

Gaza: 'Anyone who goes near the water risks his life. But if we leave the sea, we die'

Saturday 15 March 2025, by [AMER Ruwaida Kamal](#) (Date first published: 11 March 2025).

Little remains of Gaza's fishing industry, devastated by the war and years of Israeli restrictions. Yet fishermen are still clinging on to their livelihood.

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For 17 months, Ahmed Al-Hissi, a 54-year-old fisherman from Gaza's Al-Shati refugee camp, hasn't touched his fishing rod. It remains in the storage room by the port where he stashed it shortly after Israel launched its onslaught on the Strip, and he hasn't dared retrieve it — even after the ceasefire took hold.

"We have large families, and fishing is our only source of income," he explained to +972 Magazine. "We are still waiting for the [Israeli] army to allow us to fish."

For years, Gaza's fishermen have had to contend with ever-shrinking fishing zones imposed as part of [Israel's blockade of the territory](#). But after October 7, the industry ground to a complete halt, with Israeli naval ships regularly opening fire at anyone who entered the sea. "My sons tried to fish from the beach, and they were still shot at," Al-Hissi recounted.

After the ceasefire went into effect in January, Al-Hissi, who has been fishing since his teens, went back to the port with his sons in the hope of returning to work. They found a scene of utter devastation: all the boats in the harbor had been destroyed. "There was nothing," he said. "We need to start from scratch."

Indeed, precious little remains of Gaza's once-thriving fishing industry after a year and a half of Israeli bombardment. Nizar Ayyash, the head of Gaza's fishermen union, estimates the damage to the industry to be worth around \$75 million. According to the Agriculture Ministry, Israel has [killed at least 200 fishermen](#), and it continues to threaten, [target](#), and [kill](#) them even after the ceasefire.



Sons help their fathers while fishing on the beach of Deir Al-Balah, central Gaza Strip, December 7, 2024. (Ruwaida Amer)

Al-Hissi knows these dangers better than anyone: two of his sons were shot dead by Israeli forces

while out at sea, in 2017 and 2021 respectively. “Under the Israeli occupation, this profession was never safe for us,” he explained. “Even before the war.”

Rajab Abu Ghanem, 51, owned a large fishing boat which he took out to sea every day for decades. He used to be able to see the water from his home in the upscale coastal neighborhood of Sheikh Ijlin, south of Gaza City. “I have lived there since my childhood,” he told +972. “Day and night I breathed the sea air, and I would walk 10 steps and be on the beach.”

At the beginning of the war, Abu Ghanem and his family were displaced to the [tent encampment of Al-Mawasi](#), near Khan Younis in the south of the Strip. There, he would occasionally walk along the coast and see fishermen on very small boats trying to catch what they could with nets and rods. “The Israeli army continued to target them, and the area where they cast their nets had meager fish,” he recounted.

Upon his return to northern Gaza following the ceasefire, Abu Ghanem found his house badly damaged and his boat destroyed. Fearing being targeted by Israeli gunships, he is still choosing to stay away from the water.

“I used to work on my boat with my children,” he lamented. “I can’t believe that I haven’t entered the sea to fish for a year and a half. I cry every day when I look at the sea and cannot enter it.”

From blockade to war

Gaza’s fishing industry has been in decline since the 1990s, when the Oslo Accords restricted the permitted fishing zones off the enclave’s coast. While the agreement stipulated the limit at 20 nautical miles from the shore, Israel [never allowed](#) Palestinian fishermen to venture beyond 15, and periodically imposed much heavier restrictions. These constraints naturally limited the types of fish they could catch, leading to an overreliance on smaller fish and [disrupting the balance](#) of marine life.



A Palestinian fisherman displays his catch near the beach of Deir Al-Balah, central Gaza Strip, December 7, 2024. (Ruwaida Amer)

Israel’s blockade of the territory since 2007 and the activities of American and Israeli gas companies operating close to Gaza’s shores have further crippled the industry. Israeli naval ships have [regularly attacked](#) Palestinian fishermen, as well as unlawfully detaining them and confiscating their boats.

Despite these challenges, the number of registered fishermen working across Gaza rose to [4,900](#) in the months prior to the war, with an additional 1,500 Palestinians employed in related labor such as fish cleaning, in ice factories, or as fish merchants. But according to Ayyash of the fishermen union, this growth was driven primarily by a lack of other work opportunities in the Strip.

Now that’s all gone. Israel’s bombardment destroyed the majority of Gaza’s fishing boats and prevented most fishermen from getting anywhere close to the sea.

Some, however, like 35-year-old Subhi Nayef Abu Rayala, couldn’t stay away despite the risks.

Displaced from Al-Shati in the north to Rafah and then Deir Al-Balah in the south — without any of his equipment or his boat — he joined up with local fishermen who were defying their own fears and going out to catch what they could in the shallow waters. “I was afraid, but I am a fisherman and I couldn’t survive without the sea,” he told +972.

Before the war, Abu Rayala would take his boat out at night, when conditions were best. But doing so after October 7 became a death sentence. “We went out during the day so the Israeli ships would see that we were just fishing near the shore,” he explained.

Every morning, Abu Rayala would scan the shoreline for Israeli gunships. “If they were there, I wouldn’t enter the sea; if they weren’t, I went fishing,” he said. “When we came back from a catch, we would find people waiting for us on the beach wanting to buy fish because of the lack of any alternative protein-rich food in Gaza for months.” But most of the more nutritious fish, he noted, swim at greater depths than they were able to safely access.



A Palestinian fisherman displays his catch near the beach of Deir Al-Balah, central Gaza Strip, December 7, 2024. (Ruwaida Amer)

Since returning north after the ceasefire, however, Abu Rayala has not gone back out to sea. “I thought it would make things easier, but it turned out to be the opposite,” he told +972. “Anyone going near [the water] is risking his life.”

‘My whole life is at sea’

Ismail Abu Jiab, 35, has worked as a fisherman in Gaza for the past 16 years. He used to own a large boat and employed four workers, but his business was devastated by Israel’s bombardment. “At the beginning of the war, all the large boats were targeted and burned,” he told +972.

To try to eke out a living, Abu Jiab and his friend kept working with whatever equipment they could salvage, earning themselves less than NIS 10 (\$2.75) a day. “We went back to using all the old equipment: the paddle boat from 20 years ago, and nets that are torn and worn out,” he said. “We would work for one day and then pause for 10 because the equipment couldn’t handle more than that.”

Even when fishing close to shore, Abu Jiab and his fellow fishermen faced constant harassment from Israeli naval forces. Gunboats would hover nearby, shooting at fishermen or damaging their boats. Moreover, Israel’s closure of border crossings blocked the entry of gasoline and fiberglass, making it impossible to repair or maintain fishing boats.

“I have eight children who need food,” Abu Jiab lamented. “No one cares about us, no local or international institutions.”



Ismail Abu Jiab prepares fishing nets alongside fellow fishermen on the beach of Deir Al-Balah, central Gaza Strip, December 7, 2024. (Ruwaida Amer)

In December 2024, as winter set in and [seawater began to flood the tents](#) of displaced Palestinians sheltering on the beach in Deir Al-Balah, Abu Jiab and his fellow fishermen emptied out their damaged storage rooms in the port to provide refuge. “The ones that weren’t totally destroyed were burned, but they were still better than tents,” he said.

Abu Jiab continued working as much as he could throughout the war, but has stopped since the ceasefire in response to Israeli threats. “My whole life is at sea,” he said. “We inherited this profession from our fathers and grandfathers. We are like fish: if we leave the sea, we die.”

In response to +972’s inquiry, an Israeli army spokesperson stated that Gaza’s population has been “informed of restrictions on the maritime area adjacent to the Gaza Strip,” adding that the Israeli navy’s “mission is to ensure the security of the State of Israel against security threats in the maritime arena while taking feasible precautions to mitigate civilian casualties.”

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P.S.

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<https://www.972mag.com/gaza-fishing-war-siege/>

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- Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas’ murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel’s retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society’s growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible

period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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