

Synopsis:

GAZA'S FISHERMEN

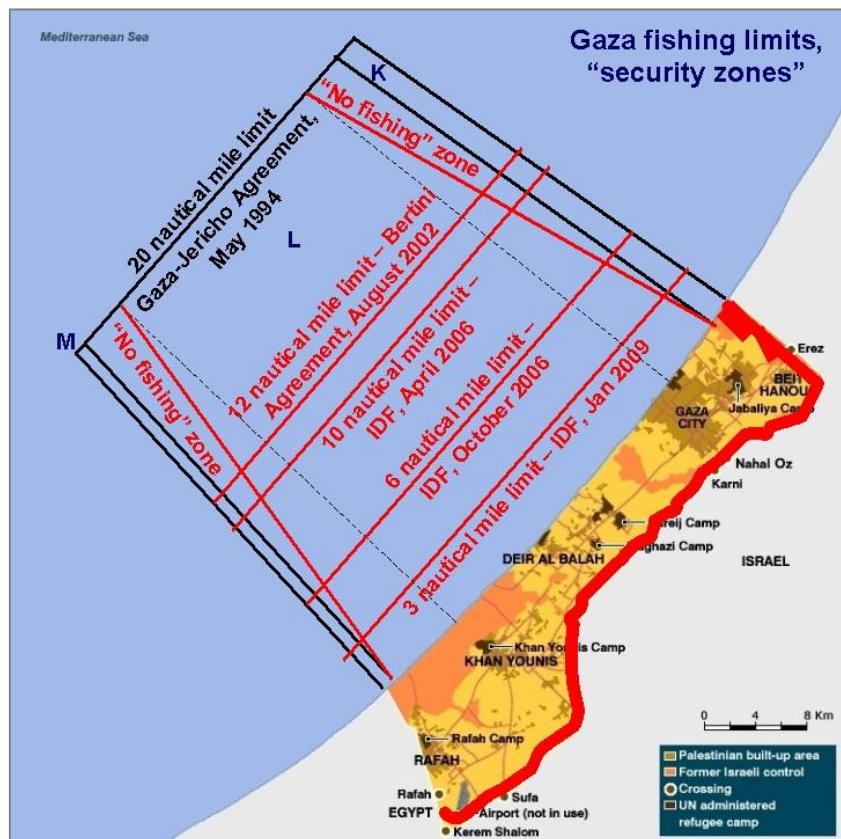
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The Oslo Accords, signed in 1993, authorised access to a 20-mile-wide fishing zone. Over the years, the zone has shrunk. Since the operation « Hardened Lead », initiated in the wake of Hamas' taking power in the Gaza Strip, the zone is down to 3 nautical miles, a little less than 5km. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) justify this embargo by the need to stop weapons smuggling and to prevent attacks. But as a member of the fishermen's union says : « *No boat has ever been captured with weapons on board. Fishermen are neither terrorists nor fighters* ».

Israeli warships harass fishermen daily, even within the 3-mile limit. They try to make the boats capsize, shoot towards them or directly at them with machine-guns. Fishermen are arrested frequently.

They all describe the conditions of arrest in the same way. After having surrendered they have to take off their clothes and jump into the sea whatever the weather. Then they are pulled back on board, handcuffed and brought to an Israeli port. Occasionally, they are forced to swim the last meters from the boat to the port. Once there, they are put in cells which are often only metal containers without any facilities. They are then interrogated. The injured sometimes have to wait ten hours to see a doctor. Most of the fishermen are released a few days later at the Erez checkpoint, without any personal items. Injured or not, they have to walk 1,5km to go back into the Gaza Strip. Their boat, their outboard motor, their nets, all their equipment is confiscated by the Israelis, who never give them back. The fishermen thus lose their only means of earning a living, thousands of dollars' worth of equipment which they will probably never manage to buy again. IDF is also putting pressure on sailors – especially the younger ones – to make them work as spies in exchange for money or advantages.



Braving the danger, some fishermen take the chance to go beyond the 3 miles, hoping to get more fish. They even take the risk to venture into Egyptian water, south of Gaza, because they are known to be full of fish. Such actions put their life in danger.

The embargo has direct consequences on the living conditions of the 3700 official fishermen of Gaza, and the almost 70 000 persons who depend on them. The fishing zone is ridiculously small compared to their number. The halieutic resources are quickly decreasing and the fishes are smaller and smaller. To ensure adequate reproduction, the fishermen should ideally stop their activity at least three months a year. But nobody can afford it as it means a total lack of income during this time.

Every day the fishermen are catching less and less fish, often even not enough to pay for fuel and maintenance. Their monthly wages are never guaranteed and rarely top 1000 shekels, which is not enough to feed their family. Most of the fishermen are ashamed to admit they depend on humanitarian aid from UNRWA to feed their families.

The embargo has forced the fishermen to change their fishing methods. They now use 6m motorboats instead of the 20m trawlers they were used to have. Many families had to learn new ways of fishing, and abandon their trawlers. Israel imposed the use of 25hp motors on the small boats. This low power makes the work at sea even more dangerous.

Other effects of the siege are more insidious. The government gives fishermen fuel once a week, but not to everyone and not enough for them to go to sea every day, so the fishermen are dependent on the fuel supply coming from Egypt through the tunnels. When there is a fuel crisis and the prices go higher, they cannot afford to buy fuel and have to stay in the port, waiting for better days.

Because of the rarity of fish, and of rising prices, a parallel market emerged. Egyptian fish is imported through the tunnels. This fish is not fresh, but it is sold at a lower price than Palestinian fish, making for unfair competition.

The fisherman's work itself is very hard. In small boats you have to drag the heavy net many times a day. You have to work everyday, early in the morning and late in the afternoon with a break during the day. The sun and the salt ruin your health. Minimal safety requirements are not observed and fishermen are frequently injured at work or drown at sea.

For all these reasons, many fishermen think about quitting. But most of them have no idea of what else they could do. And apart from that, unemployment is very high. In Gaza Port, upturned hulls whose paint is flaking away under the sun are become a common sight : without the means to maintain them, their owners have no choice but to abandon them.

Fishermen I met received no financial or medical help after being arrested or injured. Even when they had to quit their work because of their wounds. In this case the whole family is losing its income, provoking dramatic situations. Without money they have to stop building their house, abandon wedding plans, and put their children to work instead of paying for their studies.

But the first form of aid that the fishermen are asking for is not financial. Zaccaria from the fishermen's union wants to deliver a message to the West. He says that fishermen are not poor people. They used to earn a decent living. They don't want any financial help. What they want is Europe to push Israel into ending the maritime siege of Gaza. Before the embargo, fishing was a good job. They used to live with dignity, in good conditions. They want to work because they are capable of it and because they are qualified in their field of activity. They want the Israelis to respect the Oslo Accords.

Aid from NGOs is humiliating. It makes them feel like poor people. They don't want any charity. If there was no siege they wouldn't need any help. Among all the arrested fishermen none of them was a terrorist. And yet they are still captured, sentenced to terms in jail. **« Every country around the world with a coastline has the right to fish where it wants. But in Gaza, fishermen are not allowed to do their job. We need Israel's abuse to be denounced ».**

Last minute update : the conditions of the ceasefire signed between Israel and Hamas at the end of November bring a change to the fishermen's conditions. They can now fish at up to 6 miles from the shore, instead of 3 as before.

