

FAQ: Gaza and Israel

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Where is Gaza?

Gaza is located on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is a narrow piece of land measuring some 141 square miles. Gaza is 25 miles long and 3.5-7.5 miles wide. It is bordered on the north and east by Israel; the south by Egypt; and the west by the Mediterranean Sea. (See Map #1)

How many people live in Gaza?

Around 2.3 million Palestinians live in Gaza, about half of whom are under the age of 18. With the exception of an estimated 1,000 Christians, all Gazans are Muslims.

What are Gaza's borders? Where are the border crossings?

Gaza borders Israel and Egypt. The **Erez Crossing** is used for people, including Gazans with permits to work in Israel, and goods coming from Israel into Gaza. The **Kerem Shalom Crossing**, which also connects Israel and Gaza, is used for goods bound for Gaza from Egypt. The **Rafah Crossing** connects Egypt and Gaza and is used only for cargo. (See Map #2)

What separates Gaza from Israel?

The Gaza-Israel barrier, sometimes called the Iron Wall, is a high-tech security fence along Gaza and Israel's shared border. The Erez Crossing and the Kerem Shalom Crossing serve as the entry points along the barrier. This barrier was infiltrated at multiple points by Hamas terrorists on October 7, 2023.

Where is the Gaza Envelope?

The Gaza Envelope (הַצֵּף הַגָּזָה, *Otef Aza* in Hebrew), or Gaza border zone, refers to the **few dozen Israeli communities that are located within 4.5 miles from the Gaza Strip**. Sderot, a city with over 30,000 residents, is the largest community in Otef Aza. The rest of the area is dotted with smaller communities, most of which have hundreds of residents. Due to the Gaza Envelope's proximity to Gaza, these communities are most susceptible to rocket attacks by Hamas. (See Map #3)

How many people live in the Gaza Envelope?

Approximately 70,000 Israelis live in the Gaza Envelope.

TERMINOLOGY

How do people refer to Gaza?

Gaza is often referred to as the **Gaza Strip** due to its long and narrow shape. In Hebrew, Gaza is known as **Aza** (אזא). In Arabic, Gaza is known as Ghaza (غزة). Critics of Israel have called Gaza the largest “**open-air prison**” in the world due to Israel’s (and Egypt’s) continued control, or blockade, of airspace as well as land and maritime access.

Is Gaza the same territory as the West Bank?

No. While the two share much history and both are populated by millions of Palestinians, they are separated by the State of Israel and have their own political representation, internal authorities, and relationships with Israel and the world. (See Map #1)

Is the “Gaza Envelope” the same as the Gaza Strip?

No. The **Gaza Envelope** refers to the Israeli towns and communities that border the Hamas-run Gaza Strip. On October 7th, 2023, 22 of these communities were infiltrated by Hamas terrorists, including the kibbutzim of **Kfar Aza** and **Be’eri**. (See Map #3)

POLITICAL HISTORY

Who runs Gaza?

Hamas, which Israel, the US, and the EU have classified as a terror organization, has ruled Gaza since 2007. Hamas was formed in late 1987 during the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising). Hamas was founded as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—an Islamist political organization founded in Egypt (now illegal there) that combines political violence with the provision of social services. The group’s charter calls for establishing an Islamic Palestinian state, as well as the destruction of Israel and the killing of Jews. Hamas’ military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, has conducted many violent attacks against Israel since the 1990s. These attacks have included suicide bombings against Israeli civilian targets; hostage taking; and rocket, missile, and mortar attacks. In Gaza, Hamas is responsible for providing social services, though the group has prioritized funding its military activity.

Do Israelis live in Gaza? What was the Israeli “Disengagement Plan”?

No Israelis currently live in Gaza. Here’s why: Israel conquered the Gaza Strip from Egypt in the 1967 Six Day War, maintaining direct control until 2005. During those years, Israel established multiple communities of Israeli Jews in Gaza, usually referred to as settlements. In 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon oversaw the withdrawal of all Israeli citizens and soldiers from the Gaza Strip, a process known as the **Disengagement from Gaza** (or the Disengagement Plan, or Unilateral Withdrawal from Gaza). All 21 Jewish settlements located in Gaza (totaling over 8,000 residents) were evacuated. The Israeli public was deeply divided by the Disengagement Plan before, during, and after its completion. Some believe that

withdrawal from Gaza was an important step towards diminishing Israeli control over Palestinians and thus towards peace. Others believed that the disengagement severely threatened Israeli security and was a betrayal of Jewish religious values. To this day, many Israelis view the disengagement as one of the biggest mistakes in Israeli history, largely because Hamas assumed control of Gaza. (See Map #4)

How did Hamas come to control Gaza?

In early 2006, after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, Hamas defeated the more moderate Fatah party (led by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas) in Palestinian legislative elections. As per the Oslo Accords, which set the framework for Palestinian legislative elections, eligible parties were required to renounce violence and terrorism, recognize Israel, and accept the Accords. Despite the fact that Hamas refused to meet these requirements, the party ran in the elections over Israeli objections, prompting the U.S. and EU to place sanctions on the new government. In mid-2007, Hamas violently removed all Palestinian Authority (PA) officials from the Gaza Strip, effectively solidifying their control over Gaza.

What security concerns does Israel face from the Gaza Strip?

Both the **Hamas** and **Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)** terrorist groups, Hamas being the larger and better-funded of the two, regularly fire rockets and missiles at Israel. In October 2023, both groups infiltrated Israeli communities, murdering civilians and taking hostages into Gaza.

Have Israel and Hamas been at war before October 2023?

Yes. There have been several military engagements between Israel and Hamas, including the 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead and the 2014 Operation Protective Edge. Before these conflicts, Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was captured by Hamas in 2005 and held captive until his release in 2011 as part of a prisoner exchange. A major factor in all of these events was Hamas' underground tunnel system used for smuggling arms and launching attacks. Operation Swords of Iron (Israel's name for the war beginning in October 2023) was unique in that it was instigated by more than 1,500 Hamas terrorists infiltrating Israeli territory, killing some 1,300 Israelis, and taking more than 200 Israelis and foreign nationals hostage. Previous military operations were largely defined by Hamas rocket and missile fire towards Israel and Israeli aerial bombardment and occasional ground invasions into Gaza in response.

MAPS

Map #1: Israel, Gaza, and their Neighbors



Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

Map #3: Gaza Envelope, including many of the communities in the area



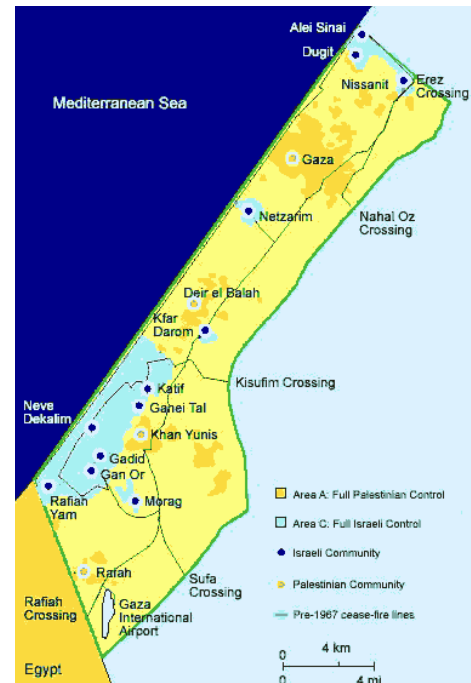
Source: Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis

Map #2: Gaza Border Crossings



Source: UN Ocha, 2023

Map #4: Israeli Settlements in Gaza until 2005



Source: Jewish Virtual Library