

Gaza explained in eight maps

Here are eight maps that explain where Gaza is in the region, the historical context, who lives there and what it's like on the ground.

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Hamas, the Islamist political and militant organisation that governs Gaza, left the world reeling last weekend when it stormed across the border into Israel killing festival-goers, and families – including young children and elderly – in their homes, and taking about 200 Israeli hostages back to Gaza.

Since then, the death toll in Israel has risen to 1400, the Israeli government reports. Israel has taken swift steps to retaliate, ordering a “complete siege” against the Gaza Strip, which includes blocking food, fuel, medical supplies and any other goods from entering the enclave that is home to some 2.1 million Palestinians.

As of Monday, airstrikes had already destroyed entire city blocks in Gaza with 2750 Palestinians killed and 9700 wounded, according to the Gaza health ministry.



Palestinians take shelter in a UN-run school from the ongoing Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip in Nuseirat at refugee camp on October 14. **AP**

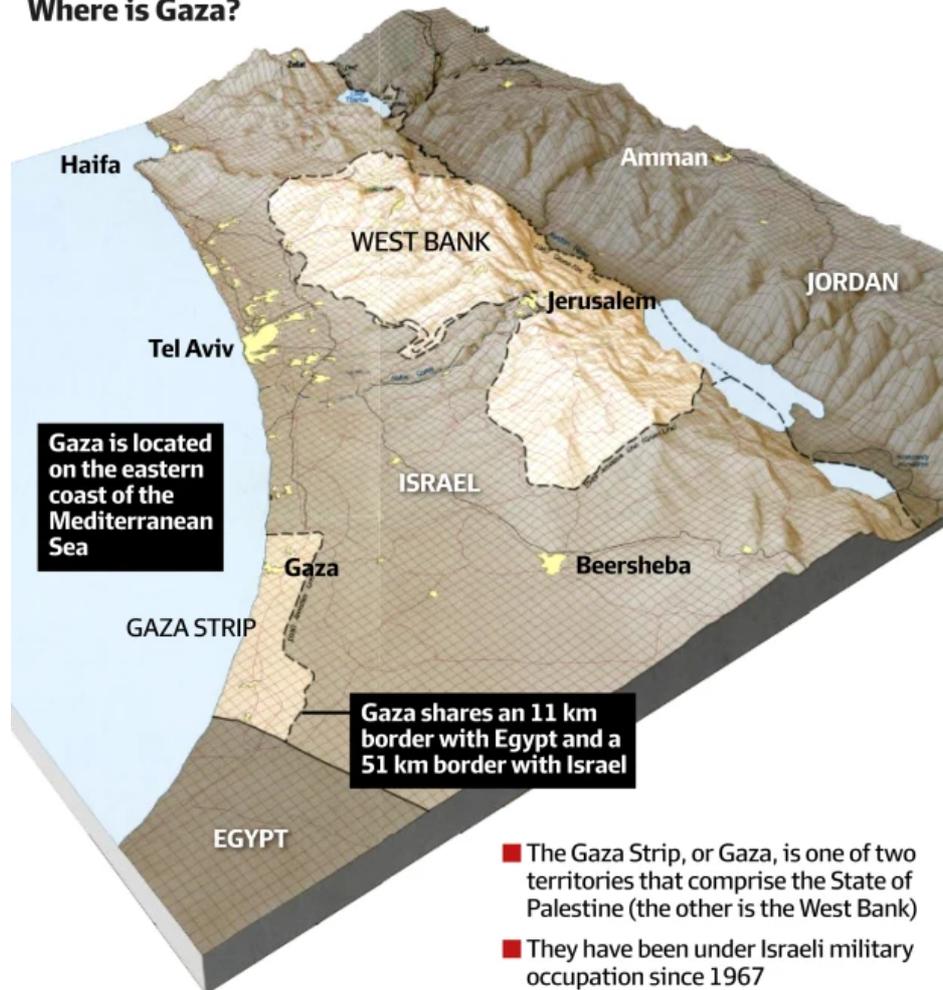
Israel is now readying for a ground invasion in the heavily populated region with troops deployed along the border. The Israeli military initially gave 1.1 million Gaza residents – more than half the territory’s population – just 24 hours to move to the south of the strip ahead of an expected ground offensive.

Here are nine maps that explain where Gaza is in the region, the historical context, who lives there and what it’s like on the ground.

1. What is Gaza, and where is it?

The Gaza Strip is one of two territories in the Middle East that comprise the Palestinian Territories. The other is the West Bank, which is much larger, to the east of Israel, and shares a border with Jordan along the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

Where is Gaza?



Gaza, on the other hand, is a much smaller, heavily populated narrow strip of land along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, with Israel to its north and east and Egypt to its south. It is an ancient trade city and seaport that was once part of a larger geographic region called Palestine.

Gaza has a semi-arid climate. Summers tend to be searing hot and dry and last for about eight months of the year, while the winter months, between November and March can be cold and rainy – with temperatures dropping to about 7 degrees overnight.

Gaza has been ruled by political and militant group Hamas since 2007, after defeating the more moderate, secular Fatah in legislative elections. There have been no new elections in Gaza since. The West Bank is led by the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinian Authority was set up in the mid-90s as an interim governing body to pave the way for setting up an independent Palestinian state based on the land they were left with after Israel's expansion at the end of the 1967 Six-Day War.

Hamas, on the other hand, rejects a “two-state solution” and seeks to establish an Islamic Palestinian state in place of Israel. Hamas has been named by the US and British governments and the European Union as a terrorist organisation (although the United Nations has not done so) because of its armed resistance against Israel, which has included suicide bombings and rocket attacks over the border into Israeli towns.

Even before this latest conflict, Gaza had been almost completely cut off from the rest of the world. Israel’s military occupied the territory until 2005 but even after withdrawing from the area, it has maintained tight control over Gaza through a land, air and sea blockade, with severe restrictions on the movement of goods and people.

2. Historical boundaries

For about 400 years until 1918, Palestine and much of the region was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Following World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the territories of Palestine, west of the Jordan River, and Transjordan, east of the Jordan River, were assigned to Britain as a Mandate by the then League of Nations.

The region has always held religious significance to Jews and had been home to a small indigenous Jewish population in the midst of a much larger population of Palestinian Arabs for millennia. And, according to Middle East expert and former Australian ambassador to Lebanon Ian Parmeter, it was not until the period of the British Mandate after 1920, that Jewish migration became “quite pronounced”.

These four maps show how borders have changed since 1920:

During World War I, Britain had promised in the 'Balfour Declaration' to establish "a national home for the Jewish People" in Palestine.

"Before [then], they did live quite happily together. There wasn't this degree of hatred, or even a great deal of friction."

"That really occurred as the migration of Jews from all over the world into Palestine started to occur under the British Mandate," Parmeter says.



Jews in Jerusalem waving a flag, express joy, after the UN adopted the partition plan for Palestine on November 29, 1947. **Getty Images**

Between 1922 and 1945, the Jewish population grew from 11 per cent to about 30 per cent.

Following the atrocities of the Holocaust during World War II, the UN General Assembly in 1947 voted to create two separate states from British-controlled Palestine – one that was Arab and one that was Jewish. Jewish leaders accepted the proposal, but Arab leaders did not, arguing they should be given more territory because they represented the majority of the region's population.

"Israel accepted that plan. And the Palestinians did not," Parmeter says. "And in many ways, that was one of the major mistakes the Palestinians made because if they had accepted that plan they would have a state, and they would at least not be arguing about the idea of a two-state solution.

"The question of expanding it could still be argued about, but they would have had something. As it is, they don't have anything that they can call their own land," Parmeter adds.



Palestinians driven from their homes by Israeli forces and fleeing via the sea at Acre, 1948. **Getty Images**

When Britain withdrew from the region in 1948, Israel declared itself an independent state and a war ensued with Palestinian Arabs along with five Arab countries that attacked Israel in protest. However, Israel won the war a year later, and it took more territory than it had originally been granted by the UN.

According to a United Nations report at the time, in the months before and during the war about 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes, in areas that are now part of Israel. This mass destruction and eviction of Palestinian Arabs is known as the Nakba (Arabic for catastrophe).

After the war, Gaza was placed under Egypt's control, and the West Bank under Jordan's control. But during the Six-Day War in 1967, both territories were captured by Israel and, according to the United Nations, have been controlled by it since. (The Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt in 1982).

2. How big is Gaza?

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world – home to more than two million Palestinians, who are living in an area of just 365 square kilometres.

Gaza shares an 11 kilometre border with Egypt to the south and a 51 kilometre border with Israel to its north and east.

The territory is between six and 12 kilometres wide, and 41 kilometres along the Mediterranean coast. It can take, with little traffic, less than an hour to drive from North Gaza to the city of Rafah in the south. There's no regular public transport in Gaza.



Gaza's population is packed mostly into five main cities spread out between the north and south of the territory, with Gaza City being the largest.

“Often you see on the streets a combination of people driving beat-up cars, and I remember seeing a lot of people using donkeys to get around,” says Antony Loewenstein, an independent Australian journalist and author of *The Palestine Laboratory*, who was based in East Jerusalem between 2016 and 2020 and spent time in Gaza.

“Transport is a weird throwback to a different era, you don't really see many donkeys on the road in Israel, which really is down the road across the border, and it's a different, parallel universe.”

There's also a side to Gaza that most people don't know or see, which is actually incredibly beautiful, according to Loewenstein, and that's the beach – despite it being polluted.



Palestinian surfers gather on the beach of Gaza City in 2014. AFP

“It’s hard to imagine but there used to be a massive influx of Israeli tourists going to the beach in Gaza. Clearly, that hasn’t happened for close to 20 years, but you have all of these quite posh high-rise hotels right on the Mediterranean, which are often empty, some of them don’t survive. Some of them have been bought. Some of them are used by Western NGOs and journalists. I’ve had a few meals right on the Mediterranean with amazing seafood,” Loewenstein says.

Outside the cities there’s also some farmland, although a lot of Gaza’s agricultural land is now part of the Israeli buffer zone, making it very dangerous for farmers, who produce everything from strawberries to olives, tomatoes and wheat.

To put Gaza’s size in perspective, Parmeter compares it to Hobart.

“Gaza is about a quarter of the size of Hobart. And it has 10 times the population of Hobart, Hobart has about 200,000 people and Gaza has about 2 million.”

4. Access in and out of Gaza

The territory has been under a blockade by Israel, backed by Egypt, since 2007, restricting people and goods such as food, fuel, medicine and construction materials from entering and exiting.

Israel says the blockade is necessary to protect its citizens from Hamas, which gained popularity in Gaza because it was seen as less corrupt and had long advocated armed resistance aimed at overthrowing the Jewish state.

A 2011 United Nations report stated that the blockade amounted to collective punishment which was “in flagrant contravention of international human rights and international law”.

In 2021, Israel completed the construction of a \$1.1 billion “iron wall” along its border with 100 metre ‘no-go zones’ on either side.

Gaza crossings

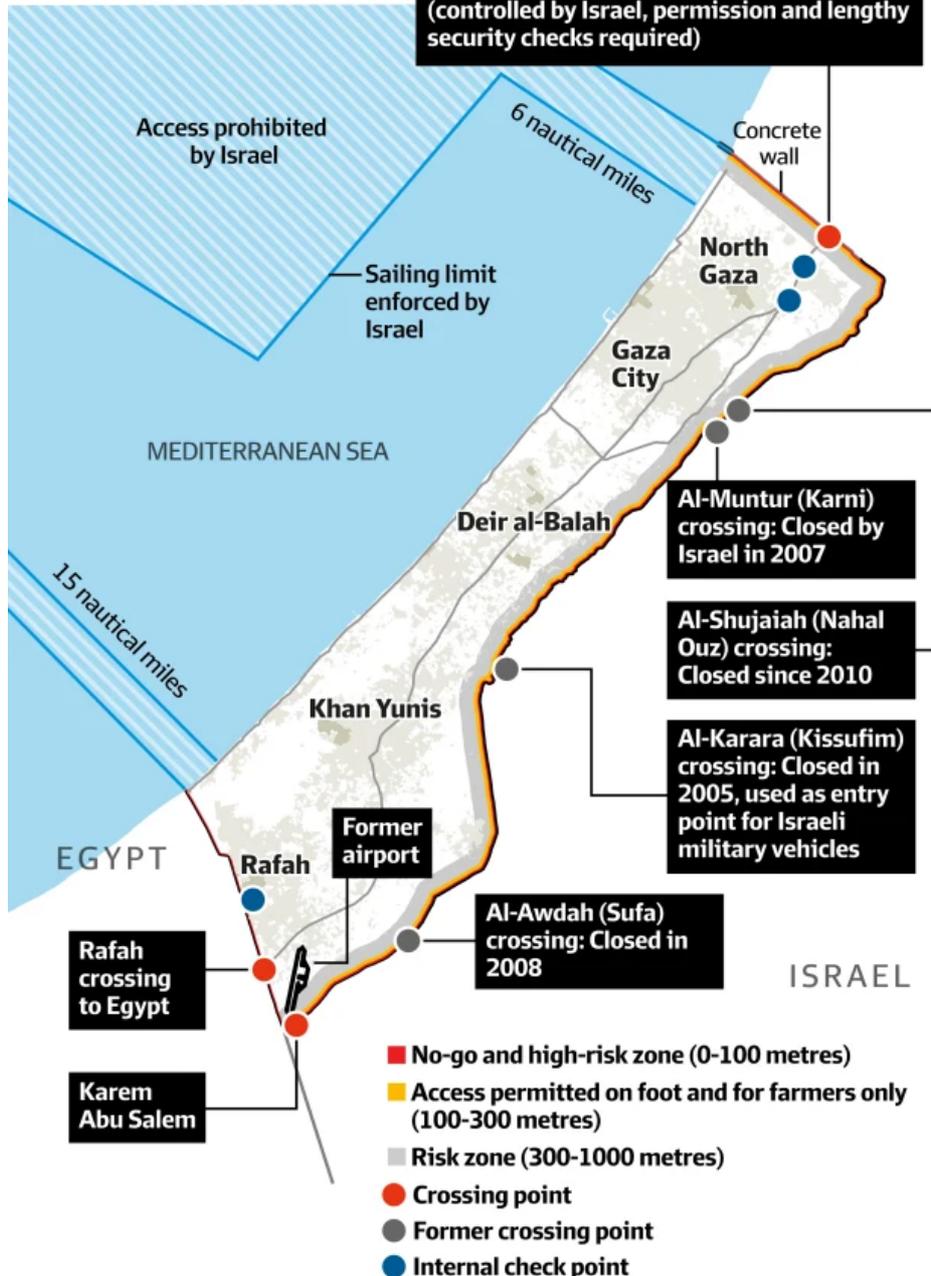
Since militant group Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, Israel has imposed a blockade, restricting fuel, food, goods and travel in and out of the area.

To leave Gaza, a student, businessperson or holiday maker, for example, can only leave from one of three major entry and exit points, which can be closed at any time.

There is no airport – Yasser Arafat International Airport was bombed by Israel in 2001.



Beit Hanoun/Erez crossing into Israel
(controlled by Israel, permission and lengthy security checks required)



Les Hewitt

Israel also controls Gazan airspace and its shoreline. There is no airport in Gaza since Israel bombed Yasser Arafat International Airport in 2001. The Port of Gaza is restricted by Israel to small-scale fishing with a limit of 6 nautical miles at the northern end of the coastal border.

Before this latest conflict, there were three crossings (two with Israel and one with Egypt) between Gaza and the outside world.

(There had previously been seven crossings, but the other four were permanently closed between 2005 and 2010). Now there is just one in the north, called Beit Hanoun or Erez crossing, and two along the Egyptian border – Rafah and Karem Abu Salem.

Parmeter explains that while the blockade is not popular with Egyptians (it doesn't want to be in a sense helping Israel to suppress Palestinians), it does not want hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees streaming into the country.



A Palestinian security officer sits near the gate under Palestinian control at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt in 2018. **Photo: AFP**

“Egypt’s economy is under a great deal of pressure at this time. [President] El-Sisi is facing an election next year. They don’t want the problem with refugees, but they do notionally side with Palestine as fellow Arabs,” Parmeter says.

To circumvent the blockade where possible, the Palestinians have built tunnels along the border with Egypt that they use for smuggling arms and food and other goods.

“It’s a whole industry ... and Israel regularly bombs that whole border to try to destroy the tunnels, but the Palestinians seem to resurrect them,” Parmeter says.

Of course, since this latest conflict, all crossings have been closed and no one from Gaza is allowed to exit. Israel will not allow any food, water, fuel or other humanitarian aid to enter. American citizens stuck in Gaza have

reportedly been stranded at Gaza's border with Egypt despite being promised safe passage through, according to *The New York Times*.

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/14/world/middleeast/gaza-egypt-border-crossing-israel.html>]

Previously, whether you were a student seeking to study outside of Gaza, a businessperson, a labourer, a hospital patient or someone wanting to go on holidays, you would require a permit to exit through one of the three crossings, which could be closed at any time.

Most of these exits tend to be by Palestinians who are traders or employed as day labourers in Israel. Only a small proportion of exits are by patients referred for medical treatment in the West Bank or Israel. Often many of these applications are not approved in time.

There had, however, been improvements this year with Israeli authorities increasing the number of exit permits for Gaza residents, with more exits granted compared with any time since the early 2000s, according to the UN.



A Palestinian woman, employed by UNRWA, carries trays filled with strawberries, at a farm in the Northern Gaza Strip in 2019. **AP**

Loewenstein says if you're a Palestinian living in Gaza, it's often incredibly difficult to get out.

"The border crossings are often simply closed – you can't get out full stop. On the Egyptian side, they're sometimes open and you have to apply. And there are only a certain number of people who get out on the Israeli side," Loewenstein says.

“It’s incredibly common for Israeli officials to routinely blackmail people who might need to go to a hospital in Israel or to study at university overseas if they are a young student. In other words, they will say ‘well, you want to go to hospital or to study in London or whatever? You just spy for us’. It’s incredibly dirty,” he adds.

The Palestinian market also relies heavily on Israel as a trading partner.

To offer a snapshot, in January 2023 Israeli authorities allowed 776 truckloads of authorised goods to exit Gaza. About 78 per cent of these goods went to the West Bank, while 22 per cent were exported to Israel and less than 1 per cent were shipped abroad.

Exports included mostly vegetables (61 per cent), strawberries (27 per cent), textiles (5 per cent) and then also furniture, aluminium scrap and fish, according to the United Nations.

[<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/movement-and-out-gaza-update-covering-january-2023>]

5. Who lives in Gaza (and what’s it like)?

Most people in Gaza live in a medium and high-rise apartment blocks in one of the five big cities, and half of the 2.1 million population are children or teenagers.

They attend one of the 278 United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools across the territory.

According to the US International Trade Administration, The West Bank and Gaza boast one of the highest per capita rates of university graduates in the Arab world.



Girls sit inside a classroom at an UNRWA school during the first day of a new school year in Gaza City in 2018. AP

The blockade of Gaza by Israel has caused living conditions to deteriorate significantly and about 80 per cent of the population is considered to be living in poverty, according to the UN.

Access to clean water is scarce, and electricity (the majority of which comes from Israeli power lines) is limited to about 13 hours a day. Many Gazans are refugees who in 1948 fled or were evicted from their homes in areas that are now Israeli villages, and have never been allowed to return.

“There are people who are much poorer and live in not quite shacks, but really rundown homes. And when I was there a number of times, I saw people who had their homes destroyed by Israeli airstrikes, and were living in rubble,” Loewenstein says.

But there is also a large middle-class population, he adds.

“For example, a friend of mine is a middle-class woman, who has worked in NGOs. She has a large family. Obviously, her world is totally different to yours and mine. But if you go to her house, it’s not that dissimilar to what your house would look like.”

Who lives in Gaza and where?



Gaza is one of the most densely populated places on earth with **4091 people per square kilometre**. About half of population of Gaza are children under the age of 19.



44%

of the Gaza Strip
population were
unemployed
in 2022

81%

have challenges in
meeting basic needs,
with food, health, and
utilities

1,476,700

registered refugees
live in Gaza's
eight refugee
camps

SOURCE: POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU, OCHA, UNICEF

Gaza has relatively modern hospitals, but often they can't get all the resources they need. So if someone needs certain medical care, like a cancer treatment, they need to apply for an exit pass from Israel. Often they are rejected, or approved too late.

The Gaza Strip faces high unemployment rates, with 44 per cent of the population unemployed in 2022, according to UNICEF. But, for those who are employed, there is a range of jobs.

Loewenstein says the NGO sector – both local and international organisations – has been a large employer in Gaza and then there's also government jobs, but he stresses it doesn't necessarily mean they support Hamas.

“And then over the years I have met a number of young people who didn't have work, or couldn't get work. Mental health problems and drug use there were off the charts, as you'd expect.”

Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, there has also been little room for dissent or public protest, says Loewenstein.

“They are an Islamist organisation, and they have pretty hardline views on women and men. It's not the Taliban ... but there are a lot of restrictions. And a lot of Gazans I know, although they often don't say this publicly, but privately, they don't like Hamas.”

Parmeter says Hamas originally won a lot of friends among the Palestinians because they weren't just a militant organisation but also a social services organisation.

“It gave social services like essential food and another humanitarian support to Palestinians who were in trouble, who were starving or whatever. And that helped them make friends, but they also have their militant wing and that became very strong,” Parmeter says.

Iran has supported Hamas for a number of years by giving financial assistance and military hardware.

Loewenstein adds: “[Gaza] is at times, a pretty oppressive place as well, probably becoming principally because of the Israeli occupation and blockade, but also because of Hamas.”

Now life is not just oppressive, but as Israel bombs Gaza and its people have nowhere to go and nothing to eat, life has become increasingly deadly.

Israel-Palestine conflict latest

- ◆ **Hundreds killed at Gaza hospital on eve of Biden visit**
[<https://www.afr.com/world/middle-east/israel-steps-back-from-ground-assault-on-gaza-20231018-p5ed3l>] Gazan authorities said the explosion was caused by an Israeli airstrike but the Israel Defence Forces said it was a rocket fired by a Palestinian armed group that malfunctioned.
- ◆ **'I was so worried'; evacuated Aussies touch down in Sydney**
[<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/biden-to-visit-israel-grim-warning-from-iran-20231017-p5ecto>] More than 200 evacuated Australians have landed in Sydney as foreign governments scramble to get their citizens out of the conflict zone and the US President readies to fly. Here's how the day unfolded.
- ◆ **The rave that turned into a bloody nightmare** [<https://www.afr.com/world/middle-east/the-rave-that-turned-into-a-bloody-nightmare-20231016-p5eckz>] A dance festival five kilometres from Gaza has come to epitomise Israel's lack of preparation for an attack by Hamas.
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[<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/biden-to-visit-israel-grim-warning-from-iran-20231017-p5ecto>]



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