

## The Tunnels of Gaza: Going Underground to Survive

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The Tunnel Economy in Operation: Moving Pallets of Flour from Egypt to Gaza (Photo courtesy of Gary Fields).

**RAFAH, Gaza Strip** — There was no turning back as the tunnel operator agreed to take me underground into the dimly-lit shaft to see how provisions were being brought into Gaza from the Egyptian side of the border 1,500 meters away. In the next instant, we were walking along a narrow, darkened subterranean corridor where long, plastic canoe-like pallets loaded with sacks of flour were moving along the hardened dirt flooring.

I had ventured to the southern tip of the Gaza Strip to witness a unique economic phenomenon. Since 2007, Israel has imposed an economic blockade on 1.7 million Palestinians in Gaza aimed at halting the import of goods to an already-isolated and impoverished population. In response, the Gazans have been forced into securing 80 percent of their consumables — foodstuffs, fuel, cars, even livestock — through tunnels. In this sense, the tunnels represent a form of resistance to the blockade.

The blockade is the culmination of a long series of calamities experienced by the people of Gaza, 67 percent of whom are refugees from Israel who lost their land and homes in 1948 after creation of the Jewish state. Their plight as refugees was compounded in 1967 when the area came under Israeli military rule and Gaza was forced into an economically dependent relationship with Israel.

During this time, Israel began to colonize Gaza, seizing 25 percent of the land for 7,000 Jewish settlers, and enclosing Gaza's population in 2002-2003 behind an impregnable concrete-and-steel barrier that gave Gaza the unenviable moniker as the world's largest outdoor prison.

When Israel "disengaged" from Gaza in 2005, it retained control of all movement to and from the area, an especially onerous burden for fishermen whom Israel restricts to a three-mile range from Gaza's shores.

The problem is that the shoals of fish within the three-mile limit are virtually depleted. If fishermen venture even near this mark, Israeli gunboats fire on them and often confiscate their boats. "I was 300 meters from the limit but Israelis boarded my boat and towed it to Ashdod," explains Awad Saidi, who lives in the Shati Refugee Camp near Gaza City. "Now I have nothing to support my family."

In 2006, after a relentless six-year campaign by Israel of denouncing the Palestinian Authority as a terrorist organization, Palestinians voted for Hamas as the majority party for the Palestinian Parliament. Israel promptly restricted food shipments into Gaza as punishment. Dov Weisglass, an aide to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, proclaimed that the aim of this restriction was "to put the Palestinians on a diet."

Confronted by the blockade, some Gazans have resorted to what James Scott terms "weapons of the weak" to protest their indiscriminate punishment. Although the Israeli government complains incessantly about rockets fired from Gaza that endanger Israeli civilians, the more relevant question is whether Israel really expects the people it is blockading to passively accept their fate. In international law, a blockade is an act of war. It seems that Israeli policymakers want to conduct such a war, but become indignant when the other side tries, however primitively, to fight back.

### The tunnels represent a form of resistance to Israel's blockade.

Despite the indignity of an economy forced underground, the tunnels are a lifeline for Gaza, providing necessities and employment for roughly 20,000 individuals. The tunnels also generate public revenue. Hamas officials patrol the area and tax tunnel operators for the goods that enter Gaza.

At the same time, there are serious drawbacks to the tunnel economy. Especially problematic are the so-called tunnel millionaires, numbering roughly 500, whose wealth amassed from the tunnel trade is visible in a burgeoning industry of luxury homes that appear as anomalies on a landscape scarred by poverty and war. Recently, the Egyptian military shut down most of the tunnels in response to an attack on its soldiers in the Sinai Desert, emphasizing how precarious the tunnel trade can be. In the meantime, people in Gaza are without fuel and essentials.

Most disturbing, however, are the 172 deaths that have occurred in the tunnels since 2007, mostly from cave-ins but also from Israeli bombing raids. Sadly, as long as Israel maintains its stranglehold on a poor area where unemployment exceeds 30 percent, burrowing underground, despite inordinate risks, will continue to attract thousands from Gaza desperate for work without prospects for doing anything else.

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