

BELOW: A farmer tends his crops in the 'buffer zone' along the Gaza-Israel border

Feeding GAZA

Since 2007, the people of the Gaza Strip have been living under a tightly controlled blockade, restricting the supply of foodstuffs into the region. As such, Gazan homemakers have learned how to adapt and fend for themselves, innovating where necessary, working with what they have. But as **Marcello Di Cintio** discovers, Gazans resent living in a state of frustrated resilience



n Beit Lahia, in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, is a bakery that smells like a mechanic's garage. Inside, a man bakes bread in an oven fuelled by recycled motor oil. The viscous goop, purchased from a mechanic nearby, flows from a barrel mounted on the top of the brick oven through a metal pipe to a reservoir next to the blackened oven door. When the baker pulls a lever, a blast of thick oil sprays into the oven causing the fire inside to roar. A half dozen rounds of pita bread puff and brown inside. When they are done, the baker, clad in a sweat-darkened T-shirt, uses a long-handled paddle to pull them out, the stench of burning motor oil masking the comfortable aroma of freshly baked bread. The pita, though, tastes fine.

In June 2007, after the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, Israel imposed a crippling land, sea and air blockade on the territory. There are no shortage of statistics that describe the consequences of the action. Gaza's GDP has halved since the beginning of the blockade, and unemployment in the territory hit 43 per cent in 2014 - the world's worst that year.

But these numbers do not speak to the ways the blockade affects the daily life of Gaza's 1.8 million inhabitants. What does it mean to live under the blockade, especially in terms of food. How do Gazans feed themselves?

TEMPORARY MEASURES

The rise of motor oil bakeries like the one in Beit Lahia are a result of the blockade. Both electricity and gas have become unreliable commodities. The Israeli airforce bombed Gaza's only power station in 2006, and due to restrictions on the import of factory parts and components, the power plant was only partially rebuilt. The energy crisis deepened in June 2013 when Egypt stopped the smuggling of fuel for the plant through Gaza's illegal tunnels. Squabbles between Palestinian authorities in Ramallah and Gaza over who should fund the power plant's fuel also contributed to fuel shortages, as did Israel's destruction of the plant's fuel tanks during 2014's summer war.

Rolling blackouts are the norm. Except for the relatively few Gazans who can afford backup generators, and the fuel to power them, most Gazans have not enjoyed more than eight consecutive hours of electricity for a decade. The lack of reliable electricity, combined with regular shortages of cooking fuel - also imported from Israel - mean that Gazans need to find innovative ways to cook their food. Hence the use of recycled motor oil to power the bread ovens.

But there are other, older, ways to bake bread. Khuza'a, a town in southern Gaza, took a beating during the 2014 war, and many families whose homes were destroyed during the fighting still live in temporary shelters. One of these wooden 'caravans' sits next to the crater where the town mosque once stood. In the precarious shadow of the leaning minaret, the only part of the mosque left standing, a

BELOW: Palestinian children observe a woman as she bakes bread in a traditional oven in her home in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip. Israel has sealed the Gaza Strip off to all but very limited humanitarian supplies since Hamas seized control of the territory in June 2007





LEFT: Gaza fishermen work on a boat belonging off the coast of the Gaza Strip. The fishermen have begun working as far as nine nautical miles off the coast after Israel relaxed restrictions for the first time in a decade but said that the measure was not nearly enough

team of salvage workers straighten tangles of twisted rebar from the rubble. A makeshift kitchen has been assembled nearby out of plastic tarps, broken cinderblocks and sheets of corrugated steel. Inside a woman bakes bread in a clay oven.

She kneels in front of the squat oven between a basket of flattened dough and a pile of hot finished pita. An olive branch protrudes out of the side of the oven, its other end burning red inside. Two aubergines soften atop the oven next to a bubbling pot of lentil stew. The aubergines would be for dinner, the woman says, the lentils for lunch. She will line a tray with torn pieces of fresh pita and top it with the lentils. Her family will eat this with lemon, olives and slices of raw onion. A healthy but meatless meal familiar to many families in Gaza.

BORDER EXPANSION

Gazans have long prepared meals in such a way. Clay ovens are as old as Gaza itself. But their resurgence has the blockade to thank. 'Without access to gas for ovens and stoves,' writes Laila El-Haddad in *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey*, 'many are consulting grandma about how to fire up clay ovens which have lain abandoned for a generation.'

The wood-fired ovens are less an innovation than a practical return to an ancient routine. Where do Gazans find wood for these ovens though? Gaza boasts no forests, after all. Isn't firewood scarce? 'Not these days,' the woman says, revealing a cruel

bit of irony: Gazans fuel their wood-burning ovens with the carcasses of fruit and olive trees the Israeli army bulldozed during the war.

Abdulsalam al-Manasrah is a farmer in Shuja'iyya whose family has long tended such trees. He and his ancestors have owned land near Gaza's eastern border since the days of the Ottomans. 'Every speck of soil is mixed with my sweat and the sweat of my father, my grandfather and my grandmother,' he says. He lost his trees soon after the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000 when the Israeli army bulldozed the old groves to expand the buffer zone west of the border fence. The Israel Defense Forces wanted to create better sight-lines from the border fence. Once the trees were felled, the farmers were forbidden from growing anything taller than 80cm. Al-Manasrah planted wheat where his trees used to be, but he says the army burned the fields when the wheat grew too high.

The Israelis further expanded the buffer zone in 2005, then again during the war in 2008. The zone now extends at least 300m from the border fence – 250m further than the limit allowed by the 1994 Oslo Agreement. Al-Manasrah's family fields lie completely in the no-man's land. He cannot access them at all. 'Maybe you can reach the buffer zone line,' he says when asked what would happen if he tried to walk to his fields. 'After the line, the soldiers will shoot warning shots. If you keep walking, they will shoot the ground in front of your feet. Within 100 metres, I don't know. Maybe your legs. Maybe your heart.'

Many of the orchards and olive groves that survived the Second Intifada were destroyed in the wars in 2008 and, especially, in 2014 when Israeli F-15 fighter jets bombed the buffer zone to destroy the tunnels militants dug beneath the border fence. According to the Gaza office of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee, approximately 300 tons of rockets targeted the buffer zone area in 2014. Each rocket carved out a 15m-wide hole in the ground and destroyed one *dunum* (1,000 sq metres) of land. Instead of bearing olives and oranges, the trees now fuel bread ovens like the one in Khuza'a. Rocket fragments have rendered the soil and clay unfit to plant. Further, Israeli crop-dusting planes sprayed the soil in the border fence area last December with what an army spokesman called 'herbicides and germination inhibitors.' The dusting aimed to 'enable optimal and continuous security operations.' Nothing grows there now.

Al-Manasrah has a second plot of land further from the buffer zone where he grows garlic, and a third farm near the edge of the buffer zone. A local NGO will supply seeds and plant this plot with potatoes and onions, but he won't invest his own money and efforts there. There is no guarantee the field will remain accessible long enough for him to turn a profit. He does not know when the buffer zone will widen again, or when to expect the next volley of rockets.

ZONES OF INFLUENCE

The blockade's greatest impact on Gazan food production happens at sea. The Oslo Accords guaranteed Gazan fishermen a zone that extended 20 nautical miles from the shoreline, but in his decade as a fisherman, Ziyad Fahed Bakr has never sailed out that far. After the election of Hamas in 2007, the Israeli Navy shrunk the fishing zone to six miles. This was reduced to three miles the following year. In 2012, the Israelis set the limit back to six miles for a couple of years before returning to three miles during the 2014 war. According to the ceasefire agreement that ended the war, the fishing zone has been increased to six miles and is gradually being extended to 12.

In reality, Gazan fishermen risk attack by Israeli Navy vessels even if they drift past the three-mile line. There are stories of masked commandos boarding Gazan fishing boats to arrest fisherman. Other times they damage or sink the boats. According to a spokesman from Gaza's Fisherman's union, in the year following the 2014 war, Israeli vessels launched more than 600 attacks on Gazan fishing boats. One fisherman was killed, 28 others were wounded, and 32 boats were destroyed.

Bakr says his boat had been shot at several times, and he points to the smooth circular scars on his legs from Israeli bullets. Two months earlier, he says an Israeli Navy vessel confronted his boat and demanded he and his fellow fisherman strip off their clothes and swim to the Israeli boat to be arrested. 'They say we cannot fish here and that we are terrorists,' Bakr says. 'Sometimes they ask about

Hamas.' It feels as though every fisherman in the Gaza seaport has a story like this to tell.

Staying clear of the Israeli Navy means staying away from the fish. High-quality Mediterranean species like sea bream and tuna do not swim so close to shore. Within three miles, the water is too warm and the sea bottom too sandy for fish who prefer to live among reefs and rocks.

Fishermen sometimes get lucky on windy days when fish drift nearer to shore. Normally, though, most fish in the three-mile zone are tiny sardines that require fine mesh nets and drag nets to catch. These practices are both illegal and unsustainable in Gaza, but fishermen such as Bakr have few options. These tiny fish fetch low prices at market anyway. 'Some days I make no money at all,' he says.

Because of the restrictions, less than half of Gaza's fish needs are met by the locals. Most of the seafood Gazans eat are frozen products imported from Israel. The fact that Gaza, a coastal territory, must purchase fish from the same nation that cripples the local fishing industry rankles many Gazans.

This irony inspired a few enterprising businessmen in Gaza to start fish farms providing fish that are locally-raised, if not locally-caught. Suhail Khail, a former marine officer with the Palestinian Coastal Police, operates a modest farm on the beach a few kilometres south of Gaza's seaport. He once had a larger farm, but he says Israeli tanks destroyed it in 2008. In his aerated water tanks he mostly raises sea bream, a species that swims wild ten miles off-shore but which is out of the reach of Gaza's fishermen.

Khail purchases all his fingerlings from an Israeli hatchery near Haifa, and many die by the time they reach the checkpoint at Karam Shalom. The supply of fingerlings depends on Israeli market factors beyond his control. Three months earlier, for example, no sea bream fingerlings were available to purchase from Israel so Khail bought tilapia fingerlings instead. But tilapia is not very popular with Gazans and he had trouble selling them. To counter this, Khail is now developing a small sea bream hatchery at his farm which would eliminate the need to buy fingerlings from Israel. A successful hatchery could support 20 local fish farms, he says, and reduce Gaza's reliance on imported frozen fish.

Of course, the farms don't help the traditional fishermen such as Bakr who try to wrestle a living from shrunk and barren fishing zones. The situation eased somewhat, and only briefly, in the spring of 2016 when Israel extended the fishing zone in central and southern Gaza to nine miles. Three months later, however, it was reduced back to six. This move was again repeated in May of this year and presently the limit is six miles. Sea bream and tuna remain out of reach and there are still reports of attacks from Israeli Navy vessels to this day.

Bakr comes from a family of fishermen and is the oldest of ten brothers. All his brothers are still too young to fish, and Bakr is unsure they ever will. 'Why bring my brothers into this empty place,' he says. 'We can get nothing from the sea.'