

History of the Gaza Strip and Hamas

In 1946 all of the land within the area now known as the Gaza Strip was owned by Arab Palestinians. This was recognized in the UN 1947 Plan for the partition of Palestine. Many of the 700,000 refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War fled into eight refugee camps located in the Gaza Strip. These eight camps are still in existence today and have been the home for four generations of Palestinians. More than 1.4 million residents of Gaza are classified as refugees today according to the UN Relief and Works Agency. Egypt was left in control of the Gaza strip following the 1948 War and remained in charge for 38 years until Israel captured Gaza and the Sinai Desert from Egypt during the 1967 Six Day War. The Sinai was returned to Egypt in 1979 but Israel maintained both internal and external control of Gaza until 2005. During this time Israel placed 21 Jewish settlements with about 9000 settlers and Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip. Egypt still controls the southern border between Gaza and Egypt today.

About 2.2 million Palestinians lived in the Gaza Strip before the recent war with Israel. This includes more than one million children. Gaza is about twice the size of Washington, DC - about 140 square miles. For comparison the West Bank covers 2200 square miles. Before this year's war Gaza relied upon Israel for most of its water, electricity and food. Israel has blockaded Gaza numerous times since 1967, cutting off travel in and out and often cutting off food, water and electricity.

Hamas was founded in 1987 following the killing of four Palestinian workers by an IDF truck in the Jabalia Refugee camp in Gaza. Palestinian activists released in prisoner trades from Israeli prisons were the first Hamas leaders – Shiekh Ahmed Yassin is notable and will be discussed later. Hamas opposed the more moderate approach of Yassar Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Operation (PLO) and later of the Palestinian Authority. Hamas originally opposed the ceding of any part of Palestine to Israel and embraced the use of violence to achieve this aim. In its 1988 charter, Hamas maintained that Palestine is an Islamic homeland that cannot be surrendered to non-Muslims. This position was in conflict with the 1988 PLO position which recognized Israel's right to exist. Hamas and other groups in occupied territories began to call for jihad (holy war) against Israel's occupation of large areas of Palestine. In December 1987 the Palestinian intifada (shaking off) of Israeli occupation began.

Hamas members are Sunni Moslems not Shi'ite. Iran and most of the Iranian sponsored militants, including Hezbollah, are Shi'ite. Several rival militant groups, not under the control of Hamas also operate in Gaza.

Hamas' first direct attack on Israel came in 1989 with the abduction and killing of two IDF soldiers. IDF arrested Hamas leader Yassin and sentenced him to life in prison and also deported 400 other Hamas activists to South Lebanon then occupied by Israel. This gave the Hamas activists the opportunity to build a relationship with the Shi'ite Hezbollah organization.

In 1991 the Hamas military branch the al-Qassam Brigades was created. During the 1990s these brigades conducted numerous terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and military personnel. In April 1993 these attacks began to include suicide bombings. The Israeli Mossad killed Yahya Ayash, who may have masterminded the early suicide attacks, in 1996.

In December 1992 Israel deported 415 Hamas leaders to Lebanon, provoking international condemnation and a unanimous UN Security Council resolution demanding their return to Gaza. Most of these detainees were returned to Gaza late in 1993 following the Oslo Accords but more than half of them were then immediately detained again by Israel.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed in 1962 and granted a seat in the Arab League. The Palestinian Authority (PA) was formed in 1994 during the Gaza-Jericho Agreement between the PLO and the government of Israel. The UN continues to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people but the PA has essentially replaced the PLO in practice. Fatah is the Palestinian political party that controls the PLO and PA. The New York Times currently uses PA and PLO interchangeably in its reporting.

According to the Oslo Accords the PA was to have exclusive security and civilian control over Palestinian urban areas and only civilian control over Palestinian rural areas. Practically the PA maintained civilian control in the Gaza Strip but Israel maintained military and security control until it withdrew from Gaza in 2005. Practically in the West Bank, the PA exerts partial civil control over 167 isolated Palestinian enclaves or islands. The remainder of the West Bank, including legal and illegal Jewish settlements, is completely controlled by Israel.

Hamas did not recognize the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO (then led by Yassar Arafat) and continued suicide and other terrorist attacks on Israel. Arafat was blamed because he could or would not stop these attacks. Opinions on his ability to control events vary based on the outlook of critics.

In September 1997 Israeli Mossad agents entered Jordan and attempted to kill Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal but these agents failed and were captured by Jordanian authorities. King Hussein of Jordan secured a deal to swap these Mossad agents for Shiekh Yassin, the Hamas leader imprisoned by Israel in 1989. In 1999, Hamas was banned in Jordan, reportedly based on requests by Israel, the US and the more moderate Palestinian Authority. Hamas leader Khaled Mashall was detained by Jordanian authorities in 1999 and eventually sent to exile in Syria.

The collapse of the Oslo Peace Process in July 2000, which failed to produce an independent Palestinian state, was followed several months later by the second intifada. This was much more serious than the first intifada and resulted in the deaths of 3000 Palestinians, 1000 Israelis and 64 foreigners.

In January 2004 Hamas leader Shiehk Yassin proposed that Hamas would end resistance against Israel in exchange for a Palestinian state in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. He noted restoring Palestinians "historic rights" would be left to future generations, thus tacitly recognizing Israel's right to exist in 2004. Yassin was targeted and killed by an Israeli air strike on March 22, 2004 without receiving an Israeli reply to his proposal.

On January 25, 2004, another senior Hamas official Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi offered Israel a 10 year truce in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state and the withdrawal of Israeli

forces from the territories captured in the 1967 War. Israel rejected his proposal as insincere and killed him in a targeted air strike on April 18, 2004.

In late January 2004, US Secretary of State Colin Powell sent envoy Steve Cohen, on his behalf, to meet with Hamas Officials to discuss these peace proposals. This was reported at the time by the French newspaper Le Canard enchaîné. No progress was made.

Ariel Sharon and the Likud party were in power during these January to April 2004 events.

In 2004, in a prelude to Israel's unilateral disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces carried out a number of military attacks targeted at militants in Gazan cities and her eight refugee camps with the purpose of drawing out and killing Hamas members. Hamas members anticipated this and made themselves difficult to find.

On September 12, 2005 the IDF withdrew from the Gaza Strip and declared an end to Israeli military rule within Gaza. The IDF maintained complete control of the airspace over Gaza and her sea coast. Israel also destroyed Gaza's only airport, making air travel impossible. The Palestinian Authority had internal control of the entire Gaza Strip immediately following Israel's withdrawal. To counter those critical of this withdrawal, Prime Minister Sharon stepped up the encouragement of Israeli settlements in the West Bank at the same time as the disengagement from Gaza. Netanyahu was a major critic of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Hamas boycotted the 2005 election for President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in which Mahmoud Abbas was elected to replace Yassar Arafat. Mahmoud Abbas remains the President of the PA today. Hamas did participate in the 2005 municipal elections for the Palestinian Authority and took control of two cities in Gaza and one in the West Bank. In the January 2006 PA legislative elections, Hamas gained the majority (42.9%) of the votes, defeating the Fatah Party which had ruled previously.

The United States, during the George W. Bush administration, cut off recognition and funding of the PA after Hamas won the legislative election stating the PA must renounce all violence and accept Israel's right to exist. The European Union also cut off funding to the PA. The US also sanctioned the PA's banks which impeded the Arab League's (Saudi Arabia & Qatar) transfer of funds to the PA. Israel cut off transfer of taxes it had collected from Palestinians to the PA. These actions severely hindered the ability of the PA to pay its civil servants, including internal security and police personnel. Russia opposed all of these measures with Putin stating that Hamas had been democratically elected and cutting off funds was a mistake.

In May 2006, following a very critical World Bank report outlining the very severe financial and humanitarian conditions of the Palestinians, the US, EU, UN and Russia agreed to allow the transfer of funds to Palestinians but bypassed the PA in doing so.

In June 2006 an explosion on a Gaza Beach, which occurred during an Israeli artillery operation, killed 8 Palestinian civilians. Israel denied responsibility but no other cause was identified and Hamas withdrew from its 16 month cease fire and began to launch rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel. On June 29, 2006 Palestinian forces entered Israel and killed two Israeli soldiers and

captured one. In response Israel captured 64 Hamas officials, crippling the Palestinian legislature and cabinet.

Friction and fighting between Hamas and Fatah continued after the January 2006 legislative victory of Hamas over Fatah. In June 2007 fighting intensified and Hamas took over total internal control of Gaza, ousting all Fatah officials. PA President Mahmoud then declared the Hamas led PA government dismissed and declared the Hamas militia outlawed. At least 600 Palestinians died in fighting between Fatah and Hamas. Mahmoud Abbas and the PA have not held any power in Gaza since 2007. The PA still holds partial civilian control in Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank.

On June 17, 2008, Egyptian mediators announced an informal truce between Hamas and Israel. On November 4, 2008, Israeli Forces violated the truce with a raid inside the Gaza Strip, killing six Hamas members. Israel stated the raid's purpose was to stop construction of a tunnel under the border. Hamas launched about 190 rockets into Israel in November following the Israeli raid. In December 2008, Hamas launched between 50 and 70 rockets or mortars into Israel but no Israelis were injured in these attacks. On December 21, 2008 Hamas stated it wanted to renew the truce and to reopen borders between Gaza and Israel.

On December 27 and 28 2008, Israel launched the *Operation Cast Lead* attack on Gaza which killed 200 and injured 600 in its first two days. A total of between 1200 and 1400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed during this operation. Hamas police, security forces and many civilians were killed in the attack. The Gaza Police Chief, the head of general security in Gaza, the Interior Minister of Gaza and other officials were killed in the attack. The Israeli rationale announced for the attack was the destruction of militant training camps, weapons warehouses and rocket-manufacturing facilities. Israel stated they sent out cell phone warnings to targeted neighborhoods but Palestinians stated these warnings were sent to every neighborhood so there was nowhere to flee. Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire on January 17, 2009 and Hamas announced a one-week ceasefire the next day to allow Israeli forces to leave Gaza. Israel reduced Palestinian access to the Mediterranean Sea to a 3 mile limit following this war which denied most fishing rights to 3000 Palestinian fishermen. A limit of 20 miles had been established during the 1995 Oslo Accords but this had been reduced twice before by Israel.

The *UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict* concluded this Israeli operation was “a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population, radically diminish its local economic capacity both to work and to provide for itself, and to force upon it an ever increasing sense of dependency and vulnerability”.

Hamas leader Khaled Mashall, in an May 28, 2010 interview with Charlie Rose (PBS TV Journalist), stated his view that the establishment of a Palestinian State within the pre 1967 War boundaries (Gaza Strip and West Bank) would be an acceptable solution to the conflict within Palestine.

In 2011, influenced by the Arab Spring movement, The Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas declared his willingness to Travel from the West Bank to Gaza to sign an agreement to reconcile Hamas and Fatah. Israeli PM Netanyahu strongly opposed this

reconciliation of Palestinian factions and declared these were really calls for Israel's destruction. No reconciliation of Hamas and Fatah happened.

After a period of relatively minor tit for tat conflicts between Israeli and Palestinian forces, Israel launched *Operation Pillar of Defense* in the Gaza Strip on November 14, 2012. Israel stated this was in response to an increase in rockets fired into Israel and an attack on an IDF jeep. A ceasefire agreement was brokered by Egypt a week later. This ceasefire was frequently violated by both sides with Hamas firing into Israel and the IDF firing and making incursions into Gaza and attacking the Gaza fishing fleet.

From December 2012 to late June 2014 Hamas fired no rockets into Israel and tried to police any other groups doing so. Netanyahu stated in March 2014 that the rocket fire over the past year was "the lowest in a decade".

On April 23, 2014 Hamas agreed to a reconciliation to form a unity Palestinian government with Fatah. This unity government was sworn in on June 2, 2014. Israel under Netanyahu took Palestinian unity as a threat and announced it would not negotiate peace with the unity government and would seek punitive actions. These included targeted airstrikes against Hamas leaders and the addition of 1500 new settlement units (families) in the West Bank.

In June 2014 Palestinian militants kidnapped and killed three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank. It is not known if this was an action authorized by Hamas leaders or by rival militants or disaffected lower level Hamas members. Israel reacted by arresting 350 West Bank Palestinians, including some Hamas militants. Hamas in Gaza then fired rockets into Israel which prompted Israeli airstrikes. On 7 July 2014, seven Hamas militants died in a tunnel explosion following an Israeli airstrike. Israel stated this explosion was caused by an accidental explosion caused by Hamas rather than by their airstrike. Hamas fired about 40 rockets into Israel following this explosion and Israel launched the 2014 Gaza War (termed Operation Protective Edge) on 8 July 2014. This attack began with massive airstrikes and a ground invasion began on July 17 with the aim of destroying Gaza's tunnel system. The ground invasion ended on August 5 and an open-ended ceasefire was announced on August 26. The IDF stated over 4500 projectiles were fired into Israel during this war and two-thirds of Hamas' 10,000 rocket arsenal was fired or destroyed. About 2200 Gaza residents were killed, including numerous children. The UN estimated 65 % of the casualties were civilian while Israel stated their estimate was 36%. 67 Israeli soldiers and 5 Israel civilians were killed. The UN estimated between 7000 and 10,000 family homes were intentionally razed, 10,000 more severely damaged by aerial bombing and 89,000 damaged.

On October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorists invaded Israel and killed 1400 Israeli citizens including some soldiers but mostly civilian men, women and children. Over 240 Israelis were taken hostage. Israel has responded with ongoing massive airstrikes and a ground invasion, killing over 11,000 Hamas militants and civilians, including many civilian men, women and children. Casualty numbers are reported by those suffering losses.

The PA has told the Biden Administration that it is open to a governance role in post-war Gaza if the United States commits to a full-fledged two-state solution to end this war. This Palestinian State would include the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel has stated Israel will maintain security control over Gaza for an “indefinite period”. Right wing members of Netanyahu coalition have proposed moving all of the Palestinians in Gaza to the Sinai Desert in Egypt. Israel does not currently recognize a Palestinian State.

The following Arab Nations, along with the Palestinian Authority and PLO, currently formally recognize the state of Israel:

- Egypt
- Jordan
- Bahrain
- United Arab Emirates
- Sudan
- Morocco
- Bhutan

The following Middle Eastern Nations do not formally recognize Israel:

- Saudi Arabia
- Kuwait
- Qatar
- Oman
- Iran
- Iraq
- Lebanon
- Libya
- Yemen