

## Gaza Strip

**General Characteristics** The Gaza Strip is a territory that was under direct Israeli military occupation and subject to military government rule between 1967 and 1993. In September 1993, with the signing of the OSLO AGREEMENTS by ISRAEL and the PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION (PLO), the Gaza Strip came under limited Palestinian autonomy for the first time, although Israel retains ultimate control over the area.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are stateless. In 1997, the population was estimated to be 1.3 million people, with nearly half below the age of fourteen years. Approximately 70 percent of Gazans are REFUGEES of the ARAB-ISRAELI WAR OF 1948 and their descendants, now in their fifth generation. The Gaza Strip is a rectangular piece of land, 28 miles long, 4.3 miles wide at its northern end, 7.8 miles wide at its southern end, and 3.4 miles wide at its most narrow point. It encompasses an area that is approximately 140 square miles or one-fifteenth the size of the WEST BANK, with one of the highest population densities in the world. Bordered by Israel on the north and east, EGYPT on the south, and the Mediterranean Sea on the west, the Gaza Strip lies in the southwestern corner of Mandatory Palestine, and its geographical boundaries have not changed since its inception in 1948. As a result of its political status since 1967, the Strip has no official capital; its chief cities are Gaza City, Khan Yunis, and Rafah. The Gaza Strip also contains eight REFUGEE camps, home to more than 300,000 people.

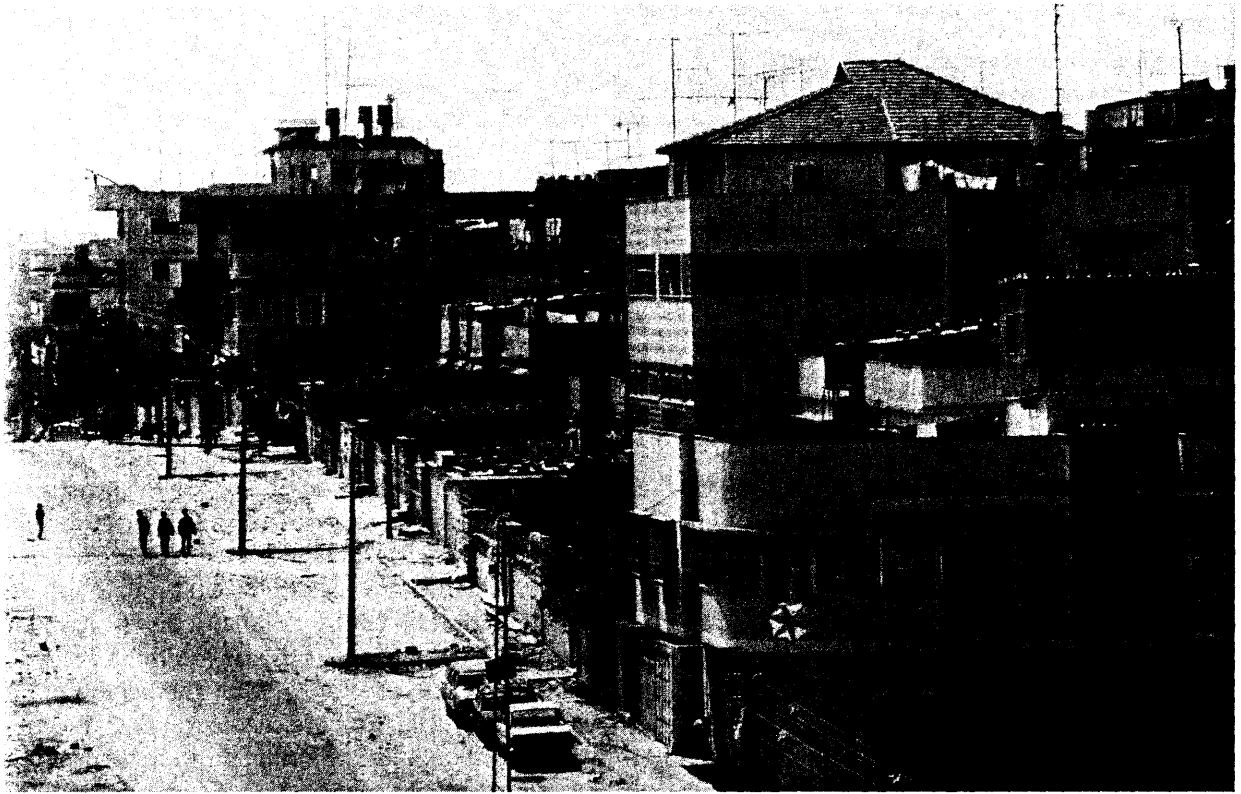
The population of the Gaza Strip is almost entirely Palestinian, and Arabic is the primary language spoken. There is a small community of 7,000 Jewish settlers who also inhabit the region.

Ninety-nine percent of the Arab populace are Sunni Muslims, with a tiny minority of Christians, most of whom belong to the Greek Orthodox Church. Broadly speaking, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip fall into three historic social groups: urban, peasant, and Bedouin. In 1948, the distinction between the indigenous Gazan and the refugee was introduced; after 1967, with the beginning of Israeli occupation and the rise of the PLO, distinctions based on political affiliation were incorporated as well.

Considerable geographical variation characterizes the territory that begins in the northern third of the Strip, an area belonging to the red sands of the Philistian Plain, and ends in the southern two-thirds, an area (south of Gaza's main watercourse, the Wadi Gaza) considered a part of the more fertile sandy loess of the northern Negev coast. Three narrow but distinctive bands of land define Gaza's physiographic structure: a wide belt of loose sands in the west, running from the shoreline to a sand dune ridge 120 feet above sea level; a central depression with highly fertile alluvial soils; and a sandstone ridge in the east extending into the northern Negev. The Strip belongs to the coastal plain, one of four climatological regions in the area. Stretching from Gaza to ACRE along the coast, and southeast to the Plain of Esdraelon; the coastal plain is distinguished by its proximity to the sea and produces a climate of considerable heat and humidity in the summer (mean summer temperatures of 24°–27° Celsius) and cool, equally humid days with limited rainfall in the winter (mean winter temperatures of 13° to 18° Celsius).

The economy of the Gaza Strip is small, underdeveloped, and weak, generating almost half of its national product from external sources. During

## GAZA STRIP



A view of Gaza City, in the Gaza Strip (*GPO of Israel, Harnik Nati, 1988*)

direct Israeli rule, the local economy was integrated with and became dependent upon the Israeli market for both employment and trade. By 1988, Israel employed close to 70 percent of Gaza's labor force and had become the territory's primary export and import market. The Gaza Strip and West Bank, furthermore, had also become Israel's second-largest export market after the United States. Natural resources are extremely limited and diminishing. Between 1967 and 1988, for example, the Israeli government confiscated 51 percent of the LAND in the Gaza Strip, much of it agricultural. The steady depletion of local WATER resources by both Palestinians and Israelis was not seriously addressed by the Israeli government, and at present rates of consumption, the Gaza Strip will be devoid of freshwater in about fifteen years. The territory contains no mineral resources of any known significance.

Traditionally, the Gaza economy was largely agricultural, and its primary export has been citrus, but because of the problems of land and water, agriculture fell below services as the main contributor

to national output by the late 1980s. The industrial sector was always small and weak, and, despite some growth since 1967, still accounted for the smallest share of the national product. Given its weak productive base, the Gaza economy has always been heavily dependent on imports, primarily from Israel. Imports from the Arab world have been prohibited and those from Europe are extremely limited through Israeli tariff regulations. Export markets other than Israel and the Arab world have also been few because of official trade policies that prohibited Palestinians from entering markets used by Israel. This fact alone has had a negative impact on local economic development. In 1988, however, under pressure from the European Community (EC), the Israeli government allowed direct trade between the Gaza Strip and EUROPE, although this trade was very small.

Through 1994, the Israeli military government, the UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY (UNRWA), and private institutions administered EDUCATION in the Gaza Strip. The government school system was inherited from Egypt, and the

entire educational structure, which runs through high school, had been left intact. In 1994, the newly established PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA) assumed control of the government school system. UNRWA still operates schools in the refugee camps through the eighth grade and uses the same curriculum as the government schools. Because of official Israeli restrictions, private schooling remained minimal. Throughout nearly thirty years of Israeli occupation, there were only three private institutions in the Gaza Strip offering classes from kindergarten through secondary school. The Islamic University (13,000 students), al-Azhar University (11,250 students), and al-Aqsa University (9,036 students) provide college-level instruction; al-QUDS UNIVERSITY offers distance learning programs at the college level to Gazans as well. During direct Israeli occupation, cultural institutions were quite rare because military laws restricted their development. In the Strip, they included the YMCA, the Gaza Artists Association, the French Cultural Center, and the Gaza Cultural Center.

Prior to 1996, when a PALESTINIAN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL was elected, government in the Gaza Strip was restricted to the local level; it included four municipal councils, nine village councils, and three local committees. Between 1982 and 1994, the Gaza municipality, the largest in the territory, had no mayor or municipal council and remained under the direct control of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior. The municipal councils in Dayr al-Balah and Rafah were also disbanded and their mayors Israeli-appointed. The only functioning council with an elected mayor existed in Khan Yunis.

**History** The earliest knowledge of Gaza dates to the third millennium B.C.E. The Old Testament names Gaza (City) as one of five cities belonging to the Philistines, and it is the burial place of Hashim ibn Abd Manaf, the great-grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the site of Samson's death. Prior to the formation of the Gaza Strip in 1948, the Gaza region was an important administrative unit of Palestine. Under Ottoman rule (1516–1917), the district of Gaza, which stretched from south of JAFFA to Khan Yunis, was part of the province of JERUSALEM, and was controlled directly from Constantinople, indicating its importance to the regime. The Gaza district included the towns of

Khan Yunis, Majdal, Faluja, and RAMLA. By the mid-seventeenth century, the town of Gaza, known for its tolerance of religious minorities, counted among its 26,000 inhabitants Jews and Christians, in addition to Muslims. The town enjoyed a period of particular prosperity under the benign rule of Husayn Pasha. Economic activity was predominantly agricultural and focused on the production of cereal grains. Industry was primitive and noted for the manufacture of soap and wine. During the early to mid-eighteenth century, however, Gaza fell victim to Bedouin raids. The resulting insecurity caused farmers to flee, and over two-thirds of the cultivable area of the Gaza district remained deserted.

In 1799, Napoleon had taken the strategically situated town of Gaza in order to defend against the invasion of Egypt, which he had wrested from Ottoman control as part of his eastern campaign. Peace and prosperity only returned to Gaza in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Between 1750 and 1882, its population increased from 6,000 to 16,000, reaching 40,000 by 1906. The nineteenth century saw a steady diminution of Ottoman power and a concomitant rise in the influence of the West, which culminated in the establishment of British rule in 1917.

**The Mandate Period** During the PALESTINE MANDATE (1922–1948), the Gaza region was made one of six administrative districts, and with Gaza City as its capital, spanned the entire southern half of Palestine. The importance assigned to Gaza was in large part due to its proximity to Egypt. The area's strategic economic significance was obvious to Mandate officials, whose desire to promote trade and commerce across the border with Egypt encouraged renewed prosperity for the town of Gaza and for the region as a whole. During the Mandate period, Gaza had evolved into a prosperous marketing center with good connections to the outside world. Each year, close to 20 percent of Palestine's entire citrus crop and 150,000 tons of grains were collected in Gaza town for domestic trade and export. (Before 1948, the area that became the Gaza Strip did not constitute an independent economic unit. Rather it was integrated into the economy of southern Palestine and existed primarily as an export and marketing center for its hinterland.) Although the British successfully

## GAZA STRIP

promoted commerce and trade, the local economy remained traditional in structure, tied to precapitalist agriculture. Economic growth brought improved living standards as seen by Gaza's growing population and declining infant mortality rates.

Despite growing political tensions between Palestine's Arab and Jewish communities, the Gaza district remained relatively unaffected since Jews were officially prohibited from purchasing land there. The chaotic last months of the Mandate, however, resulted in the call for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state; the Gaza district was to be a central part of the latter. The residents of Gaza opposed partition and the division of their agricultural lands that partition would have imposed.

### ***The 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the Imposition of Egyptian Occupation***

As a result of the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, two-thirds of the Gaza district was lost to the new state of Israel. The town of Gaza and thirteen other localities were incorporated into an artificially created entity known as the Gaza Strip, which was less than one-third of the area intended under the partition plan, and just over 1 percent of Mandatory Palestine. The Gaza Strip, whose prewar population numbered 80,000, was flooded by 250,000 refugees fleeing the war and placed under Egyptian military rule from 1948 to 1967. During Egypt's tenure, the Egyptian army assumed control over Gaza's civil and security affairs. Political activity of all kinds was prohibited. Egyptians held all high-level administrative positions. Refugees were excluded from mainstream social and economic affairs, and indigenous Gazans were carefully monitored. Everyone in the Gaza Strip was officially classified as stateless and ineligible for any passport. A nightly curfew was imposed.

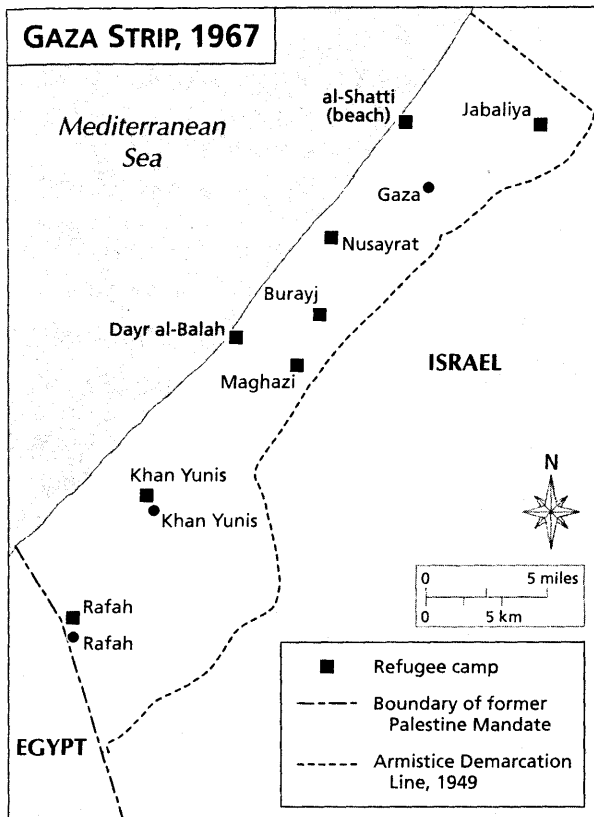
Economically, the immediate postwar situation was urgent. Separated from the agricultural area it once served and from the rest of the Palestinian hinterland, the Strip lost much of its prime agricultural and grazing land to Israel and its port was closed. As a result, the indigenous economy virtually collapsed. The massive influx of refugees further strained an already weakened economic base. Politically, the refugees also presented an urgent problem. Refugee repatriation and compensation

became the focus of Arab-Israeli tensions. Israel made it clear that it would never allow a full repatriation of Palestinian refugees living in Gaza, and the Arab states indicated that they would not absorb displaced Palestinians. In 1950, UNRWA began relief operations for Gazan refugees and by 1952 had established eight refugee camps throughout the Gaza Strip. UNRWA assumed full responsibility for the refugee community, providing food, housing, health care, and education.

During the early to mid-1950s, infiltrations by Palestinians and Israelis across the Gaza-Israel border assumed increasingly violent dimensions. The Egyptian government, fearing continued Israeli attacks, imposed harsh security measures on Gaza residents. On February 28, 1955, Israel attacked an Egyptian military installation in Gaza and thirty-nine people were killed. This event was an important factor in Egyptian-Israeli relations. It convinced President Jamal Abd al-Nasir to shift his foreign policy priorities from inter-Arab matters to the ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT. As a result, Nasir's attempt to prevent Palestinian border raids into Israel gave way to a policy that actively sponsored such raids. Israeli policy similarly became more offensive, and, in 1956, it culminated in the Suez crisis. As a result of the Suez war, Israel gained control of the Gaza Strip in November 1956. Under pressure from the United States, however, Israel was forced to withdraw from Gaza in March 1957 when Egypt reassumed control.

The ten years between 1957 and 1967 focused greater Egyptian attention on the economic and political needs of the Gaza Strip. After Suez, Nasir emerged as a major proponent of the Palestinian cause. In order to secure a base of support in Gaza, he expanded the boundaries of economic and political expression.

At the economic level, the government opened the Gaza port and declared Gaza a free-trade zone for consumer and industrial goods, many of which were banned in Egypt. The government extended new markets to Gaza's citrus producers and sold lands registered for public use to local residents. The Egyptians also expanded the local educational system and improved health care services. However, the refugee population and Gaza's indigenous poor remained impoverished, dependent upon UNRWA and other external sources of assistance.



The Egyptian government did lessen the constraints on organized political activity in Gaza but did not eliminate them. In 1957, the government allowed the establishment of a legislative council in Gaza. In 1959, the government similarly encouraged the establishment of the Palestine National Union and in later years approved the formation of the General Federation of Trade Unions and the Palestine Women's Society. In 1962, the Egyptians gave the chairmanship of Gaza's legislative council formerly in the hands of an Egyptian official, to a local Palestinian. In the same year, the Egyptian government also provided Gaza with a constitution. Perhaps the most significant political change was the formation of the PLO in Gaza in January 1964. Three Gazans served on the PLO's executive committee. Egypt further allowed the PALESTINE LIBERATION ARMY, the military wing of the PLO, to set up a base in Gaza and supplied it with light arms. Although little violence broke out across Gaza-Israeli lines between the birth of the PLO and the ARAB-ISRAELI WAR OF 1967, tensions between Israel and the Arab states escalated.

**Israeli Occupation** The June 1967 war ended with an Israeli victory and the imposition of Israeli military rule in the Gaza Strip. Israel immediately embarked on a normalization program that sought to restore services in a variety of areas. The government also secretly deliberated the Allon Plan, which provided for the formal annexation of the Gaza Strip and the resettlement of 350,000 Gazan refugees in northern Sinai and the West Bank. Although the Allon Plan was never officially adopted, the government did evict some 40,000 people from the Gaza Strip by December 1967.

From the beginning, Gazans actively resisted the occupation. Within less than a year of Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip, a protracted period of armed struggle (1967-71) broke out between the Palestine Liberation Army and the Israeli military. Civil disobedience also was widespread. In 1970, the Israeli army, under the command of Ariel Sharon, embarked on a campaign to rid the Gaza Strip of all resistance. By early 1972, Sharon's efforts proved successful: Large numbers of guerrillas had been killed, and control over the refugee camps, the guerrilla's base of support, had been secured. In September 1971, at the request of the Israeli government, a leading Palestinian citrus merchant, Rashad Shawwa, agreed to become mayor of Gaza. Shawwa formed a municipal council, but he and his council received intense criticism, since many nationalists viewed their appointments as a political compromise with the occupier. In October 1972, Shawwa resigned; Israel's reinstatement of direct military rule in the Gaza Strip followed. In October 1975, Shawwa agreed to be reappointed as mayor of Gaza City.

The 1978 CAMP DAVID ACCORDS calling for autonomy in the Gaza Strip and West Bank touched off an explosive phase in Gaza's political history. Most Gazans interpreted the accords as a renunciation by Egypt of all claims on the Gaza Strip, and so they opposed them. One month after Camp David in September 1978, a rally was held in Gaza to denounce the agreement and to propose comprehensive negotiations for Palestinian self-determination that were to include the PLO. After the rally, Israel imposed restrictions on political activity in Gaza and tensions increased. Furthermore, President Sadat, angered over Gaza's rejection of the Camp David accords, froze

## GAZA STRIP

salary payments to officials employed in Gaza by the Egyptian government before 1967 and prohibited the admission of Gaza students to Egyptian universities.

On December 1, 1981, the Israeli government instituted a civil administration in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. An integral part of the military structure, the civil administration was given responsibility over all nonmilitary sectors such as health, education, and social services. Interpreted as the first step toward the implementation of Menachem Begin's autonomy plan and the annexation of the territories, the imposition of the civil administration generated considerable opposition from Palestinians. In protest, Mayor Shawwa immediately announced a general strike. The Israeli authorities dismissed Shawwa, and Gaza's municipal council was disbanded. In August 1982, amid heightened tensions emanating from the Lebanon war, the Israeli Interior Ministry assumed full control over the Gaza municipality and resumed direct rule to the Strip. At this time, the government also increased Jewish civilian settlement inside the Gaza Strip.

By the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising on December 8, 1987, Gaza had no elected mayor, no election process, and no right to public assembly. Channels for political or legal expression did not exist. Heightened civilian settlement brought with it contestations over vastly limited natural resources, especially land and water. In November 1988, the PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL called for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank alongside Israel. The MADRID PEACE CONFERENCE, 1991, began in October. The Palestinian delegation was headed by a Gazan, Dr. Haydar ABD AL-SHAFI. Almost two years later in September 1993, Israel and the PLO signed the OSLO AGREEMENTS in Oslo, Norway, to implement partial autonomy in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of JERICHO.

**The Post-Oslo Period** In May 1994, the Israeli army withdrew from Gaza's most populated areas and redeployed to other parts of the Strip. One month later, Yasir ARAFAT returned to Gaza, and the PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA) was officially established. The impact of the army's redeployment and the PA's arrival was immediate and positive. Gaza's nightly curfew ended, allowing people to

walk the streets at any hour without fear of arrest or harassment. Personal security was much improved as the PA assumed control over many internal functions. New stores and restaurants appeared and remained open into the evening hours, giving the territory a sense of normalcy it had not known for decades.

Despite these positive changes, however, economic conditions in the Gaza Strip continued to deteriorate in the postagreement period. The primary reason for Gaza's economic decline was Israel's closure of the territory (and the West Bank and East Jerusalem), imposed in March 1993 as a security measure and never once lifted. Closure either bars or significantly reduces the number of Palestinians allowed to work in Israel and severely restricts trade levels, a critical source of income for Gaza's domestic economy. By early 1996, unemployment in the Gaza Strip averaged 30 percent, reaching 50 percent during periods of total closure. The resulting income loss cost the local economy nearly \$3 million daily, roughly equivalent to total donor pledges in 1995. By 1999, economic conditions had declined even more.

Closure and unemployment directly contributed to growing levels of poverty, especially in Gaza. By early 1996, at least 20 percent of Gaza's population and 10 percent of the West Bank's lived at or below an absolute poverty level of \$500-\$650 per capita annually. The average Gazan family spent almost 60 percent of its monthly income on food, 1 percent on health care, and 3 percent on education. By 1998 close to 40 percent of Gazans were impoverished.

The political downturn of the OSLO PEACE PROCESS stands in marked contrast to the expectations that first accompanied it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Gaza Strip, where political and economic tensions remained high by 1999.

These very tensions and lack of progress spilled over in the ignition of the al-AQSA INTIFADA, which broke out in the West Bank in September 2000 and rapidly spread to Gaza. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) responded with overwhelming force to the challenges presented by Palestinian protesters, rock throwers, and gunmen confronting Israeli forces at checkpoints delineating borders between Palestinian-controlled and Israeli-controlled areas. Although most of these flash points were internal to the Occupied Territories—for example, a traffic

intersection about a kilometer from Netzarim ISRAELI SETTLEMENT on the southern outskirts of Gaza City—Israel employed tanks, heavy mounted machine guns, Apache helicopters, and F16 jet fighters to try to quell disturbances. By mid-2004, 1,500 Palestinian deaths in Gaza were attributed to intifada-related violence.

The closure policies were tightened in an effort to end disturbances, then further harshened in response to Palestinian suicide bombing directed at Israelis. The fact that no suicide bomb attacks were conducted by Gazans until a double bombing attack in Ashdod in spring 2004, did not reduce the pressure on Gaza. Under the closure system, Gaza is regularly sliced into three segments, roughly dividing northern, middle, and southern Gaza by Israeli military checkpoints. This division is reinforced by the BARRIERS to movement created by the fenced, fortified settlement blocs. The Palestinian population is regularly denied movement between the three segments of Gaza altogether, which is particularly damaging since most institutions and service providers are in Gaza City, and the population of the rest of the Gaza Strip is either prevented or impeded from reaching universities, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, government ministries, and a variety of other businesses and services. In addition to these effects, the new closure regime has ended the "Safe Passage" between the West Bank and Gaza, negotiated in the Oslo peace process, preventing economic exchange, trade, or physical contact between the Palestinian populations of the West Bank and Gaza.

Coupled with the closure policy has been an aggressive Israeli policy of clearing land, including the clearing of a 500-meter strip of densely populated Rafah on the Egyptian border. As part of the policy, thousands of buildings have been destroyed, and many thousands of people, 1948 refugees, have been rendered homeless. In addition, the IDF has "shaved" almost all the citrus groves in the northern Gaza Strip, to deny cover to those firing crude mortars, almost all agricultural areas with any "cover" near roads that settlers use, and areas in proximity to settlements. Well over 10 percent of all arable land in Gaza has been damaged, crops razed, and irrigation systems and wells destroyed in this way.

Increasingly restrictive policies for granting the permits necessary for Palestinians to work in

the Israeli economy have reduced the numbers of Palestinians from the Occupied Territories working in Israel to less than 12,000, a loss of external employment that cannot be replaced in the shattered Palestinian domestic economy. To obtain such a permit, a person must be, at minimum, 35 years of age, married, and have children. Even for the few lucky to have a permit, work opportunities and access to Israel are extremely limited. Many who have a permit are unable to find a job.

The result of the violence, chaos, and draconian Israeli response to the second intifada has been a collapse of the Palestinian economy, plummeting living standards, marginalization of the PA, and a humanitarian disaster only held at bay by massive donor contributions. In Gaza, the poorest have descended from an average of \$2.10 per day per individual to \$1.32 per day per individual and 75 percent of Gazans have joined the ranks of the poorest. Rates of malnutrition in Gaza are as bad as anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa, with levels of acute malnutrition at 13.3 percent in 2002 and chronic malnutrition at 17.5 percent. Those figures eased somewhat to 3.9 and 12.4 respectively in the following year as a result of massive donor response in emergency food and nutrition programs. However, both acute and chronic malnutrition rates remain in the unacceptable "moderate" zone. Unemployment rates for Gaza are estimated at about 60 percent, with 95,000 domestic and external jobs lost by the third quarter of 2002.

On the political front, PA efforts have come to little. The creation of the post of prime minister has yielded no results on the ground, and the PA, its ministries, and the security services are largely paralyzed in the face of growing chaos, lawlessness, and poverty. The Bush-Sharon agreement in April 2004 regarding a unilateral Israeli withdrawal of settlers, but not military installations, from the Gaza Strip in exchange for concessions regarding West Bank settlements and abandoning the long-enshrined principle of RIGHT OF RETURN for Palestinian refugees coupled with the ongoing assassinations of Palestinian political leaders, including the spiritual leader of HAMAS al-Shayk Ahmad YASIN and the Hamas political leaders Isma'il Abu Shanab and Abd al-Aziz RANTISI in Gaza in 2004, have provoked deep anger in Gaza, which

