

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Israel-Hamas War

The Gaza Strip and Its History, Explained

Source: Timothy Bella, *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2023

Israel is at war with the Palestinian militant group Hamas, and hundreds of civilians have been killed in the days since the group's surprise attack on Saturday signaled a major escalation of the conflict between the two sides and engulfed the region in chaos.

As images and videos of the devastation come out of Israel, many people are also watching the violence unfolding in the Gaza Strip, one of the world's most densely populated and impoverished territories. Israel ordered a siege of the Gaza Strip on Monday, with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant saying there would be "no electricity, no food, no fuel" for the more than 2 million Palestinians living there.

Here's what to know about the Gaza Strip and its history up to the current war between Israel and Hamas:

What is the Gaza Strip?

The Gaza Strip is a small area bordering Israel and Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea. It is one of two Palestinian territories. The other is the Israeli-occupied West Bank, which includes East Jerusalem and borders Jordan and the Dead Sea.

Gaza was part of the Ottoman Empire before being occupied by Britain from 1918 to 1948 and Egypt from 1948 to 1967. Nearly 20 years after Israel declared its statehood in 1948, the country captured the Gaza Strip from Egypt and the West Bank from Jordan in the 1967 war. Palestinians claim these territories and see them as part of a future state.

Israel controlled Gaza for 38 years, building 21 Jewish settlements in that period. Tension and violence persisted for years, including the first intifada, a stretch of nearly four years of protests, riots and bombings in the Palestinian territories and Israel over Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank. The bloodshed led Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to say in 1992, "I would like Gaza to sink into the sea, but that won't happen, and a solution must be found."

In 1993, the agreements known as the Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization aimed at fulfilling the "right of the Palestinian people to self-determination." In 1994, Palestinians took control as the governmental authority of Gaza. Part of the larger push for peace involved Israel following through on a unilateral disengagement plan proposed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2003 that would dismantle the Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip.

In 2005, Israel gave up control of the Gaza Strip under domestic and international pressure, withdrawing 9,000 Israeli settlers and military forces from Gaza.

Who governs the Gaza Strip? When did Hamas take control?

Hamas, one of the two major political parties in the Palestinian territories, clashed with Palestinian leaders as the Oslo accords were being brokered in the '90s. Hamas came to power in Gaza after winning a 2006 election. No elections have been held since then.

Even though Israel gave up control of the Gaza Strip, it has kept a land, air and sea blockade on Gaza since 2007. The result has been damaging for Palestinians, with the United Nations saying in 2009 that the blockade from both Israel and Egypt had been "devastating livelihoods" and causing gradual "de-development" in Gaza. Israel has argued that the blockade has served to keep control of Gaza's border, prevent Hamas from getting stronger and protect Israelis from Palestinian rocket attacks.

The blockade has faced criticism by human rights groups and the United Nations, which consider Gaza to still be under Israeli military occupation. The United Nations estimates that the blockade has cost the Palestinian territory's economy nearly \$17 billion over roughly a decade.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has gone one step further in recent years to say the blockade violates the Geneva Conventions — a claim that Israeli officials have rejected.

What does a siege of the Gaza Strip mean?

Gallant, Israel's defense minister, told the Southern Command on Monday that there would be a "full siege" of the Gaza Strip in the early stages of the war — cutting off all electricity, food and fuel.

The densely populated Gaza Strip relies heavily on Israel for water, electricity and food — giving the more severe blockade a far-reaching impact. The primary imports for Gaza are food, consumer goods and construction materials from Israel and Egypt, its two main trade partners. Most of Gaza's fresh fruit and vegetables come from the farms along its border with Israel. Gaza also gets most of its electricity from Israel, though the strip does have one old power plant. The enclave has groundwater sources, but many wells have been ruined by pollution and saltwater. More than 90 percent of the water in Gaza's sole aquifer is no longer potable.

U.N. Secretary General António Guterres said Monday that he was "deeply distressed" at Israel's plan to "initiate a complete siege of the Gaza Strip." Palestinian civilians are "trapped and helpless," Guterres told reporters in New York, calling on Israel to allow continued access for relief officials and humanitarian supplies.

How many people live on the Gaza Strip? Who lives there?

More than 2 million people live in Gaza, making it "one of the world's most densely populated territories," according to Gisha, an Israeli nongovernmental organization.

At roughly 140 square miles, the Gaza Strip is just over twice the size of Washington, D.C., but has triple the population. Gaza is smaller than the West Bank, which is more than 2,200 square miles.

The population in Gaza is extraordinarily young. UNICEF has estimated that there are roughly 1 million children living in the Gaza Strip, meaning that almost half the people in Gaza are children. Almost 40 percent of the population is under the age of 15, according to the CIA.

More than 1.4 million of the residents of the Gaza Strip are Palestinian refugees, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

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The territory has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, World Bank statistics show, and the United Nations estimates that roughly 80 percent of the population relies on international aid to survive and access basic services.

"For at least the last decade and a half, the socioeconomic situation in Gaza has been in steady decline," the UNRWA website says. "There are now very few options left for the people of Gaza, who have been living under collective punishment as a result of the blockade that continues to have a devastating effect as people's movement to and from the Gaza Strip, as well as access to markets, remains severely restricted."

What makes the Gaza Strip vulnerable?

Since Gaza City is more densely populated than Tel Aviv and other major cities around the world such as London and Shanghai, targeted counterstrikes like the ones Israel has launched in recent days have a high likelihood of hitting civilians. Previous conflicts have killed hundreds of children. After at least 1,200 Israelis were killed in Hamas's surprise attacks over the weekend, according to Israeli media, a swelling counterattack by Israeli forces in Gaza has also caused 1,100 civilian casualties, according to the local Health Ministry, including scores of children.

Living conditions in Gaza are bleak: 95 percent of the population does not have access to clean water, according to UNRWA, and electricity shortages periodically bring life to a halt.

On Monday, Guterres said about 137,000 displaced people were sheltering in schools and facilities operated by UNRWA, the U.N. relief agency for Palestinians.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about Israel's war with Hamas? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.