

Gaza's turbulent century: From British rule to the rise of Hamas and its Oct 7 massacre in southern Israel

In each of the last three articles on the history of Gaza, we have covered hundreds or even thousands of years. Now, we will zoom in and devote an entire article to the last century, from the British conquest in World War I to the day of the Hamas attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

As a town close to the Egyptian border, Gaza was in immediate danger from British-controlled Egypt as soon as the Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of the Central Powers in October 1914. In 1916, the Ottomans expelled all the Jews from Gaza, suspecting them of being British sympathizers. This widened to additional parts of Palestine later and in the spring of 1917, they even expelled the Jews from Tel Aviv.

In March 1917, the first battle of Gaza took place. Both sides considered themselves defeated, but the British retreated earlier. After the battle, an eyewitness rode into Gaza and described what he saw: "Everywhere, a deadly silence. In the middle of the streets ... hundreds of bodies burned and broken remnants of people and animals. On blackened house walls ... big purple stains, like red flowers – flowers of blood showing where injured and dying people had rested their chest or forehead before their last breath" (From the memoirs of Rafael de Nogales, Venezuelan volunteer in the Ottoman army).

The British failed again at the second battle of Gaza in April 1917, but they gathered intelligence – partly with the help of the Jewish Zionist espionage network, Nili – and came back for a third battle. On Oct. 31, 1917, they captured Beersheva, and

then returned to Gaza, this time from two directions, on Nov. 1. After a week of battles, Gaza was in British hands and the road to Jerusalem was open. Less than two months later, General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem.

With Gaza under British rule, some of the Jews who were expelled in 1916 returned to their home city, but the community remained small – about 50 families. Witnesses from the era claim that they had excellent relations with their Arab neighbors. During the remainder of the British era, Gaza actually flourished and expanded. New neighborhoods were built, and by the end of the mandate, Gaza was home to approximately 30,000 inhabitants.

The situation of the Jews worsened in 1929 when riots broke out and the Arabs, fueled by pan-Arab nationalism and anti-Zionism, attacked their Jewish neighbors who had lived side by side with them for centuries. The fact that most of these Jews were Arabic-speakers and not necessarily Zionist didn't matter. In Gaza, the death toll wasn't as high as in Hebron or Safed, but it was bad enough. Unlike other places, the Jewish community of Gaza was small, did not have a defensive infrastructure, and was more vulnerable. The Jews fled from Gaza, never to return. The 1929 Arab riot marked the end of Jewish presence in the city to this day, and the Jewish neighborhood was destroyed.

As World War II came around, Palestine became an important British stronghold, especially when Rommel's German forces advanced through North Africa, and Syria fell under the rule of the French Vichy regime. There is rare footage of Australian ANZAC soldiers enjoying surfing on Gaza's beach during their deployment in 1941.

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Then the war was over in 1945 and once the British had lost

India, they had no interest in holding on to the Middle East. They wanted to leave. But how? In Iraq and Jordan, they set up local governments. Egypt was already a protectorate with very loose British oversight, but this never happened in the area referred to as Palestine. The two competing nationalist movements were too irreconcilable, especially with the refugee crisis from the Holocaust in Europe. The Jews insisted on a Jewish state and free Jewish immigration, while the Arabs wanted closed borders. The British asked the newly established United Nations to solve it, and the UN voted through a partition plan in 1947, roughly based on population. However, since no one wanted to implement it, the British just gave up and left in May 1948, allowing the region to spin into a civil war.

The moment the British left, Israel declared independence and was immediately attacked from all sides – including the Egyptian side, where Gaza is located. Egyptian forces quickly conquered Gaza and held it during most of Israel's Independence War – and Gaza was soon flooded with Palestinian refugees.

About 750,000 Arabs fled or were expelled from areas that became Israel during the war, which was later nicknamed "the Naqba" [the catastrophe] among Arabs, and out of these, 200,000 refugees came to the area around Gaza. They stopped in Gaza because it was the last habitable area before the desert, and they wanted to stay close, assuming they would soon be able to go back home once Israel had been crushed.

But that never happened.

The Naqba refugees came to many other areas, such as Jordan, Judea and Samaria (West Bank), Syria, and Lebanon. But the Gaza Strip, was the only place where these refugees became a majority, overwhelming the locals. Still today, at least 60% of the Gaza Strip's population are descendants of those refugees.

The areas that Egypt and Jordan conquered remained under the control of Egypt and Jordan. This is when the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were created. There was a Jewish town on what became the Gaza Strip – Kfar Darom – but it was evacuated.

In the negotiations with Egypt in 1949, then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion offered that half of these refugees – approximately 100,000 – would be allowed to return to where they had fled from, provided that Israel could annex the Gaza Strip and make it a part of Israel. Egypt refused. But Egypt also refused to give the Palestinians any kind of Egyptian citizenship or open the border into Egypt. Instead, the Gaza Strip was closed off, and seen by the Egyptians as part of a future Palestine. The refugees were to be kept in permanent refugee status as a pawn in pressuring Israel to stop existing. This is about the time the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was established.

UNRWA provided food, education, and basic humanitarian needs for the refugees. It was supposed to be a temporary solution for a few years, “until the Palestinian issue is resolved” – which is code for until “Israel stops existing.” Since Israel continued in its stubborn insistence to exist, this temporary solution became permanent, and Palestinian refugees became the only refugees in the world whose status became hereditary.

You might think this is when the Gaza Strip became an “open-air prison,” but that’s not true. The border was completely open. No fence and no checkpoints. Many Palestinians from the Gaza Strip sneaked back into Israel easily. Some just went back to where they fled from to pick up stuff they left behind. Others attacked and killed Jews. This became known as the fedayeen attacks, which, with time, became more organized. This also caused Israeli counterattacks, led by a young officer named Ariel Sharon, whose life became intimately intertwined with Gaza. These were the highly controversial “retaliation operations.”

Originally, Egypt had seen these fedayeen as a nuisance and was afraid they'd spark a new war with Israel, but with time, the Egyptian army became more involved in training them. These fedayeen units in Gaza were the cradle of Palestinian nationalism. This is where many key Fatah and PLO people started their careers.

In 1956, as part of the Sinai campaign, Israel conquered not only the Gaza Strip but the entire Sinai Peninsula. Over 1,000 Gazans were killed as the IDF troops went through the city searching for members of the fedayeen. Ben-Gurion assumed they'd be forced to return Sinai eventually, but hoped to keep Gaza, so he ordered the building of a settlement. It was the first-ever Israeli settlement, called Nachal Rafiach, close to Rafah. It existed for two months.

When the negotiations ended and Israel returned Sinai and Gaza to Egypt, the agreement included the end of the fedayeen attacks. Egypt jailed most of them. Whoever was able to, fled from Egypt and met up in Kuwait, where they organized themselves into the Fatah party, under a young charismatic Egyptian officer called Yasser Arafat. In 1964, Fatah, along with several other Palestinian organizations, united under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) while based in Jordan.

In 1967, Egypt prepared for a full war with Israel, planning to erase it. But Israel, instead, won a crushing victory in the Six-Day War and conquered the entire Sinai Peninsula. Gaza sort of just automatically became a part of that. This was the end of the last Egyptian rule over Gaza.

As Gaza became a part of Israel, it became a popular place for Israelis to visit to see the markets, go to the beach, or get

their car fixed in a cheap garage. Israeli schools arranged field trips to Gaza, and Israeli archaeologists excavated the ancient synagogue. Israelis walked around freely and spoke Hebrew without fear.

For the first time since 1948, Gazans were now free to go visit the West Bank or Israel whenever they wanted, and Israel had a deliberate policy of encouraging Gazans to move to Jordan or other neighboring countries. Many did go to Jordan... where Fatah and the PLO easily recruited them. In 1970, Jordan kicked them out, so they moved to southern Lebanon. From here, it was easier to send "ships to Gaza" with weapons and explosives. The Palestinian terrorists in Gaza grew stronger.

After a brutal terror attack in 1971, Israel began with harsher counter-terror measures spearheaded by the general – Ariel Sharon. Again. And it was brutal. Sharon had a policy of collective punishment. If a grenade was thrown from a street, that street was destroyed. If terrorists were hiding in a grove, that grove was burned down. Thousands of terrorists were arrested, and about 38,000 Gazans were expelled. This is also the era in which the Israeli settlements in Gaza and Sinai were built. Kfar Darom, which had been evacuated in 1948, was re-established, but also Netzarim, Gush Katif, Yamit, and many other settlements were created.

These measures effectively subdued the Gaza Strip. So much so, that when the Yom Kippur War broke out in 1973, Gaza stayed silent. No one dared to rise up against Israel again. Things seemed to quieten down and the Gaza Strip once again became a safe place for Israelis to visit to see a cheaper dentist, or eat knafe at the shuk. Israel began examining the possibility of annexing Gaza and giving the Gazans Israeli citizenship. The borders were opened up more, and Gazans were allowed to enter Israel for work. Many learned Hebrew.

The PLO in Lebanon condemned this normalization and demanded "resistance." Gazans who worked in Israel were marked as

“collaborators.” Grenades were thrown at the buses that were bringing the workers to Israel. Regular Gazans started to fear working with Israel, as it made them targets of the PLO. When Israel tried to arrange local municipal elections, anyone who dared to take part was murdered.

In 1973, a young Sheikh named Ahmed Yassin established a Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, “Mujama’ al-Islami,” and openly defied the secular PLO by working with Israel. At this point, Israel was practically begging for any local Gazan willing to work with them – and so the local IDF commander struck up a relationship with Yassin, who presented the Muslim Brotherhood as a religious, non-political and non-nationalist movement.

Yassin established communities around the mosques, sports training, extra-curricular activities, kindergartens, professional schools, humanitarian activities, and community-focused work. It became a local force, not depending on the PLO, and they received full support from Israel.

And so, for 15 years, until the First Intifada, Ahmed Yassin slowly and silently built the foundations of what would become the Hamas terrorist organization, right under the nose of Israel. It became a large infrastructure of religious, community-based organizations in which the seeds of extremism were sown, ready to erupt at any moment. In 1967, there were around 70 mosques in Gaza. By 1982, there were over 175. All were built with the help of Israel. In 1978, Israel allowed the first Islamic University in Gaza – a university which later became well known as a breeding ground for Hamas leaders and terrorists.

This is what people mean when they say that “Israel created Hamas.”

In the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979, Sinai was returned, but not Gaza. The PLO protested and decried Egypt as

collaborators. The Mujama said nothing, pretending to be non-political. It's plausible that Yassin preferred continued Israeli rule, knowing it would be a lot harder to fool the secular Egyptians who had had experience with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the 1980s, before the First Intifada broke out in 1987, the civil war between the secular nationalist PLO and the Islamist Mujama deepened. Mujama activists vandalized "Western" places like movie theaters, casinos, and even the offices of the Red Crescent (emergency services). In 1985, Yassin set up an internal security service called Majd and appointed a young man named Yahya Sinwar as its deputy. Their mission was to cleanse Gaza and catch drug dealers, prostitutes and collaborators. In reality, they mostly targeted PLO militants and any local Gazans who were suspected of collaborating with Israel. This is when Sinwar earned the nickname, "the butcher of Khan Yunis" – because of all the Palestinians he murdered with his bare hands. He was later jailed in 1989, during the First Intifada and was only released in 2011.

Throughout the 1980s, Israel sat back and didn't intervene. Anything that weakened the PLO was good news. But then the First Intifada broke out in 1987, ignited in Gaza, and spread to the West Bank. This was what Sheikh Yassin had waited for. Now he established Hamas and began using the network of the Mujama to execute terror attacks inside Israel. It soon became clear to Israel that the Islamists were a bigger problem than the PLO. Israel closed the borders to Gaza permanently and set up a stronger fence. Israel started to see Gaza as a hot potato you would gladly give to anyone who wants it.

Even the PLO.

The PLO had been weakened after the Lebanon War in 1982 when they were forced to relocate to Tunisia, and in 1991, they lost the backing of the Soviet Union. Now they were offered autonomy in Gaza and Jericho as the first stage of the Oslo

Accords, provided they could keep Gaza calm – and suppress Hamas. It was an offer they couldn't refuse. As part of the deal, some Fatah leaders in Israeli prisons were released, and they arrived in Gaza to set up a new police force, awaiting Arafat's arrival. One of these Fatah leaders was Muhammad Dahlan, and he began building a strong anti-Hamas force in Gaza. From 1994 until 2007, the Gaza Strip was occasionally called Dahlanistan. Backed by Israel and armed by the IDF, the PLO gained the upper hand against Hamas in Gaza.

In July 1994, Arafat arrived in Gaza, under much celebration, in a car entourage from Egypt. He entered Gaza on foot as the "liberator who ended the occupation," shook the hand of the Israeli IDF commander who transferred the city to him, and then bowed down to kiss the ground. Not a very smart move – because what everyone saw on their TV screens was Arafat bowing down before an Israeli commander in uniform... and Hamas used it to accuse the PLO of being Israel's collaborators.

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Gaza went through unprecedented growth. Many countries threw money at them. They built hotels, launched companies, established an electricity company, and built an airport. Israeli businessmen established offices in Gaza, and the city grew. The PLO brought with them a new, rich upper class. Arafat and his people lived in luxury while most regular Gazans continued to live in poverty. Hamas accused the Palestinian Authority of being a new means for Israel to exert control over the Palestinian people. From their perspective, Arafat came in with his people from Tunis and merely exchanged the Israeli occupation with a new form of corrupt oppression.

Hamas executed more suicide attacks during the 1990s to thwart the Oslo Accords. A few cases of Israeli settler extremism came to the surface at this time, most notably the murder of

former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Israel offered a final and extremely generous peace offer in the summer of 2000, which would establish an independent Palestine. Arafat refused and launched a Second Intifada. Maybe this was because of Hamas' popularity. Without a recent armed struggle against Israel, the PLO would lose its credibility with the Palestinian people and only be seen as collaborators.

In September 2000, it happened. Hundreds of Palestinian (PA) police forces turned against their former IDF colleagues with live fire at the Netzarim Crossing. Once again, an intifada started in Gaza, and dragged the West Bank with it. Hamas began building rockets, which they fired at the Israeli settlements. Suicide bombings increased all over Israel, with hundreds dead.

And then Ariel Sharon came back. This time as prime minister. But most of his harsh measures against terrorism were focused on the West Bank – not Gaza. Regarding Gaza, he reached the conclusion that there was no one – not PLO and not Hamas – that one could talk to on the other side. So he decided to do as the British had done in 1948. Just leave. But first, he killed Sheikh Yassin in an airstrike in 2004.

In the year 2005, the disengagement came about. Israel evacuated all its settlements by force, uprooted the Jewish cemeteries, and evacuated all military bases. The Gaza Strip became an isolated enclave of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hamas claimed, "Our suicide attacks chased Israel out from Gaza," which gave them a huge popularity boost. The United States wanted to use this momentum to force an election, and they pushed for allowing Hamas to take part in it. Big mistake. The elections were held in 2006, and Hamas won most seats in the parliament. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh became the first elected Palestinian prime minister, serving under PA President Abbas. But this elected government did not hold up for long.

In 2007, Hamas violently overthrew the PLO in Gaza, killing or throwing them off rooftops, and expelled all those associated with Fatah from Gaza permanently. From this moment, in 2007, Gaza became a tiny isolated dictatorship under Hamas. Mahmoud Abbas subsequently expelled all Hamas members from his PLO government in Ramallah. The elections of 2006 were practically annulled.

Israel stood on the sidelines and did nothing in this civil war, perhaps worrying that whomever they “helped” would lose Palestinian legitimacy. Maybe because Sharon was no longer alive. But once it was over, Israel started treating Gaza like a North Korea: closed all borders, allowed minimal humanitarian aid in and established a blockade on the sea. Hoping that the worse life the Gazans have, the bigger the chance they will revolt against Hamas. But it had the opposite effect. With bad humanitarian conditions, Hamas, funded by Qatar and Iran, became the biggest employer and the only one that could provide people with a livelihood.

As Gaza morphed into a totalitarian Hamasstan, they began shooting at Israeli cities and kidnapping Israelis whenever they could. As time went on, they acquired more and more sophisticated weapons and started shooting at Beersheva, Ashkelon, Tel Aviv, and even Jerusalem.

Israel tried to contain Hamas but hesitated to go in and reoccupy Gaza as the death toll would be too high. The policy instead became total separation and a strong security barrier. A system of sticks and carrots was put in place to keep Hamas in check, going in with aerial bombings or even ground forces now and then to “mow the grass” of terror infrastructure, but still allowing Gazans to enter Israel for work as long as it had been quiet. Most Israelis believed that, in this way, Hamas would keep quiet and prefer to develop Gaza, invest in their own people, and not be interested in a conflict. It was the reasonable thing to do.

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Hamas lulled Israel into thinking this policy was working and that they were reasonable.

They weren't.

Hamas has always been led by religious fundamentalists. On Oct. 7, 2023, the devastating consequences of having ignored them for so long became unmistakably clear.. Gaza was like a car with a "check engine" light on since 2007 – and Israel refused to check the engine, hoping it would all be fine. Until it exploded.

For now, no one knows what the future of Gaza holds. But one thing is clear: Israel's policy to allow Hamas to rule Gaza has come to a definite end.

The fertile soil of Gaza and its location between the sea and the desert have always made it an attractive place for commerce and agriculture. But this location has also made it an object for wars and conquests, and it has belonged to various different nations and empires throughout its long history. Hamas is the latest of a long list of rulers, and they have mismanaged Gaza so that it has become an isolated and besieged city. The fertile soil, once amazing for growing crops, is now used for digging terror tunnels and hiding weapons.

The future of Gaza is still shrouded in mystery. Will the PLO return? Will Dahlan come back from his exile in the UAE? Will the US own it? Will Israel and the U.S. follow the example of Alexander the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte, who both emptied Gaza of its inhabitants? Will the status of the refugees be settled once and for all, or will they keep being permanent refugees? Is the future of Gaza secular or Islamic? Will Israelis be able to visit Gaza again like they did in the 70s? Will Israel try to rebuild Kfar Darom for a third time? Will

there ever be Jews living permanently in Gaza City again, or was 1929 the last time ever?

Socrates, who was the teacher of Plato, who was the teacher of Aristotle, who was the teacher of Alexander the Great, who once destroyed Gaza, answered all these questions in the best way: The only thing we know is that we know nothing.

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