

OPT: Tunnels boost Gaza mosque reconstruction

[الأرض الفلسطينية المحتلة: الأنفاق تعزز إعادة إعمار مساجد غزة](#)

GAZA CITY, 12 October 2011 (IRIN) - An increased flow of building materials entering the Gaza Strip via underground tunnels along the Gaza-Egypt border has allowed reconstruction work to begin on hundreds of religious sites damaged or destroyed during the 23-day Israeli offensive which ended in January 2009.

Nearly a quarter of Gaza's 850 mosques were affected; 45 mosques were totally destroyed, 107 sustained major damage, and about another 50 had minor damage such as smashed windows and doors, according to the Gaza public works and housing ministry, the religious affairs ministry, and private mosque owners.

An Egyptian above-and-below-ground [steel barrier](#) erected with US assistance was meant to stem the flow of goods through the tunnels, but since the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt in February 2011, if anything, traffic through the tunnels has increased, say observers.

Israel only allows building material to enter Gaza via Israeli-controlled crossings for [approved projects](#) funded by international organizations and UN agencies.

According to UN estimates, in September 946 truckloads of authorized construction materials were allowed to enter Gaza via Israeli-controlled crossings for approved international humanitarian building projects: 665 truckloads (46,550 tons) of aggregate, 232 truckloads of cement (9,195 tons), and 41 truckloads of steel bars (1,418 tons).

An average of 90,000 tons of cement, 90,000 tons of aggregate and 15,000 tons of steel bars are entering Gaza via tunnel each month, according to UN estimates.

The quantities of material now becoming available mean prices are [going down](#): Today one ton of cement costs about US\$135 in Gaza, down from up to \$340 per ton in January, according to deputy housing minister Yasser Shante. "Business has increased over the last three months," says Arafat Abu Hasira, owner of Abu Hasira Glass and Aluminum Company in Gaza City. Aluminium, only available via tunnel, costs about \$6 per kg, down from about \$135 a year ago, said Abu Hasira.

Israel says the mosques were used by Hamas to store weapons and that Hamas operatives regularly fired rockets into Israel from within or near mosques, but Hamas disputes this.

"Religious sites are separate from any activity related to security forces or resistance factions," said deputy minister of religious affairs, Hassam Seifi, adding: "Our communities lost a lot with the destruction of each mosque."

"A mosque is not only a place of worship, it's our social fabric, where Palestinians meet"

A "source of peace"

"Gaza is a religious society and mosques are the centre of our communities," said religious affairs ministry official Abdullah Abugrboah, adding: "Gaza's population is 99 percent Muslim [predominantly Sunni], with a Christian population of less than 1 percent."

It will cost about US\$25 million to reconstruct the 45 mosques (an average \$500,000 per mosque), said Shante, and about \$10million to repair the 157 damaged mosques, at an average cost of US\$100,000.

"It is motivating to see new mosques. It's a source of peace after the war," said worshiper Mohamed Samara, a 30-year-old researcher at a nearby ministry who came to pray during his lunch break.

Three mosques in his neighborhood of Shujaya were destroyed during the war; one has been partially rebuilt, he said, adding: "A mosque is not only a place of worship, it's our social fabric, where Palestinians meet."

Mosques are supervised by the religious affairs ministry (Waqf), in accordance with Islamic law. The ministry is under the Hamas-led government in Gaza, which is still deemed a "terrorist" organization by many Western countries.

Humanitarian law

According to international humanitarian law, there is no ban on the destruction of religious sites used by opponents for military purposes, said Yuval Shany, chair in public international law at Hebrew University, although there is a presumption that religious sites are civilian targets and should be spared (according to Article 52 of the 1977 [First Additional Protocol](#), which reflects customary law on the matter).

The [Israeli army](#) maintains that its forces operated in accordance with international law, only launching proportionate attacks against military objectives, and blames Hamas for any harm to Palestinian civilians.

According to the [Goldstone Report](#), an Israeli strike on the al-Maqadmah mosque on the outskirts of Jabilyah killed 15 and injured 40 people. Israel rejected the findings of the report and denies responsibility for the attack on al-Maqadmah mosque.

Amnesty International reported the rampant destruction of Gaza mosques in its [post-war assessment](#).

