



## 1 Background

The Gaza Strip has been a theatre of conflict for decades. Each of these conflicts has left its mark, and over time, a significant environmental footprint has developed in the Gaza Strip. During the most recent fighting – between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009 – Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) conducted a major combined military operation in the Gaza Strip. The operation comprised bombardment by land, sea and air, and incursions into the Gaza Strip by Israeli troops. Before and during that period, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups fired rockets from Gaza into Israel and engaged Israeli troops in Gaza during the ground invasion.

The fighting resulted in extensive casualties and the destruction of homes, livelihoods and infrastructure. With fighting taking place in densely populated areas, and with hospitals and UN facilities being hit by shells, there was almost no safe space in the Gaza Strip. As the borders were sealed, civilians had no place to flee, and bore the brunt of the fighting. Homes and public infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip sustained extensive damage. Gaza City was the worst hit. A unilateral Israeli ceasefire on 18 January, followed a day later by a unilateral ceasefire by Hamas and other Palestinian factions, put an end to the fighting. The Israeli army completed its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip on 21 January.

The environmental situation in the Gaza Strip was already serious prior to these events, due to underinvestment in environmental systems, lack of progress on priority environmental projects and the collapse of governance mechanisms. The recent escalation of hostilities caused additional damage and increased the pressure on environmental facilities and institutions. Two of the most striking examples are the significant volume of demolition debris that was generated and the serious damage done to the sewage system. Other adverse environmental impacts include the widespread destruction of agricultural areas, damage to smaller industrial enterprises and an increase in pollution discharged into the Mediterranean and into the groundwater.

According to a United Nations (UN) damage assessment carried out using satellite imagery, 2,692 buildings and 180 greenhouses were destroyed or severely damaged during the hostilities and 167 kilometres of road were damaged. The assessment revealed 220 impact craters on roads and bridges and more than 700 craters on open or agricultural land. Utilities infrastructure in energy (fuel and electricity), transportation and telecommunications also sustained severe damage during the crisis. Water supplies were affected by damage to water wells and drinking water pipes, as were wastewater systems.

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