen report that the Israelis pressure them to become informers in exchange for the freedom to fish. ¹⁵

9/12/05 – Israel announced that it had ended the occupation of Gaza and withdrew its forces. But it continued to maintain control of air and sea-lanes as well as all border crossings on land. The amount of vehicular traffic remained extremely limited and never approached a typical pre-occupation daily level. The ability for persons to enter or leave Gaza continued to be restricted. Permission or denial for passage was often arbitrary and unpredictable. The conditions of an occupation continue to prevail.

1/25/06 – Hamas won 76 of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council in an open

honest election. After a bloody battle with Fatah elements that were supported by both Israeli and U.S. interests Hamas took control of Gaza. Israel and the United States immediately reiterated that Hamas was a terrorist organization and that they would continue to have no public contact with it. The restrictions at the border crossings were tightened further with even more severe limitations on the admission of produce, materials, medicines and people. Anemia and malnutrition are widespread as a result.

Early June 2008 – Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak instructed the Israel Defense Forces to secretly prepare for an invasion of Gaza, later known as operation “Cast Lead”. 16

June, 2008 –Israel contacted BG Group to propose renewing negotiations over the natural gas deposits. Actual negotiations overseen by Ehud Olmert were taking place in October, 2008. It appears that Israel wished to reach an agreement with BG Group before the secretly planned invasion began.¹⁷

6/19/08 – Hamas and Israel signed a 6-month truce agreement calling for cessation of rocket firings by Hamas and military incursions by Israel. In May over 300 rockets had been fired. Hamas was lead to believe that significant increase in shipments would be allowed to enter Gaza. Before the truce roughly 70 trucks were allowed to bring provisions into Gaza each day compared with some 900 permitted before the Israeli clamped down in 2000. Hamas was led to believe that a similar flow of traffic would be restored. Instead Israel allowed only an increase from the 70 to 90 trucks.¹⁸

8/24/08 – Two boats, the Liberty and Free Gaza sailed into Gaza Harbor from Cyprus carrying 44 international supporters of the Palestinians. They were the first vessels to break the Israeli siege in 41 years. The venture had been organized by Free Gaza Movement (freegaza.org).

I was aboard the ship Free Gaza and again on 2 other trips to Gaza aboard the Dignity that was later rammed and badly damaged by an Israeli warship.

10/31 & 11/9/08 – I joined other international observers traveling aboard 3 separate Gazan fishing boats. We went to document events and locations and to hopefully serve as deterrents against attacks by Israeli gunboats. On both days we were harassed by machine gun and cannon fire and explosive charges landing within a few feet of our boat. Several times each day the largest of the three Israeli patrol boats came within 50 feet of our vessel as they raked the deck and cabin with a high pressure water cannon. Any fish, loose equipment or crewmen caught in the torrent were at risk of being washed over the side. All the cabin windows had been previously smashed by such assaults and were now quickly boarded up when the patrol boats approached. An Italian observer with us had been wounded previously by flying glass, requiring a number of stitches in his back.

According to the crew attacks of this sort occurred every day when a fishing boat approached or passed the 6-mile limit imposed by the Israelis. This pattern of attack began in 2000 after the natural gas discovery was made.

11/18/08 – Israeli naval vessels attacked three Palestinian fishing boats located seven miles off the coast of Deir Al Balah, clearly within the limits permitted in the 1994 Gaza-Jericho Agreement. Fifteen Palestinian fishermen and three international observers were kidnapped and taken with the boats to Israel. The fishermen were held for a day and then released. The boats were eventually returned but damaged. The internationals were jailed in Israel for

many days and then deported.

11/5/08 – IDF forces killed 6 Palestinians while supposedly searching for a tunnel passing under the border. By continuing to enforce the siege the Israelis had never honored the conditions of the truce. But this incursion by the IDF was such a blatant violation that it effectively terminated even the semblance of a truce.

According to the Israeli Intelligence Heritage Center one rocket had been fired from Gaza in September and 2 in October before the IDF incursion. Israeli spokesman Mark Regev conceded that Hamas had not fired these few rockets.

During the next 5 weeks 237 rockets were fired into Israel.¹⁹ The provoked increase in rocket fire was Israel's public justification for launching the long planned "Cast Lead" invasion despite offers by Hamas to renew the ceasefire.²⁰

11/18/08 – An Egyptian court ordered the government to stop shipping natural gas to Israel. Under a 2005 agreement Egypt agreed to deliver 1.7 billion cubic meters of gas to Israel over a 15-year period. The gas began to flow in May, 2008. A lawsuit followed seeking to bar delivery since the Parliament had not given its approval. The court supported the lawsuit and its findings are being appealed.²¹ The potential cutoff of the gas from Egypt gave Israel even more incentive to take control of the Gaza Marine deposits and to deny any benefits to Palestinians whether Hamas or Fatah.

12/27/08 – Israel began bombing Gaza as phase 1 of operation "Cast Lead". The Gaza harbor was bombed during the hostilities damaging a number of the fishing boats.

1/18/2009 – Israel declared a ceasefire ending Operation "Cast Lead".

1/24/2009 – A father and his daughter walking on a Gaza beach were wounded by gunfire from Israeli ships shooting at Gazan fishing boats.

2/14/2009

"GAZAN COAST BECOMING A "NO-GO" ZONE

On Saturday 14th February, 2009, 23 year-old Rafiq abu Reala was shot by Israeli naval forces whilst fishing in Gazan territorial waters, approximately two nautical miles out from the port of Gaza city. He was in a simple fishing vessel, not much larger than a rowing boat, with a small outboard engine, known locally as a 'hassaka'. Rafiq, his brother Rajab and another friend were following the course of a shoal of fish. A group of five more hassakas were out at the time, about a kilometre to the west of Rafiq's boat, further out to sea. An Israeli naval gunboat approached the area and began shooting at the other hassakas, which quickly changed course and headed east, back towards shore.

Suddenly Rafiq realised the gunboat was bearing down on their hassaka. As he recounted the events of that day, Rafiq likened the predatory nature of the naval vessel to that of a wolf. It circled their fishing boat and began shooting heavy ammunition in their direction. The three terrified fishermen threw themselves down flat in the bottom of their boat. The Israeli captain ordered them via megaphone to raise their nets and leave the area. At this point the gunboat was less than 20 metres from Rafiq's hassaka. The second time the gunboat came around no attempt was made to communicate with the fishermen. Rafiq was desperately pulling in the nets with his back facing the gunboat. An M-16 assault rifle was

fired hitting him twice with explosive 'dum-dum' bullets, which peppered his back with shrapnel from the bullets themselves.

The force of the shots threw him in the water, plunging him down about six or seven metres below the surface. Rajab asked their friend to control the boat while he rescued Rafiq. Being a strong swimmer, he dived in after Rafiq and pulled him out of the water into the hassaka. However, Rafiq was unconscious by this time. The outboard was being slowed down by the weight of the nets so they headed towards another hassaka 300 metres away where they dumped the nets. The fishermen in this vessel had a mobile phone and made an emergency call. The stricken hassaka reached port at the same time as the ambulance arrived and Rafiq was taken to al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza city in a serious condition.

It could take Rafiq months to fully recover yet he has a family to support. He married just six months ago and his wife is now expecting their first baby. After five years of working as a fisherman, he has experienced Israeli naval forces firing warning shots on many occasions but this was the first time he has been directly targeted. However, Rajab survived being shot in the chest by the Israeli navy two and a half years ago. It is sobering to note that 15 Gazan fishermen have been killed by the Israeli navy since 2000. Rafiq described the level shooting on Saturday like an open war. Fishermen were attacked from Wadi Gaza, south of Gaza city, all the way to the north of Gaza. A number of hassakas were targeted that day, some vessels sustaining serious damage from the shooting.

Palestinian fishermen have come under daily assaults from Israeli gunboats since Israel announced a unilateral ceasefire which supposedly came into force on 18th January. Reports of heavy gunfire and even missile fire are now becoming the 'norm'. Rafiq is the third Gazan fisherman to be shot by the Israeli navy during this non-existent ceasefire. On 26th January, Alaa al-Habil was shot in the lower leg whilst trawling less than one nautical mile off the coast of Gaza. On 6th February, Mahmoud al-Nadar was shot in both legs whilst 1.5 nautical miles off the coast of Rafah in the south of the Gaza Strip. Nowadays it is unthinkable for fishermen to venture beyond three nautical miles from the Gazan coast, with many vessels staying just metres from the beach. However, Gazan territorial waters reach 12 nautical miles offshore – indeed, the Oslo Accords grant a fishing zone extending as far as 20 nautical miles.

Israel is attempting to create arbitrary 'no-go' zones in the sea – enforced solely by the gun. They might succeed if it weren't for the resilience of the fishermen. All this is akin to what is happening on land. The Israeli Occupation Force has declared an area of Palestinian land a kilometre in from the Green Line a 'closed military zone', affecting an audacious land grab that threatens to swallow a vast swathe of rich agricultural land all the way along the eastern length of the Gaza strip." 22

-January, 2009 – Noble Energy announced the discovery of a vast deposit of natural gas some 50 miles off the Haifa shoreline. Named Tamar 1 it is estimated to hold 5 trillion cubic feet and be able to produce 50 per cent more than the daily capacity of the old Mari-B site. The stocks of Noble Energy and its partners Delek Group and Avner Oil have soared since the announcement. 23

-March 30, 2009 – Noble Energy announced the discovery of another major deposit at Dalit, located about 30 miles off shore from Israel. Production estimates have not been released but the two discoveries are considered sufficient to cover Israel's energy needs for many years.24

-Attacks by Israeli gunboats on the Gazan fishermen continued unabated. Between March, 2009 and early April at least 3 Gazan fishermen have been injured, 24 abducted to Israel and 11 boats confiscated.

- April 12, 2009 - An unmanned fishing boat blew up about 300 yards off the Gaza coast. The IDF claims that it had been booby trapped in an attempt to attack an Israeli patrol boat. They cite this account as justification for their “monitoring” of Gazan boats and for the latest restrictions that limit fishing to a zone within 2 miles of the coast. Palestinian observers on shore claim the vessel was sunk by gunfire from an IDF ship.²⁵

Although the violations of law and basic human rights to the Gazan fishermen pale in comparison to the recent horrors that unfolded throughout Gaza during Operation Cast Lead they must not be overlooked. And they must be seen within the context of another attempted theft of a valuable Palestinian resource.

Former IDF chief of staff Moshe Yallon typified Israeli arrogance and indifference when he stated, “The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people.”²⁶ The resilience and the resourcefulness of the fishermen and of all the people of Gaza in the face of the horrors they have suffered clearly gives the lie to Moshe Yallon’s arrogance. They are not victims. They will prevail.

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Notes

i Andrew Muncie’s Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAUzugKX1AE>

2 Gaza-Jericho Agreement May 4, 1994, Bloomberg.com

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aUNlFwH22dU>

3 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea Part V

4Peter Eyre interview on Energy World <http://www.presstv.ir/Programs/player/?id=84338>

5 New York Times 9/28/2000

6 Wikipedia Camp David Accord

7 Peter Eyre interview on Energy World

<http://www.presstv.ir/Programs/player/?id=84338>

8 Times OnLine 5/23/07

9 Wikipedia Second Intafada

10 Interviews with Gazan fishermen.

11 Wikipedia Directional Drilling

- 12 United Nations Mission Report of Catherine Bertini.
- 13 Pepijn Koster 7/1/07
- <http://www.myfavouriteplaces.org/wl/pivot/entry.php?id=52>
- 14 www.uruknet.info ISM Nov. 5, 2008
- 15 IMEC 4/9/2009
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- 21 New York Times 11/18/08
- 22 Enrique Ferro blog 12/14/09
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- 24 Haaretz.com Avi Bar-Eli 11/02/2009
- 25 1/8/09 NY Times OpEd by Rashid Khalidi Haaretz 4/13/2009 Amos Harel
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