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Gaza: Palestine First and Last

Gaza, the birthplace of Palestinian nationalism, has a long history of resistance

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The Biblical story of Samson and Delilah takes place in Gaza, capital of the Hebrews' enemies, the Philistines — from which the word Palestine derives. The seductress Delilah cut off the hair of Samson the Hebrew, sapping his strength, and he was taken prisoner by the Philistines, who blinded him. They paraded the blind hero in their hall: "And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood ... And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life."

Gaza was important in the Hebrew chronicles, because it was pivotal in the trade routes between Europe and Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The city and territory have been the focus of rivalries since antiquity, from pharaonic Egypt via Rome to the Byzantine empire. In 634 CE Gaza was the site of the first recorded defeat of the Byzantines by the followers of Islam, then a minor religion whose prophet, Muhammad, had died just two years earlier. Gaza remained under Muslim control until the first world war, with interruptions at the time of the Frankish kingdoms, the Mongol invasion and Napoleon's military expeditions. Gaza was "easy to take and easy to lose," as Jean-Pierre Filiu wrote in one of the most detailed studies to date. The Ottomans eventually ceded Gaza, the

gateway to Palestine, to Britain's General Edmund Allenby on 9 November 1917. This gave him access to Jerusalem.

Great Britain's aim was not just to defeat the sultan, an ally of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire, but to secure control of a strategic territory and guarantee the protection of the eastern side of the Suez canal, the British imperial artery, a vital communication between India and the empire's heart. The British staved off French designs on the Holy Land and in 1922 were granted the League of Nations mandate to administer a territory to be known as Palestine, of which Gaza would be a part. Their mission also included implementing the Balfour Declaration, facilitating the creation of a Jewish national homeland and encouraging Zionist immigration; they did this enthusiastically until 1939.

Gaza and its hinterland were part of all subsequent fighting between Palestinians — Muslim and Christian — against Zionist colonisation and the British presence. Gazans contributed to the great Arab Revolt of 1936-39, eventually crushed by the British, a defeat that deprived the Palestinians of political leadership, leaving Arab governments to defend (if that's the word) their cause.

On 15 May 1948, the day after the declaration of the state of Israel, Arab forces entered Palestine. This earliest Arab-Israeli war ended with a first Arab defeat. The territory, which had been earmarked for the state of Palestine under the partition plan approved by the UN General Assembly on 29 November 1947, was carved up. Israel annexed some of it (notably Galilee), Jordan absorbed the West Bank. The Gaza Strip — 360 sq km including the cities of Gaza, Khan Younis and Rafah — came under Egyptian military control: It would remain the only Palestinian territory over which no actual foreign sovereignty was exercised. Eighty thousand inhabitants had to accommodate 200,000 refugees driven out of other parts of Palestine by the Israeli army. They were forced to live in miserable conditions, longing to return home. The massive refugee presence and the unusual status of the territory would make Gaza a centre for a renewal of Palestinian political consciousness.

Despite Egypt's control — exerted first by its king and then by the Free Officers after the coup of 23 July 1952 — the Palestinians organised themselves autonomously, carried out guerrilla operations against Israel and protested against any attempt to settle the refugees in Gaza permanently. Israel's reprisals were harsh and allowed an unknown young officer, Ariel Sharon, to make his name through his brutal repression of the territory. On 28 February 1955 Sharon led a raid in Gaza which left 36 Egyptian soldiers, two civilians and eight Israelis dead. On 1 May there were huge demonstrations against Egyptian passivity throughout the Gaza Strip. This helped persuade Egypt's new strongman, Gamal Abdel Nasser, to change his foreign policy. Though previously considered pro-American by many of his fellow Egyptians, he decided, at the height of the cold war, to make overtures to the USSR. On his way to the Bandung conference in April 1955 — which marked the beginning of the non-aligned movement — he met with fellow delegate, Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai, and asked him if the Soviets might be willing to sell Egypt arms. The Soviet response was slow but ultimately

positive, an agreement to deliver Czech materiel was announced on 30 September 1955: The USSR broke the western monopoly on arms sale to the Middle East and made a game-changing entry into the region.

Nasser was also persuaded to allow Gaza's Palestinians greater freedom to organise into combat groups. On 26 July 1956 Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal Company. The ensuing attack on Egypt by Israel, France and the UK (the Suez Crisis) led to the seizure of Sinai and the Gaza Strip, which remained under Israeli control until March 1957. Clandestine resistance began. The human cost of the occupation was high: "The most moral army in the world" murdered civilians. In Khan Younis dozens of people were machine-gunned against a wall and others were shot with pistols — between 275 and 515 people were killed in all.

When Israel, responding to pressure from the United States, evacuated Sinai and Gaza, Nasser's popularity was at its height, as was that of Arab nationalism. In the camps, the young Palestinian generation in exile saw this as a response to the defeats of 1948-49. They would go on to be politically active in organisations such as the Arab Nationalist Movement, created by George Habbash, the Baath Party and Nasserist movements. They believed that Arab unity would be the route to the liberation of Palestine.

A few young people drew a different lesson from their experiences in Gaza. Perceiving how conditional Arab support was (even Nasser's), they confronted Israel directly. Many had spent time in Egyptian prisons. They viewed the liberation of Palestine as a task for Palestinians. They came together in 1959 to found Fatah under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, himself a refugee in Gaza in 1948 (the group's name comes from an acronym of the Palestinian National Movement in Arabic). Among the Gazan activists who played a central role in the movement in the 1970s and 80s were Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad); Khalil Wazir (Abu Jihad), who became Fatah's second in command and was assassinated by the Israelis in Tunis in 1988; and Kamal Adwan, killed by an Israeli commando unit in Beirut in 1973.

Their newspaper Falistinouna (Our Palestine), published in Beirut from 1959 to 1964, declared: "All we ask of you is that you [the Arab regimes] surround Palestine with a defensive ring and watch the battle between us and the Zionists ... all we want is for you [the Arab regimes] to take your hands off Palestine." At the height of Nasser's influence, it took courage to say that.

Things changed from the mid-1960s, after the failed attempt to unite Egypt and Syria (1958-61), which revealed the Arab countries' inability to change events. The Algerian liberation struggle, successful by 1962, provided a new model. In January 1965 Fatah launched its first military offensive against Israel, attracting a flood of militants from other organisations who were tired of waiting for Arab unity. Egypt's defeat in the Six Day war in June 1967 enabled Fatah to become a major force and allowed it to take control of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) with Nasser's agreement. In February 1969 Arafat became chairman of the PLO's executive committee. The Palestinians were back as major players in regional politics and Gaza was a major

element in this revival.

The Gaza Strip itself, under Israeli occupation, organised military resistance in which a host of organisations joined forces, with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood, which kept to social action. The first attack on the occupying forces was on 11 June 1967, the day after the ceasefire signed by Egypt and other Arab nations with Israel. These attacks continued until 1971, only halted by Sharon's tanks and extra-judicial executions. Although military resistance was crushed, political initiatives became more frequent, especially contacts with the West Bank, which had been rare before 1967. From then on, the Palestinian elites backed the PLO, which they recognised as "the sole representative of the Palestinian people."

Only the Muslim Brothers refused to take part. They rooted themselves in Palestinian society through their social networks, benefiting from the tolerance of the occupying authorities, which regarded them as a counterbalance to the principal enemy, the PLO. The Mujamma al-Islami (Islamic society), founded in 1973 by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, was legalised by Israel. But this wait-and-see attitude — which meant the time for resistance never came — caused a split within the Brotherhood and led to the creation of another movement, Islamic Jihad, in the early 1980s.

The first intifada broke out in December 1987 in Gaza. The first consequence was a major shift in the Brothers' strategy: They created the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which took part in the intifada but refused to be part of a united front with the other Palestinian organisations. The other important consequence was that the PLO used the intifada to boost its credibility and negotiate the Oslo accords, ratified by Arafat and the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin on 13 September 1993. Gaza was Arafat's choice for the new Palestinian Authority's base, established on 1 July 1994.

Then came the failure of Oslo, denser Israeli settlement and colonisation, the second intifada, (from September 2000), the Hamas victory in Palestine's first democratic elections in 2006, the refusal of western countries to recognise the new government, the alliance between a faction of Fatah and the United States to end it, Hamas coming to power in Gaza in 2007, and the resultant blockade, in place ever since, affecting 1.7 million inhabitants.

Even though the Israeli army (and settlers) quit the Gaza Strip in 2005 — without any coordination with the Palestinian Authority — it remains effectively occupied: All land, sea and air access still depends on Israel, which forbids Palestinians access to a significant proportion of territory (30% of agricultural land) as well as to the sea beyond six nautical miles (reduced to three miles since the beginning of the latest assault). Israel continues to control all aspects of statehood. The blockade is strangling the population in spite of unanimous, but only verbal, condemnation from the international community, including the United States.

Since its retreat, Israel has conducted large-scale operations against the territory: in December 2008-January 2009, November 2012, and this July. As long as the blockade

remains in place and the Palestinians do not have a state of their own, any ceasefire will amount to no more than a temporary cessation of hostilities. General de Gaulle predicted this on 27 November 1967, when he spoke of the consequences of the Arab-Israeli war: “The occupation cannot go on without oppression, repression and expulsions, while at the same time a resistance grows, which [Israel] regards as terrorism.”