

Restricted Livelihood

GAZA'S FISHERMEN

Abdallah is a 53-year-old fisherman from a refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip. He owns a boat, which he runs together with four of his seven sons and another 12 fishermen. Overall, the income generated by Abdallah's boat provides for about 70 people, the majority of them children.

Fishing and fishing-related activities have traditionally supported the

livelihoods of thousands of families across the Gaza Strip. However, in the past decade the ability of people to gain a living from this sector has been severely undermined as a result of the restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities on the access of fishermen to sea areas along Gaza's coast. The number of fishermen has declined from about 10,000 in 2000, to only 3,500 in 2013 and about 95% receive international aid.



Abdallah, 53 years old, fisherman, Gaza

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For many years, Abdallah was employed as a construction worker in Israel. In September 2000, following the beginning of the second Intifada, the Israeli authorities further restricted free movement, limiting permits to exit the Gaza Strip to exceptional cases. The loss of his job in Israel pushed Abdallah to search for an alternative livelihood.

"Fishing seemed a prosperous business. I bought a small 7 metres long boat and began to work day and night. We were able to reach very deep into the sea. At the beginning, I used to make about USD 1,000 a month, which at that time was quite a lot, so I managed to save some money and buy a double-sized boat and three smaller boats. We sold the fish not only to the local market, but also to merchants from the West Bank and Israel."

However, Abdallah's good fortune proved to be short lived. Alongside the escalation in violence, the Israeli Navy began to restrict Palestinian access to the sea, citing concerns about the smuggling of weapons

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and infiltration into Israel. The scope and duration of the restrictions were highly inconsistent. During some periods, fishing activities were totally banned and the ability of Abdallah and his fishermen to work became increasingly unpredictable.

In July 2006, following the capture of an Israeli soldier by a Palestinian armed group, Israel announced that access to sea areas beyond 6 nautical miles (NM) from Gaza's shore was prohibited.

At the end of the Israeli military offensive "Cast Lead" in January 2009, the accessible area was further reduced to just 3 NM. Boats exceeding the limit received "warning shots", forcing them to return, or were requisitioned by the Israeli Navy. These practices continue until today.

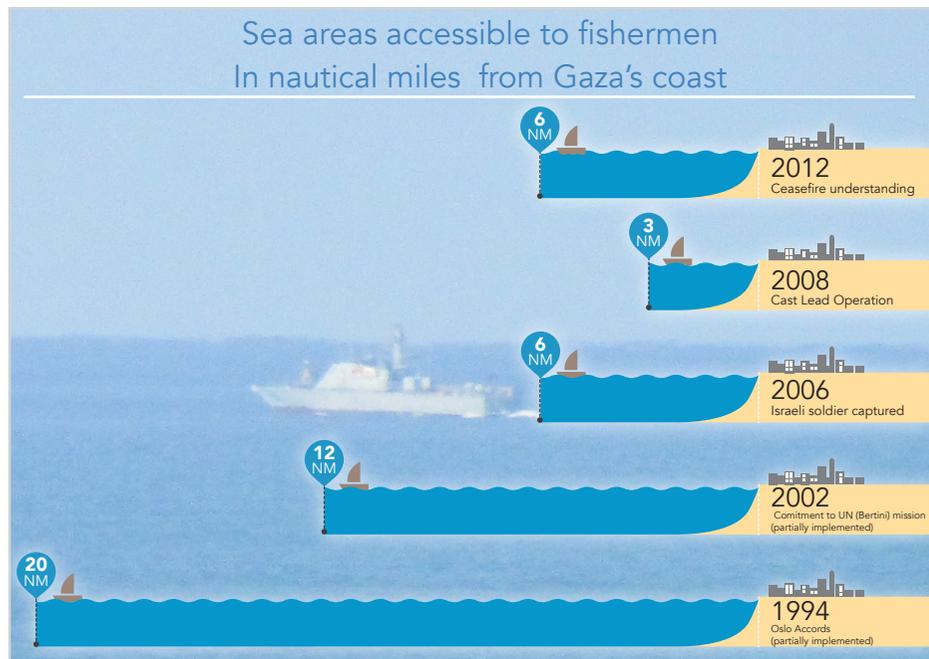


“From that time our financial situation began to deteriorate rapidly, said Abdallah. The fishing catch was only a fraction of what it was used to be, both in quantity and in quality. We lost access to the bigger and more valuable fish. The best income we were able to make then was NIS 150 per day, compared to over NIS 250 before. On some days, we had no income, as we were not even able to cover the cost of fuel. We had to cut down our expenses, even on the basic things.

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but I couldn't afford the tuition. Today, she is 23 and doesn't work. I feel guilty about that.”

The UN's Humanitarian Coordinator met with fishermen at the Gaza city harbour recently to hear firsthand about their situation and the challenges they face. “These are ordinary fishermen struggling to make out a living in this traditional Gazan livelihood - they want to be able to provide for their families but the long-term restrictions imposed on access to the sea are driving them deeper into poverty and debt”, he said.



Mohammed, 59 years old, is a married father of six, who works on Abdallah's boat. Rather than earning a fixed salary, his income is entirely dependent on the volume of the fishing catch: half of the daily net income (sales minus expenses) goes to the boat owner and the other half is divided equally among the other fishermen.

“Because of the access restrictions and the limited catch, I barely make NIS 500 a month. How can I afford the basic needs

of my family? Every three months, we receive a food ration from UNRWA and a subsidy from the Ministry of Social Affairs. This helps us to survive, but is not enough to live decently. Recently, I had to accept a marriage proposal for my 17-year-old daughter, because I can't provide her with proper food and housing, let alone send her to college. I hope she will have a better life with her husband.”

According to Mohammed's wife, Shifa', 44 years old, the sharp



Abdallah's boat upgraded by a new power generator and lighting system.

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reduction in her husband's income has had a pervasive impact on the family's living conditions.

"We need to expand our home desperately. We are currently eight people living in two bedrooms and another room, which we divided by a wall, that serves as a toilet and a kitchen. The six children, including two boys and four girls, sleep in one room, which we also use for storage, while my husband and I sleep in the other room, which we use as a living room during the day. I am pregnant now, but I can't afford the

type of food I really need or get proper medical follow up."

In November 2012, in the context of a ceasefire understanding between Israel and Hamas, the Israeli authorities expanded the fishing limit from 3 to 6 NM from the coast, allowing access to approximately one third of the fishing areas allocated under the Oslo Accords (20 NM). To maximize the benefit of this new situation, Abdallah obtained a USD 10,000 loan from a commercial bank, allowing him to purchase a

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generator and a lightening system designed to attract fish from deeper waters (see photo).

"We learned this technique from the Egyptian fishermen", said Abdallah. "With the new equipment, I hope to make a good profit, particularly during April, which is the peak of the sardine season."

However, in March 2013, Israel re-imposed the 3 NM limit in response to the firing of rockets by Palestinian armed groups.

"The new restriction came at the worst possible moment. We lost the sardine season and I was devastated. Nevertheless, I have a USD 200 loan payment every month. The bank is not interested in the circumstances. If I don't pay they will take my boat, which is the only thing I have to make a living. I feel insecure, physically and economically."

In May 2013, the fishing area was re-extended to 6 NM, renewing hopes of Abdallah and his fellow fishermen for a better future.

"Only God knows what will happen tomorrow. Our lives and livelihood are entirely dependent on a political situation, over which we have no control. Yet, I have no choice but to keep trying. There are too many families depending on my boat. All I wish for is to live my life in dignity, provide for my family, and be able to sail like other fishermen in the world, Abdallah concluded"

For more information on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, please see OCHA Factsheet Access Restricted Areas in the Gaza Strip, July 2013 and The Gaza Strip: The humanitarian impact of restrictions on movement of people and goods, July 2013. Both available at www.ochaopt.org