

review the cover

this week's essential reading

'How a pillar of German banking lost its way' by Ullrich Fichtner, Der Spiegel

'It is the story of how new investment banking heroes modified the staid German financial institution, looted and robbed it of its soul – without leaving behind a better, stronger bank'

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'Storm sentinels' by Chris Pomorski, The Verge

'Data on things like rainfall, wind and humidity was being collected from state to state in a chaotic, non-standardised fashion, using a hodgepodge of poorly coordinated networks'

'I meet countless Gazans who are literally trapped'

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Gaza has experienced three wars in the past decade, each more devastating than the last. I last visited Gaza in 2009, six months after Israel's Operation Cast Lead.

I found an enclosed territory and population struggling to adapt to Hamas rulers and recovering from devastated homes and lives. The 2014 conflict, that killed more than 2,250 Palestinians – hundreds of them children – and left thousands permanently injured, along with the deaths of 67 Israeli soldiers and six Israeli civilians, still reverberates in Gaza; another war, just around the corner, is always feared.

According to the UN, more than 96,000 housing units were either destroyed entirely or in part during the 2014 war. During the conflict, 500,000 people – one quarter of the population – were internally displaced with nowhere to go.

In a report last year, the UN feared that Gaza could be "uninhabitable" within five years on current economic trends (though many Gazans worried it would happen earlier). Unemployment is at least 44 per cent and three-quarters of the population are threatened by hunger.

These struggles are ubiquitous across Beit Hanoun and the Strip. Farmers tend their small fields while dealing with frequent Israeli gunfire. Skin diseases appear on children's arms and legs due to unhygienic conditions. Inside dirty caravans, cockroaches scurry around boxes of food. Disabled children barely leave their rooms because their families cannot afford care. One mother tells me that she often refused to send her son to school in the winter because his clothes were always wet. I see horrible scarring on a child's buttock after a makeshift fire ran out of control. Cancer rates are up and bed wetting for children is common.

The social fabric of society is strained. The NGO Aisha Foundation reports that sexual abuse and domestic violence are soaring and yet the Hamas government wants to restrict public discussion about it. Executive director Reem Rainah says "women are not enslaved here", but also that "there's no equality between men and women. There are no laws to determine boundaries between the genders."

In another caravan, with rotting floors, fraying equipment and dangerous gas stoves, Samaher Al Shenbari was recently told by Hamas that her dwelling would be destroyed to make way for a wedding hall. She opposed the forced relocation because there was nowhere to go. She says many of her family's children have not accepted that their home was destroyed during the 2014 conflict and they suffer psychologically and physically because of the loss. "We want a new house," she tells me. "We want all our families living together in one home." She talks with a newborn baby cradled in her arms.

The Gaza Strip is unlike anywhere else in occupied Palestine. Its two million residents were punished after 2006 for voting the "wrong" party into power. Hamas defeated the American- and Israeli-backed PA and, since 2007 when Hamas assumed power, Egypt and Israel have imposed a stifling economic blockade on the territory, restricting goods and the movement of people.

This year has seen a precipitous decline in Israeli permits granted for Gazans to leave and Egypt's Rafah border is rarely open. Exports are minimal and the import of essential building materials is negligent. Economic activity barely operates because Israel has rescinded countless permits for businesspeople entering and leaving Gaza.

I meet countless Gazans who are literally trapped, constantly refused permission to travel abroad or into Israel to study, live or seek medical care. After Israel recently charged a Palestinian man in Gaza with diverting tens of millions of dollars to Hamas – allegations challenged by his employer and other nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) – Israel tightened its travel restrictions on Palestinians in Gaza working for NGOs.

Some Gazans, who can afford it, pay bribes to Hamas and Egyptian officials to put them at the top of the list when the Rafah crossing occasionally opens. Birth rates have declined in Gaza due to the hardships.

After the 2014 war, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) was established by the UN, Israel and the PA to facilitate rebuilding. The main donors are the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, Britain and South Korea. NGO Aid Watch Palestine, which calls for the GRM to be replaced by a more accountable system, has assessed that "the GRM transfers enforcement of Israel's policing to the UN and the PA, thus making the UN and the PA involved with Palestinian human rights violations, particularly the blockade on Gaza, which is a form of illegal collective punishment".

Aid Watch co-director Haneen Elsamak tells me in Gaza that her group was started after the 2014 war because it was always foreign NGOs along with international groups, and not Palestinians, following the massive amount of aid money flowing into Gaza. Palestinians were rarely given control over their own lives.

UNRWA director in Gaza, Bo Schack, refuses to use the term "collective punishment" with me when describing the situation in Gaza. Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam all condemn the blockade as "collective punishment". He notes the UN in the past 12 months has rebuilt 1,300 homes and provides rent money to many residents. He acknowledges a US\$70 million (Dh257m) shortfall for vital activities at a time when the Middle East is suffering multiple conflicts.

Schack says that when he started his job in Gaza in 2015, 850,000 Palestinians were receiving food assistance. "Today we are almost at one million," he explains, "and that means we are supporting half the total population of Gaza."

Israel is tightening its blockade on Gaza and in the last months has barely allowed any materials in at all, including cement and civilian infrastructure. Many builders tell me that they have fired countless workers this year because there is no work.

Contractor Saadi AS Salama says employees come to him crying because they desperately needed work to support their families. Private contractors have protested in the streets over the lack of goods getting through the borders.

Why has reconstruction largely failed? Engineer Ali K Abu Shahla

says in his office in Gaza City, after spending decades working with Palestinian authorities, that, "even today, there is no plan for Gaza reconstruction". He attended a key meeting in Jerusalem after the 2014 war where a process was drafted to reconstruct Gaza. However, it was proposed to include six people from the West Bank and only one from Gaza.

"I asked [then] why people involved were not from Gaza, why the major individuals had no experience or eyes and ears in Gaza," he says.

The PA and Israel had little interest in helping the people of Gaza in the faint hope that a desperate population would overthrow the ruling Hamas regime.

To get a new home approved is still a tortuous process. Coordinates of the new property are sent to a committee and a group of both Israelis and Palestinians must approve it. According to Abu Shahla, "Israel has no right to veto properties but they keep projects 'under construction' for months and years".

This committee allows Israel to know the GPS coordinates of all new structures, which many locals say could be used by Israel as targets in any future war, along with every contractor's name and address.

The "dual use" list includes thousands of goods that Israel claims can be used for military purposes, but Israeli NGO Gisha argues that it "includes items whose use is overwhelmingly civilian and critical for civilian life". Cement, steel and other major construction materials are allowed to enter Gaza by Israel if they are produced by Israeli companies. Israel is profiting after causing the bulk of Gaza's destruction, and heavily taxing the goods they allow in.

Khalil Shaheen, director of economic and social rights with the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights in Gaza, condemns the "dual use" list as inhumane. "Hamas may be using materials for tunnels, but what can I do as a Gazan civilian?", he asks me. "Should I wait 15 years for a new home? Israel has a legal responsibility to protect civilians."

A former NGO director for Gaza explains the Israeli rationale: "Their policy and approach is to put Gaza on the starvation diet and make things bad, but not so bad that it would lead to revolution or [a] swing of support in their favour internationally."

Israeli defence minister Avigdor Lieberman recently told a Palestinian newspaper that Israel was willing to lift its blockade on Gaza, "if Hamas stops digging tunnels, rearming and firing rockets". He claimed Israel would build an airport, port and industrial areas.

The future of Gaza remains tenuous. With Hamas leadership elections early next year, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in his 80s, and Israel reaching 50 years occupying Palestinian lands in 2017, Palestinian autonomy feels like a distant dream. Gaza's humanitarian crisis reveals that without stronger international pressure, the territory will wither.

@ Visit www.thenational.ae to listen to a Crossroads podcast conversation with Antony about his time in Gaza.

Antony Loewenstein is an independent journalist based in East Jerusalem.



Goats pass buildings in Beit Hanoun, which were decimated during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict. The village is close to the Israeli border and was the scene of fierce fighting. Much reconstruction has yet to take place. NurPhoto via Getty Images



A Palestinian family in the Khan Yunis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip. It is believed that three-quarters of the Gazan population are threatened by hunger, while access to health care is restricted because of an Israeli blockade. Said Khatib / AFP



A Palestinian fisherman in Gaza. The toll of an economic blockade is borne mainly by ordinary people such as fishermen and farmers. Ezz Al-Zanoun / NurPhoto via Getty Images

* the stats

2 million	2,250	500,000	44%	3
The population of the besieged enclave of the Gaza Strip	How many people were killed during the 2014 assault on Gaza by Israel	How many people were displaced during the same 2014 war	The percentage of people who do not have a regular job	How many wars the territory has experienced in just one decade