

## A LONG LOOK AT A SMALL PLACE

# GAZA

## A HISTORY

**T**oday, the Palestinian enclave of Gaza is known as a flashpoint for conflict that far eclipses its minuscule size. At 140 square miles—sharing an eight-mile frontier with Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula and hugging Israel’s border for nearly 32 miles—the sliver of desert is only twice the area of the District of Columbia. Yet modern Gaza’s reputation for turmoil is not new: Throughout its history, this Middle Eastern territory has rarely been at peace.

Known as “the outpost of Africa, the door to Asia,” in ancient times, Gaza was a key port city and a hub of religious diversity, with Jews and Christians once living in harmony under Muslim rule. Unfortunately,

its prime trade location also made it a perennial target for invaders. Cycles of conquest—from the Hyksos of Syria to the Philistines to King David to Alexander the Great to Napoleon Bonaparte—have wracked Gaza’s much-trespassed borders for millennia, leaving upheaval and devastation in their wake. In modern times, the region made up of 1.8 million inhabitants is at the heart of a drawn-out struggle with its neighbors.

*Moment* asked Matt Rees, former *TIME* Jerusalem bureau chief and author of *The Palestine Quartet* series, to step back from the headlines about this historic city and illuminate the deep roots of the ongoing turbulence.

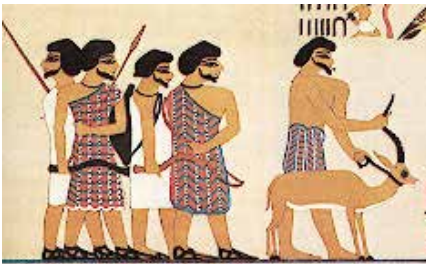
## BEFORE THE COMMON ERA

**3300**



The first confirmed settlement of Gaza occurs at Tell as-Sakan, an Egyptian fortress that was located a little south of today's Gaza City. Archaeologists believe that the Egyptians located the outpost there to protect their eastern frontier from invaders from the Levant. The **Canaanites** who inhabit the land alternately submit to and resist Egyptian rule.

**1600**



The **Hyksos**—"Asiatic hordes" from Northern Syria—conquer Egypt and settle in Gaza, destroying whatever is in their path, according to the Reverend Archibald Sayce in his 1895 book, *Patriarchal Palestine*. The Hyksos rule Egypt—and Gaza—until they are driven out in the late 16th century.

**1300s**



Gaza gets its name from the **Amarna Tablets**, which were "letters" written in Babylonian cuneiform that were sent to Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III—who expanded his rule into Asia Minor and Ethiopia. In the tablets, Gaza is called *Zzati*, which becomes *Ghazza* (pronounced *razza*) in Arabic.

**1100s**

The Philistines, who come from Crete and Asia Minor, take over Gaza and make it one of their five most important cities. They call it Philistia, from which the name Palestine is derived. According to the Book of Judges,

they capture Samson—a long-haired Jew of supernatural strength: The Philistines "seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza." About to be sacrificed, Samson leans against a pillar of the Temple of Dagon, and the building crashes down killing his enemies.

**1000s-730**

King David brings Israelite rule to Gaza. When the Israelite kingdom splits in 930, Gaza becomes part of the northern Kingdom of Israel, which is conquered by the Assyrians in 730. In the Bible, the prophet Amos reports God as saying: "I will send down fire upon the wall of Gaza" (Amos 1:7) to punish the Philistines for their transgressions. Around 600, the Philistines vanish without a trace.

**529**



The **Persians** overrun Gaza after a long siege. In his writings, the fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus refers to Gaza as "Kadytis" and calls it "one of the greatest cities of all time."

**332-323**



During his several-month siege of Gaza, **Alexander the Great** is wounded in the shoulder—by a missile, according to the ancient historian Arrian. After Alexander's victory against thousands of Persians and Arabs, the men of Gaza are slaughtered, the women and children enslaved. Batis, the commander of the Gaza fortress, is treated with "horrible cruelty," according to Arrian. Gaza undergoes Hellenization. Upon Alexander's death in 323, Gaza is fought over by the Ptolemies (Greeks in Egypt) and Seleucids (Greeks in Syria). Ultimately the Ptolemies take control.

**100**



A synagogue with a **mosaic of King David** playing the lyre is built in what is now the Rimal district of the city. (Egyptian archaeologists who discover it in 1965 insist they've found the remains

of a church and that the mosaic depicts Orpheus. After Israelis capture the area during the Six-Day War, they find the face has been gouged out, and they transfer the mosaic to the Israel Museum.) In 96, Jewish king Alexander Yannai storms Gaza and settles in the city.

**63-66**



**Gaza is conquered** by the Roman general Pompey the Great and incorporated into the Roman Empire, bringing an end to Jewish rule. The Roman governor Aulus Gabinius rebuilds Gaza, but in 66, Jewish rebels take up arms against Rome. In *The Jewish War*, Roman historian Flavius Josephus writes that they "entirely demolished Anthedon and Gaza; also many of the villages. Everyone [sic] of those cities were plundered, and an immense slaughter was made of the men who were caught in them."

**34**



**Mark Antony** deeds Gaza to his lover, Egyptian Queen **Cleopatra**, but the Roman senate annuls the gift and hands Gaza over to its Jerusalem vassal King Herod.

## THE COMMON ERA

130



The Roman Emperor Hadrian inaugurates wrestling, boxing and oratorical competitions at a new stadium. One of Gaza's favored Greek deities is **Tyche**, the "blind mistress of fortune,"

whose capriciousness is used to explain the cruel vicissitudes of fate. The Romans remain in control until the empire is broken up in the 4th century, and the eastern part comes under Byzantine rule.

401



According to some accounts, Christianity takes root after Porphyry, one of Gaza's first Christian bishops, promises **Byzantine Empress Eudoxia** a son if she will suppress paganism in Gaza. When a son is born, Eudoxia pays for a church, and Christianity spreads.

634



Gaza is the first city in Palestine to be captured by Muslims. It narrowly avoids being destroyed by the army of **Caliph Abu Bakr**—a trusted advisor and

father-in-law to Muhammad—because it's the burial place of Prophet Muhammad's great-grandfather Hashim ibn Abd Manaf. According to Muslim tradition, his tomb is in the Sayid al-Hashim Mosque in Daraj, a quarter of Gaza's Old City. Many Jews and Christians remain despite the Muslim takeover.

767

Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i is born in Gaza and goes on to found an important school of Sunni Islamic law. One of its distinguishing principles is that jihad can be launched against "disbelievers" in addition to those who are unjust to Muslims.

1100



Gaza returns to Christian rule when the **Crusaders** seize Gaza from the Fatimid caliphs, a dynasty said to be descended from Muhammad's daughter Fatima. Jerusalem's King Baldwin III erects a castle to defend Gaza against Egyptian raids and installs the Knights Templar in it. Many Jews and Muslims flee or are killed.

1260



Mongols under **Hulagu Khan**—grandson of Genghis—overrun Gaza as well as Damascus and Aleppo. The Egyptian Mamluk general Baibars and his slave warriors drive the Mongols back at the Battle of Ain Jalut. Gaza becomes the capital of a Mamluk province extending south from Rafah to Caesarea in the north, and east to the Hebron Hills and Samaria. In the eyes of Arabic writer Dimashki, Gaza is "a city so rich in trees that it looks like a cloth of brocade spread out on the land." The Mamluks rule until 1516.

1481

Meshullam of Volterra, an Italian Jewish jeweler, travels through Gaza. Despite rumors that Syrians have "spread over the land," he arrives safely at the city. "It is a good and worthy land, yielding fruits of the highest repute," he writes. "The finest bread and wine can be had there. The latter is made only by Jews. The circumference of the city is four miles; but there is no wall. It is six miles from the sea, built partly on a hillside and partly in a valley. The dwellers are many, among them sixty Jewish and four Samaritan families."

1483



Another traveler, the Swiss Dominican Felix Fabri, sees what locals call the ruins of the Temple of Dagon, which was destroyed by Samson, and the house where the Philistine temptress Delilah seduced him. "There is a great palm-grove around the city," writes Fabri. "The houses are wretched and made

of mud; but the mosques and baths are costly... At night the sound of the waves is audible.”

1516



The Ottomans push the Mamluks out of Palestine, and for a century Gaza is ruled on their behalf by the Ridwan family, descendants of a senior official in the entourage of **Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent**. In his 2006 book, *An Ottoman Century*, Dror Ze’evi, a scholar in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Ben-Gurion University, says this is “probably the last golden age of the city” due to peaceful relations between Christians and Jews under Muslim rule, which allows for the construction of many houses of worship.

1665



Talmud scholar **Nathan of Gaza** persuades Shabbetai Zevi to go public with his conviction that he is the Messiah and declares that the Messianic age will begin within a year. When rabbis in Jerusalem reject the idea, Nathan, who has taken

up kabbalah and fasting and sees “visions of God all day long,” declares Gaza the true holy city. When Zevi converts to Islam, Nathan flees to Italy, then Macedonia.

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1799



After conquering Egypt and on his way to seize all of Palestine, **Napoleon Bonaparte** captures Gaza. In a letter to the government in Paris, he describes the battle: “Next morning we advanced on Gaza, and found three or four thousand cavalry marching toward us... We charged the enemy, who did not even wait for our attack, but fell back.” Napoleon calls Gaza “the outpost of Africa, the door to Asia.” When the siege of Acre fails, the French abandon Gaza and return to France.

1800s



In 1882, the British begin their de facto rule of Gaza, which flourishes. From 2,000 inhabitants in 1840, Gaza’s population increases to 40,000 in 1906. In 1905, Gaza exports \$1.5 million worth of wheat, barley, corn, dates, sesame, leather and chicken through its port. In the same year, the value of imports reaches \$750,000. There is also a Jewish school.

1838

American scholar **Edward Robinson**, known as the “Father of Biblical Geography,” writes about the roads to Gaza rather than about the city itself, which is less important to him than other sites because its ancient buildings had mostly been destroyed by war. But he was thrilled to find “ripe apricots in Gaza in May.”



1917



During World War I, the British choose to land on the beaches of Gaza to gain a toehold in Ottoman-ruled Palestine. They fail. The second time, under a new general, Edmund Allenby, they wrest Gaza from **the Turkish army**, and from there, roll on to Beer Sheba, Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine. Along the way, the British leave enough of their dead to fill five military cemeteries, which still stand today.

## POST WORLD WAR I

1929



In what some called an unprecedented outbreak of anti-Jewish violence, **Arabs riot** and kill Jews throughout Palestine, including 135 Jews in Gaza. Some Gazan Jews are saved by their Arab neighbors. Jews leave the city and are prohibited from returning by the British, who want to placate the Arabs. That same year, the Rimal neighborhood—Rimal means “sands” in Arabic—is built along the sand dunes between Gaza City and the Mediterranean. It will soon become the most desirable area in which to live.

1948



After withstanding an attack and a siege by the Egyptian army, including units made up of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jewish village of Kfar Darom in Gaza is evacuated under the cover of darkness. When the British pull out of Palestine and Israel becomes a state, Gaza is incorporated into Egypt. The population swells with Palestinian refugees, many of whom crowd into hastily constructed camps. (There are currently eight camps, housing 1.2 million registered refugees and their descendants, while the West Bank has 19 camps with 741,000 inhabitants.)

1949

Egypt brutally suppresses Gaza’s communists. Gaza writer Mueen Bseiso’s

*Palestinian Notebooks* include several accounts of his torture. “They used to beat us with whips made of plaited telephone wires. The Palestinian, who did not own a telephone, was being beaten with telephone wire.”

1967



After defeating Egypt and other Arab armies in the Six-Day War, **Israel takes control of Gaza**. Israel’s cabinet debates whether to keep Gaza. “For Jerusalem, we are willing to die,” says Prime Minister Levi Eshkol. “For the Gaza Strip...our hearts are a little bitter.” But he votes to keep Gaza anyway. An “open borders policy” allows Gazans to visit friends and family in the West Bank and work in Israel.

1977

The first Jewish civilian settlement in Gaza is inaugurated. At the ceremony, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin says, “This is a great day for the State of Israel and for Jewish settlement, a day which symbolizes our deep-rooted presence in this area, which has since the Six-Day War become an integral part of the State and its security.”

1987



**Sheikh Ahmad Yassin**, a Palestinian imam and quadriplegic, and other Muslim Brotherhood members estab-

lish Hamas, an acronym for the Arabic phrase meaning “Islamic Resistance Movement” and also the Arabic word for “zeal.” He says, “I think Israel will think one thousand times before invading Gaza” because of the strength of resistance likely to be encountered.

1994



After 27 years of exile, Palestinian leader **Yasser Arafat** returns to Gaza as part of the implementation of the Declaration of Principles agreed upon at the Oslo Peace Accords and signed in Washington in 1993. International development cash transforms Gaza, although hope for a successful state is dimmed when the extent of the Palestinian Authority’s corruption becomes apparent.

1998



With United Nations Development Program funds, local businessmen build **Al Deira**, a lavish hotel on the beachfront, using traditional mud techniques as a symbol of the revival of Gaza and its place in Arab history. *Lonely Planet* calls it “swish, stylish and tightly run.” The hotel hosts visiting foreign correspondents and wealthy Gazans, who

dine on its spacious terrace overlooking the Mediterranean.

**2002**



Hamas constructs its first **Qassam rockets**, named for a Gazan sheikh who rebelled against British rule in the 1930s. Based on a North Korean rocket transported from Teheran to Damascus and smuggled via Lebanon to the Sinai in Egypt, the prototype reaches Rafah through tunnels barely wider than a man's shoulders and less than three feet high.

**2004**

Sheikh Yassin is killed by an Israeli missile as he is being wheeled from early morning prayers. Although Hamas gains strength in the West Bank, Gaza remains its true stronghold.

**2005**



Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pulls Israeli soldiers and some 9,000 settlers out of military bases and 21 civilian settlements in Gaza. This unilateral “disengagement” is widely opposed by Israel's right and resisted by **the settlers**, who were forcibly evacuated by soldiers—some in tears.

**2006**

Hamas wins legislative elections in Gaza. The United States, Russia, the United



Nations and the European Union institute economic sanctions against what they consider a terrorist organization. A wire fence with posts, sensors and buffer zones is constructed to separate it from Israel. The Egyptians build **concrete and steel walls** along its border. Israel and Egypt strictly control Gaza's borders and the three main border crossings.

**2007**

In the culmination of what has become a civil war, Hamas fighters run the Fatah forces of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas out of Gaza after a bloody confrontation that leaves 118 people dead and 550 injured. Hamas fighters turn Abbas's lavish villa in the city's Tel el-Hawa neighborhood into a military base. Hamas takes over the administration of Gaza, and Israel intensifies its blockade.

**2008**



Hamas gradually increases the capacity of its Qassam rockets to carry a bigger payload over a greater range. In December, consistent fire across the border and strikes on Tel Aviv bring Israeli ground forces back into Gaza for the first major incursion since the 2005 settlement pullout. When Operation Cast Lead ends in early 2009, 13 Israeli soldiers and 1,300 Palestinians are dead.

**2010**

The Gaza Mall opens in Rimal, which is also home to the city's main hospital, al-Shifa, the Presidential Palace, the United Nations Beach Club, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights and the best hotels and restaurants. The chairman of the mall's board of directors promises “attractive and competitive prices” at the restaurants, clothing stores, toy shops and office supply stores. That same year, a Turkish NGO sends three ships to break the economic blockade. In a highly publicized incident, nine activists on the *Mavi Marmara* are killed while resisting Israeli soldiers boarding the ship.

**2014**



The killing of three Israeli youths in the West Bank leads to mass Israeli arrests of Hamas activists. Hamas responds with intensified rocket fire on civilian targets, which eventually leads to an Israeli incursion into northern Gaza called Operation Protective Edge. During the operation, Israelis discover more than 30 tunnels based in Gaza extending deep into Israeli border communities, equipped with weapons for planned surprise attacks. At least 1,800 Palestinians and 70 Israelis die, and the Gaza towns of Beit Hanoun and Beit Lihyeh in the northern Gaza Strip are particularly devastated. A temporary cease-fire takes effect in August, and countries around the world express a commitment to helping Gaza rebuild. ♡