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## From the Sea

Al-Aqsa Flood and the Heritage of Coastal Palestine

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In Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, we saw coastal landings and maritime strikes along the Israeli coast north of Gaza by Hamas commandos in rubber and fiberglass boats. The Israeli state was taken wholly by surprise perhaps because it had expected that its punishing siege of Gaza, including a complete maritime blockade since 2009, would have brought Palestinians to heel by now.

A little-noticed effect of the operations happened far offshore in the Mediterranean. On October 9, Chevron **confirmed** that it had been instructed by the Israeli energy ministry to cease producing natural gas from its offshore platform in the Tamar field in the Eastern Mediterranean, in what may have been a move due to fear of maritime sabotage or shore-to-sea rocket attacks by Hamas. On a clear day, Tamar's platform, only 15 miles offshore, is visible from Gaza. The Tamar gas field - operated by a consortium involving Chevron, the United Arab Emirates' Mubadala Energy, and several Israeli and Israeli-American companies - used to **contribute** as much as 70 percent of Israel's electricity needs and supplies gas to Jordan and Egypt.

The stoppage of gas production in the Tamar field - even if temporary - indicates the dramatic effect of Palestinian military and maritime operations from Gaza and the extent to which the Israeli security forces were unprepared for them. The long and slow strangling of Gaza had lulled the Israeli security forces into shifting much of their military forces to defend settlers in the West Bank. All along Gaza's land and sea limits, Israelis security apparatuses depended on digital surveillance to monitor Palestinian movements in the wake of the **Great March of Return** between 2018 and 2019.

Gaza may have been besieged for most of the 21st century, but it has been territorially controlled by Israel since 1967, and 70 percent of its population were expelled from their homes in Palestine during the Nakba. Settler colonialism is ultimately about the control of populations, territories, and the natural resources therein, including marine ones. Most maritime countries enjoy a 200 nautical mile offshore zone

they can exploit economically. Not Palestinians. In 1995, under the Oslo II Interim Agreement, Palestine was allocated a zone of 20 nautical miles for economic activities including fishing and subsea extraction, as well as recreation off the coast of Gaza. In subsequent years, this Palestinian economic zone was reduced: from 20 nautical miles to 12 in 2002; to six upon Hamas's 2006 victory; and finally to three nautical miles, during Israel's devastating 2009 Operation Cast Lead. Today, Israeli naval vessels patrol between one to three nautical miles offshore, shooting at Palestinian fishermen who dare breach this invisible sea barrier, sometimes if they are even one nautical mile from the shore.

In the years of siege, the Israeli security apparatuses have intensified their control of Gaza's land and maritime borders and ratcheted up the surveillance of both the sea and the shore. Israel had already begun constructing a fence around Gaza in 1994 and had destroyed Gaza's airport in 2002. Along with the diminution of Gaza's seas, Israel has slowly strangled Gaza's economy and daily life and transformed the strip into the world's most densely populated open-air prison. In the early decades of the 20th century, the godfather of Likud, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, imagined a Palestine that could be subjugated by "an iron wall which the native population cannot breach."

An important element of the Israeli throttling of Palestinians' seagoing life has been the circumscription of their access to their subsea and marine resources. In 2000, a massive reservoir of natural gas was discovered within Gaza's 20 nautical mile maritime zone; but Gaza Marine now lies beyond the reach of Palestinians in Gaza. In June 2023, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu **issued** a press release

announcing **plans** along with Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to develop the Gaza Marine field, but details - including on the exact beneficiaries of the development of the gas fields - have remained opaque, even to the supposed partners, the PA.

Palestinian fishermen's ability to earn a living at sea is also heavily curtailed by their encounters with Israeli naval patrols, which have been known to arbitrarily attack their boats. Fishing trawlers which require deeper waters for their works have been prevented by Israeli naval vessels from sailing further out to sea and thus effectively grounded. Seaside recreation has also proven deadly for those who want to enjoy the sea from the land. Palestinian children and picnickers on Gaza's beach have been killed by Israeli snipers and missiles. In the last few days, the Israeli military has issued multiple triumphal videos of its munitions blowing coastal infrastructures in Gaza and Gaza City's many fishing boats out of the water. Israeli naval vessels have been raining fire on Gaza from the sea just as Israeli planes have been bombarding the strip from the air and ground forces have been gathering along its boundaries.

The Gazan siege is Jabotinsky's iron wall turned into concrete in air, land and sea; and this wall was breached in Al-Aqsa Flood.

In Memory for Forgetfulness, his elegy for a Beirut wearily awaiting destruction by Israeli forces in 1982, Mahmoud Darwish wrote,

The dawn made of lead is still advancing from the direction of the sea, riding on sounds I

haven't heard before. The sea has been entirely packed into stray shells. It is changing its marine nature and turning into metal [...]  
Why are they arming the foam and waves with this heavy artillery? Is it to hasten our steps to the sea?

The sea for Palestinians hasn't always been the metallic source of fire from fleets of warships.

Multiple flotillas of solidarity activists from around the world attempted to break through the Israeli maritime blockade by setting sail towards Gaza from Mediterranean ports between 2010 and 2018. All were intercepted by Israeli naval forces. Most were brought to shore in Israeli ports and their passengers were detained. One, the Mavi Marmara, was raided and nine activists aboard were killed. The sea, even if barred, was - is - still a window to a world whose solidarity is with Palestinians.

Palestine is a maritime nation. Her poets dream of Mediterranean billows. Her children learn to dive and swim in the sea and play football on the sand. Her cuisine boasts fruits of the sea prepared in inventive ways. Palestinian families picnic on her beaches up and down the coast. Palestinian seaside homes open their shutters to Mediterranean air and water. Even as Palestine's famed ports - Haifa, Jaffa, Acre - were usurped in the Nakba, Palestinians remain stubbornly attached to their sea. As Palestinians in Gaza await the fleet of Israeli and US warships "transforming the sea into one of the fountainheads of hell" - in echoes of Darwish's Memory - the Mediterranean awaits their return.

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