LIFE AT THE CROSSROADS

A History of Gaza

GERALD BUTT

RIMAL
SCORPION CAVENDISH

The Gaza Strip is a name familiar to millions outside the Middle East. It is also a name synonymous with an image of political turmoil, poverty, unrest and violence. This book's direct and informative style reveals how the scenes of violence and human suffering are taking place in a land rich in history. The current struggle for the control of the Gaza Strip is the latest phase in a long saga of attempts to control this south eastern corner of the Mediterranean. The Palestinians of Gaza have had to survive the indifference of the world at large and have been in the shadow of neighbouring regions which have attracted international focus. Much of Gaza's historical heritage has been forgotten. However, within these pages unfolds the richness of Gaza's history. Continuously inhabited for more 3,000 years at a key strategic crossroads of the region, it has been a palimpsest of influences throughout its existence. As well as considering the early period, the age of the Pharaohs and the Philistines of the Bible, accounts are given of the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine eras. The coming of Islam, the interlude of the Crusades and the long period of Ottoman domination bring the story up to the First World War. The crucial history of Gaza in the 20th century is discussed in the period of the Mandate and the conflicts with Israel. It culminates with the *intifada* and the prominence of Gaza in the religious and secular movements dedicated to ending Israeli occupation and the emergence of the Palestinian state.

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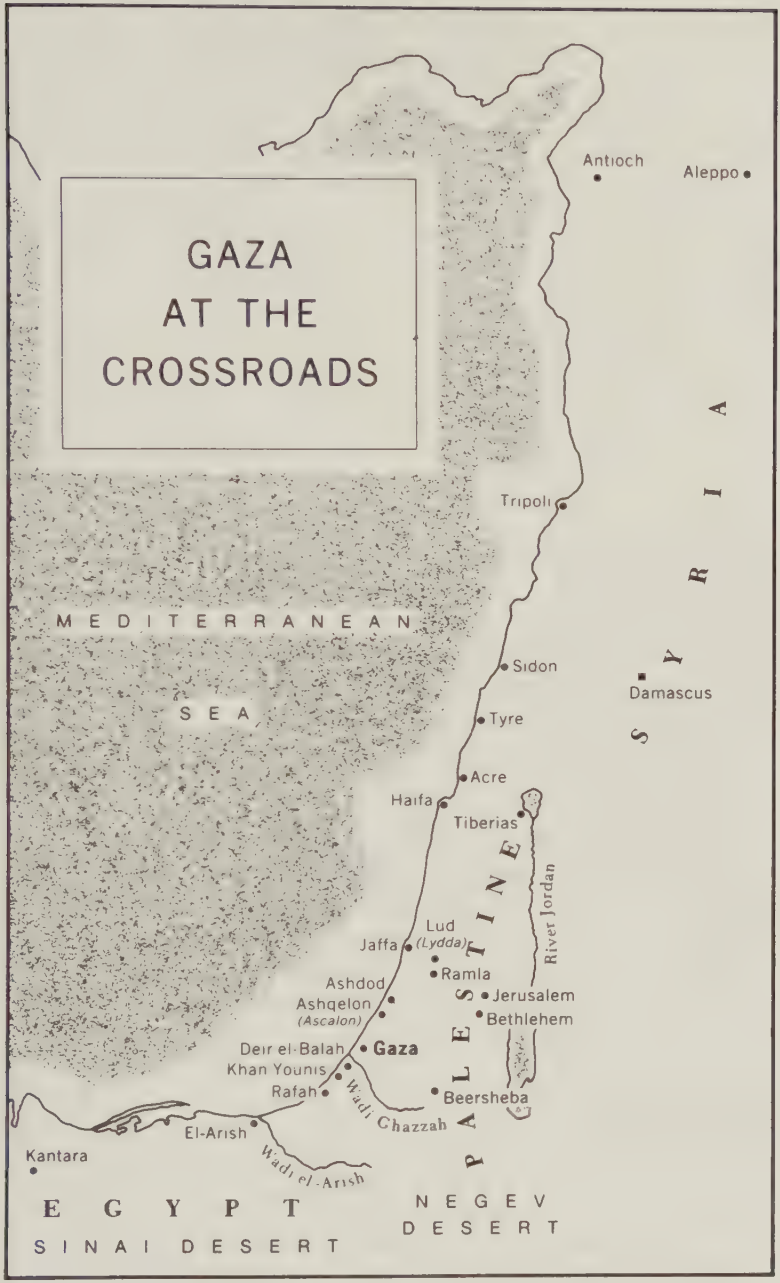
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Foreword

The history of Gaza that is told in the following pages has been drawn from a wide range of published source material, as well as from my own interviews and observations. Transcribing Arabic names and words into English invariably poses problems for books of this kind. I have made every effort to remove inconsistencies; but at the same time I have tried to use spellings which will be most familiar to general readers and cause as little puzzlement as possible. My apologies are offered in advance to the purists who find this irritating.

My thanks go to the people of Gaza who told me their stories and invited me into their homes. I hope that the publication of this book will presage a happier future for the people of the Gaza Strip than they have known for most of this century.

My thanks also to Elizabeth Woonton for her careful research and for helping in all aspects of the writing and preparation of this book.

Gerald Butt, Nicosia
February 1995

CHAPTER 1

'A Land of Many Battles'

'Gaza has a long experience of war; the Philistines, the Pharaohs, Nebuchadnezzar, Cambyses and Alexander the Great were all there; Antigonus and Ptolemy, Judas Maccabee and Alexander Janneus took toll of its wealth and life. Pompey restored it, Augustus gave it to Herod, and Baldwin to the Templars, and Arabs, Turks and Mamluks rode over it; Ali held it in 1771 and Napoleon in 1799. After the battles of this war [World War I], Gaza was a very lamentable spectacle.'[1]

Thus wrote a priest who visited Gaza in 1918, just after the Ottoman Turkish army had been defeated by the British and Allied forces commanded by General Allenby. Gaza, through its rich historical associations, promised much to the newcomer; but, he continued, the newcomer was bound to be disappointed by what he found.

The same is true in the last decade of the century. Gaza suffers from an image problem. Its true identity has been ravaged by occupation and war, and the traces of its past buried under the detritus of conflict, to an extent that its rich historical associations have been largely forgotten. The reason is not hard to find. The priest who visited it in 1918 saw it after it had suffered

three onslaughts from the Allies in a matter of months.

These military offensives were only the latest of dozens that can be catalogued over the centuries. 'Gaza is a land of many battles,' a leading Palestinian historian said, as he lamented the paucity of material evidence of the great events of the past played out on Gazan soil.

Gaza's image in the closing decades of the 20th century has been shaped by more battles – not the skirmishes or offensives of conventional warfare, but the battles of a people to liberate their land from occupation and to achieve independence. The Palestinians' militant struggle to end the Israeli occupation of their land began in 1967 a few months after the occupying forces arrived. But twenty years later, the campaign changed overnight from a series of sporadic guerrilla actions observed by a passive population to mass popular revolt: the uprising, or *intifada*, to quote the Arabic word which has come into general usage.

The people of Gaza have fought many occupying forces over the centuries, and no-one with a knowledge of history of this corner of the world will have been surprised by the fact that the Gazans led the way in the struggle against the occupying Israeli army. The *intifada* began in the Gaza Strip and in the years that followed it this territory was where the flame of Palestinian resistance burned most fiercely.

The association of violence with the image of Gaza towards the end of the 20th century is inevitable. The world has watched scenes of violence played out on its television screens and captured in newspaper photographs; news reporting of events in Gaza have made headline news around the globe.

The *intifada* put Gaza on the world map. But this, arguably, was a mixed blessing, bringing only partial benefit to the territory as it tried to establish its independence and recover its self-esteem. On the positive side the uprising focused international attention on the plight of the Palestinian people who had been living under Israeli occupation since 1967; and it reminded the world that no pressure had been put on Israel to abide by UN Security Council resolutions requiring it to withdraw its army from occupied Arab land. But at the same time it pushed further into obscurity Gaza's rich and important history.

As a result of the *intifada*, Gaza became one of the names on

the map of the Middle East which is familiar to millions of people in the West. It is a name which conjures up a clear image of turmoil, of tear-gas, of Israeli troops firing into crowds of Palestinians, of young Palestinian youths – their faces covered by *keffiyehs* – throwing rocks or petrol bombs at the occupying forces, of refugees living in squalor, of despair.

In May 1994, Gaza was in the news for more positive reasons. Along with Jericho in the West Bank it was one of the first areas to be granted autonomy as Israeli troops pulled out of some of their positions in the centre of the territory – even though Israeli settlers remained and a sizeable Israeli military force continued to be deployed on Palestinian soil to protect them. On 1 July 1994 television screens around the world showed the emotional scenes in Gaza as the Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Yasser Arafat, set foot again on Palestinian soil after 27 years in exile. As one newspaper correspondent described the event, 'he was whisked through the Rafah border to a tumultuous reception in the Gaza Strip and a spectacular 30 minute motorcade past thousands of adoring supporters to Gaza city. It was a day which every Gazan had decided to call historical.' The Palestinian leader saw his arrival in Gaza as a symbolic move in the direction of the establishment of a Palestinian state. Gaza in 1994, as in the many decades and centuries before, was a crossroads – this time for the Palestinian people en route from a life in diaspora or under Israeli occupation towards statehood.

But more crossroads are still to be passed; the hope that the granting of autonomy to Gaza would set in motion a speedy mechanism to create a Palestinian state proved to be unfounded. The images of violence, albeit less frequent, continued to appear on television news screens; still there were reports of the Gaza Strip being sealed off by Israel, of soldiers and civilians being shot at the Erez crossing point, of a militant Islamic leader being blown up in his car, of angry Palestinians from Gaza taking to the streets to accuse Yasser Arafat of having sold out their cause, and of Palestinian police shooting at crowds of Palestinian protesters.

The people of Gaza feel that publicity around the world is essential if the cause of the Palestinians and their determination to achieve full independence are to be realised. But the adverse

effect of the international spotlight on events since the beginning of the *intifada* has to be taken into account too. If one's only knowledge of Gaza comes from the television screen or from the newspaper report, it is difficult to believe that people still live there, given the chaos and squalor portrayed by the media. It is harder still to comprehend that the city and the land round it have a rich and continuous history stretching back more than three thousand years. Ala-Eddine Shawa is a Gazan Palestinian married to an American. 'At one level,' he says, 'people in the United States know a remarkable amount about Gaza – they know there's an Islamic group called Hamas, that there are refugee camps, that there's been a lot of trouble with the Israelis, and so on. But they also think it's very confusing and complex – it seems to them to be a case of everyone hating and killing everyone else.' Whenever Ala-Eddine Shawa is about to leave the United States to return home, it is as if he is heading off to an alien planet. 'They wonder how I can want to go there and stay there.'[2]

Some awesome claims have been made for this tiny strip of territory which many people in the United States and elsewhere in the West will find surprising. 'Gaza lies on the main highway between Africa and Asia,' one historian wrote. 'The road is one of the oldest in the world . . . ' Because of its location, another historian said, 'Gaza knew little peace in antiquity.' It has known little peace in recent times either.

Gaza, to the outsider who is familiar only with its association with violence, might appear to be an unpromising subject for a biography and an unlikely place to claim the significance of having been a crossroads of the Middle East. Distinguished cities with much better chronicled history have claimed this role – Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Istanbul among them. Gaza is not in the same league; it has no great pyramids, it has never been a magnet for tourists or businessmen, nor has it ever been a great military power in its own right. Everyone knows at least a little about Cairo and the other cities: about Gaza's past, few people, even among the Palestinians, can tell one very much. 'Even Gazans know very little about their own history,' a school teacher said. 'We have the excuse that we have been too preoccupied with trying to survive to have the luxury to sit back

and look at the past.'

The way that Gaza has escaped serious attention in the history books is remarkable. Because, in its way, Gaza has been tied up closely with the history of all the major cities in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as with Cairo and with urban centres in the Arabian peninsula and beyond. Precisely because of its geographical position, all the major players in the history of the Near and Middle East have had to take the status of Gaza at the time into account before being able to pursue their political, military or commercial ambitions. This has been as true in the 20th century as it was in the 2nd century BC. Gaza is, quite simply, one of the oldest living cities, sited at one of the oldest crossroads.

The ignorance and misunderstanding of Gaza's role in the past relate to the question of image. One of the oldest cities in the world, it may be. But if one visits it today, one would hardly think that this was the case. When one arrives in the Gaza Strip from the north travelling, as countless thousands have done over the past three thousand years, down the one of the oldest highways in the world, one eagerly anticipates the first glimpse of this ancient city. But one must be ready to be disappointed. The prospect is far from promising. A tall bank of sand dunes with small shrubs growing among them on the right-hand side of the road obscures the view of the Mediterranean; on the left, interspersed with small and insignificant buildings and date palms, lie citrus groves. But as the road, busy with horse and donkey carts as well as cars and trucks, curves southwards there is no clear view of an ancient city. Instead of a neat conglomeration of buildings fringed by orchards and fields, as one might have expected, with Gaza port somewhere over to the right, the view is one of chaotic urban sprawl on a huge scale. It extends from a considerable distance to the left (eastern) side of the main road all the way to the sea on the right.

On closer inspection the new arrival will find that the urban landscape is made up largely of dusty and crumbling buildings, ill-constructed and badly finished concrete structures and the shanty accommodation of refugee camps, squeezing out the remaining areas of agricultural land. He or she might well dismiss Gaza as a best-forgotten and insignificant corner of the Middle

East. Many people have done that. It was with the image of being a forgotten and unwanted backwater that Gaza lived in the decades before the outbreak of the *intifada*.

But appearances are misleading and have done Gaza a gross disservice. The scenes of violence in the late 1980s and early 90s were being played out on land that is rich in history. The great highway which crosses the territory from north to south, 'the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of all nations' as it is described in the Book of Isaiah, has been trampled by scores of conquering and defeated armies. In the same way, the walls and ancient buildings of the city have been constructed and destroyed on countless occasions. When one lives at such a strategically important crossroads one is witness to spectacular developments of history. But one is subject also to the whims of the powerful forces who seek to control the junction.

The uprising of the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation was the latest (and, perhaps, the beginning of the final) chapter in a long saga of attempts by the people of Gaza to resist and remove foreign domination.

While archaeological remains from the past are few by comparison with other significant Middle East sites, a visit to Gaza is valuable in attempting to understand why this territory had such an important role to play in history. In the absence of major historical structures to act as landmarks the landscape itself – the geography and topography – helps a visitor to get a sense of location. For a start, a visitor will see – through the density of modern buildings – why Gaza city was built where it was. Heading south, one turns right up a slope to reach the centre of Gaza. In other words, the city was built on a small hill just to the west of the road, thus affording itself natural protection. This hill, once protected by walls, provided unrivalled control of the land route along the coastal plain connecting Syria with Egypt and Arabia. The walls have gone, but there is still a clear sense of climbing into a compact city centre; and this sense is compounded by the sight of crumbling tombstones in the cemeteries at several spots on the slopes of the hill – areas which would have lain outside the walls.

Most of the old buildings of Gaza city are made of sandstone, while in the villages round about one can still see many made

from mud-brick mixed with straw. The more affluent of Gaza's ancestors built with stone and marble imported from Egypt, Greece, Syria or distant parts of Palestine. The Mosque of Umar, the Grand Mosque, is the dominant feature of the city centre today, sited close to Palestine Square.

The whole focus of life in the city was on movement along a north-south axis, in parallel with the highway which gave the city its *raison d'être*. Gaza port, in ancient times called Maioumas, was a separate city. Only in the early part of this century was a route opened up from Gaza westwards to the sea – the boulevard called today Umar al-Mukhtar Street – cutting across the traditional north-south axis. In the 1950s another east-west route was cut – the contemporary al-Wahda Street. Where this heads down the slope from the old city centre to the sea one can see scars of Mamluk and Ottoman buildings in the Duraij district which have been sliced through to allow passage of the road. Today the city sweeps all the way from the centre down to the sea. But in the living memory of most Gazans this area was, as one described it, 'a jungle of trees and shrubs growing in the sand, with only a few ways where one could pass safely on foot to reach the coast.'

Today the city is inclining more and more towards the sea. As Gaza looks to the day when it will be part of an independent Palestine, work is under way on a new port and free trade zone, sited close to where the original one once stood in the Roman period and in early times. It is also close to the spot where for centuries Gazan fishermen have anchored their small wooden craft. Yasser Arafat has chosen a building right on the coast for his own headquarters in Gaza, and new hotels, apartment blocks and other high-rise buildings – the design of which are doing nothing either to enhance the landscape or evoke memories of Gaza's history – are appearing out of the sand dunes in this western edge of the city. The district is known as Rimal – from the Arabic word for sand.

Today the city is made up of eight districts. Shuja'iya and Zaitoun, poor and densely packed areas, straddle the main highway (known locally as the Rafah-Jaffa road). The other districts are Tuffah, Sabra, Daraj, Nasir, Sheikh Radwan and Rimal. There was a time when different areas of the city

specialised in particular crafts and skills. On the western edge of the old walled city, for example, one once found potters at work. And some pottery is still manufactured in this district.

The importance of pottery as a local industry and a source of livelihood can be seen as late as the period immediately after the First World War. The English priest quoted at the start of this chapter who visited the city in the wake of the devastation caused by three battles for Gaza in 1917 emphasised the importance of reestablishing pottery and other crafts 'to rebuild the city and bring her children home. The manufacture of the very jolly black jugs and bowls is growing well under the impulse of a contract for hospital furnishings with the Red Cross Society.'[3]

Today the focus of daily trading in everyday commodities is the Feras market, on Umar al-Mukhtar Street just to the West of Palestine Square. It is the kind of informal free-for-all market that you find in every ancient Arab city. On the pavements and in every empty space people hang out clothes they hope to sell – a feast of brilliant colours – reds and pinks predominating among the clothes for ladies and children. But there is everything there, including cassettes, kitchen ware and jewellery.

Closeby is the Suq al-Amla, where money-changers can be seen at work – the official ones behind counters in tiny shops, the unofficial ones trying their luck, amid much chatter and waving of arms, on the street.

By the side of the Umar mosque is the gold souq, the Qaisariya – a small covered area with a vaulted roof that could have been lifted from one of a dozen old markets of its kind in Damascus, Aleppo, Amman, Baghdad or any other old Arab city. But the overcrowding of Gaza city and its repeated destruction over the centuries have led to haphazard development. The result is that districts of the city have generally lost their individual character. This means that commercial and residential property are intertwined, so that in a small stretch of any street one is likely to find assortments of premises like small mechanical workshops, furniture manufacturers, fruit and vegetable sellers, and hairdressers dotted among crumbling buildings housing Gazan families.

Through the streets an assortment of traffic passes; along with all the mechanical vehicles, ancient and modern, donkey and

horse carts still ply a trade between businesses, and bring families and their produce into Gaza from the villages nearby. In the early mornings, with smoke and mist drifting through the narrow streets and alleys of the towns and refugee camps you can hear a voice calling '*Bai'i Halib*' – Milk Seller. He is usually an old man from one of the villages or from a bedouin family, and he travels slowly round the town by donkey cart. And many people still prefer to trust the freshness and unwatered purity of his milk to that bought in packets at the shops.

But it is poverty that keeps the donkey and horse carts in use in Gaza, just as it is poverty that forces children to play around in the dusty, rubbish-strewn alleys between the old houses, wearing slip-on shoes or, as often as not, without shoes. After the winter rains the streets fill with water and the alleyways become mud paths.

The main roads also become coated with mud in winter, with cars pulling out of the unmade tracks and side streets. The arterial Rafah-Jaffa highway in and out of Gaza is like a road in a suburb of any Arab city. The chief function of the businesses crowded along its edges is to service the cars and other vehicles using the highway. In Gaza's case the main custom comes from work on the Peugeot taxis which take workers each day from the territory into Israel in search of work. So common are these vehicles that Peugeot has become the common word for taxi.

The highway today, then, because of the complexities of international borders, is not serving as a link between Egypt and greater Syria as it did for so many centuries. Its role is limited to providing a link between the Gaza Strip and Israel. The road serves as an umbilical cord. Gaza is dependent for its economic survival on this link through which most of its imports and exports must pass. And with more than half the Gazan workforce unemployed, the territory is dependent on Israel as a source of employment. Gaza is a reluctant recipient of nutrients through the umbilical cord. Breaking that link – as the Gazans have sought to do with enforced attachment to other superior military powers to the north and south over the centuries – remains the dominant aim of its people as the 21st century approaches.

The physical pressures on Gaza and its people in recent years have come from a number of sources, not least from the Israeli

military occupation; but among the most serious of the other pressures is that of overcrowding. Even by the standards of this tightly packed region, the Gaza Strip is tiny and claustrophobic; and the pressure on its meagre resources increased dramatically in 1948 with the arrival of 200,000 Palestinian refugees. Today, 340,000 refugees still live in eight refugee camps around the Gaza Strip (with about the same number again registered as refugees but living outside the camps). The refugee camps, which have the appearance of small and chronically overcrowded squatter towns, dominate the character and political outlook of contemporary Gaza. They are symbols of the conflict which have given Gaza its current character; and it was that character in turn which spawned the reaction to the Israeli military occupation of the Strip, creating the image of violence which the territory has acquired in the world at large.

Around one million people (80 per cent of whom are refugees from 1948) are crammed into 360 square kilometres of flat land on the coastal plain, and the population is increasing by around 40,000 a year. Some 320,000 people live in Gaza city (which includes 49,000 in the Beach refugee camp). The rest of the population is distributed among the other three towns in the Strip (Khan Younis, Deir el-Balah and Rafah) along with the nine villages and eight refugee camps.

Geographical studies speak of Gaza lying in a very fertile part of the eastern Mediterranean region which is rich in wells of sweet water. You can still see evidence of this – not only in the fields, but also in the fruit and vegetable markets which operate every morning in Gaza and in all the towns and villages in the Strip. But such are the dimensions of this little wedge of territory – 45 kilometres in length and varying in width between four and 10 kilometres – that the demand on agricultural land for urban development is irresistible. Compounding this problem, too, is the fact that Jewish settlements in Gaza, set up during the Israeli occupation which began in 1967, have been sited on some of the most fertile areas containing the best water resources. 'I can see a day coming soon,' a Palestinian economic planner in Gaza said, 'when we no longer have room for agriculture.'

Gaza is a wedge of fertile land, fringed by desert to the south and east and by broader sweeps of agricultural development to

the north. It is in all senses a link between two worlds. For many reasons, historical and political – as well as geographical – Gaza does not fit comfortably with either of its giant neighbours, Egypt to the south or Israel to the north. Gaza has been occupied by the one and administered by the other; and while the links with Egypt remain close (with the Arabic spoken in Gaza tinged by the accent and woven with the colloquial expressions of Egyptian Arabic), Gazans see themselves inextricably linked with Palestine (the ancient territory of Philistia). The recent history of Gaza has been characterised by a struggle on the part of its people to reassert that link.

What is fascinating, though, is to look back further, beyond the time of the British colonialists, through the eras of the Ottomans, of the Crusaders, of the early Arab conquerors, of the Romans and Greeks, and of the pharaohs. By doing so, one can discover that what looks like a small and insignificant speck on the bottom right-hand corner of a modern map of the eastern Mediterranean has had an important and colourful role to play in the history of this part of the world. Up until very recent times, Gaza has been a crossroads for armies and traders alike, a strategic corridor controlling access between Egypt to the south and the lands of Palestine, Syria and Turkey to the north.

What follows in the pages ahead is the story of the Gaza crossroads from earliest history to the present day. For centuries different armies fought for control of the land on which, eventually, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine (incorporating Gaza) and Israel were created in the aftermath of the 1914-18 World War. In recent times, this region has been the battleground for the Middle East wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982. The Middle East crisis and the various parties involved in it have received international attention at these moments of open warfare; guerrilla campaigns have also attracted the eyes of the world, as has the search for peace in the more recent years. Gaza has been in the thick of this frenetic activity, wedged between bigger powers, buffeted this way and that by the creation of the state of Israel, by the Suez crisis, by the Middle East war of June 1967 and by the *intifada* and its aftermath.

Gaza has never been the subject of biography like some of its illustrious neighbours in the region such as Jerusalem and Cairo.

Yet scores of references to Gaza can be found in ancient texts – from reports of conquests of the pharaohs carved in stone to references in cuneiform script on clay tablets – as well as in more recent records. Gaza has also been mentioned in numerous memoirs and biographies of soldiers and politicians who came into contact with this part of the world. Archaeologists have dug beneath the surface of Gaza and discovered physical evidence of its past, recording their experiences in learned journals. By piecing together these disparate references – sometimes a mere mention in a list of place names – it becomes clear that Gaza has its own story.

* * *

Of the two areas where the Palestinians have lived under Israeli occupation the Gaza Strip has tended to be overshadowed by the West Bank – the less crowded, scenically more attractive and considerably more prosperous of the two physically unconnected (since 1948) regions of Palestine. In the second half of the 20th century Gazans had good reason to feel themselves unwanted. While the clamour for control of the West Bank was considerable among many nationalist and right-wing Israelis, as much as among all Palestinians, neither Israel nor Egypt (which administered the territory from 1949 to 1967) showed any enthusiasm for continuing to administer or possess Gaza. There is little in Gaza, for example, to attract fervent followers of Islam, Judaism or Christianity; Gaza cannot boast about its Jerusalem, Hebron or Nablus.

The Palestinians of Gaza, as much as the place itself, have had to survive in recent years accepting the indifference towards them of the world at large. Gaza has been living in the shadow of neighbouring states which have attracted international attention. It is not surprising, therefore, that Gaza's past has been largely forgotten by the outside world.

Gaza today is part of the Arab world and has been inhabited mostly by Muslims of the mainstream Sunni branch of Islam (with a small community of Christians) since the birth of the religion in the 7th century. But even earlier than this, traders from Arabia – the Arabian peninsula, modern-day Saudi Arabia

– had settled there. Gaza had been a crossroads many centuries before the arrival of either Islam or Christianity. And like any junction of trading routes or region of strategic military importance, its people were prepared to absorb foreign influences as much as they were determined to resist and repel foreign domination. Like other eastern Mediterranean coastal cities, the people of Gaza in the earliest years of history were fused with the races of the lands round about. The history of Gaza cannot be seen in isolation: it is linked with the sagas of Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome. All the great dynasties of the Middle East fought to possess Gaza – a 'land of many battles'.

Notes

[1] The Reverend Father Waggett. Quoted in Foreign Office Documents held at the Public Records Office (PRO) in Kew. (FO 371 3413) The records give no information on his identity – but his sensitive observations make interesting reading and will be quoted in Chapters 10 and 15.

[2] Interviewed by the author, 1994.

[3] PRO 371 3413.

CHAPTER 2

A City on the Border

Driving south from Gaza city you are hardly aware at one point, as the main road dips down, of the wide river bed that you are crossing. But if you happen to glance up to the right you will see a narrow bridge which spans the dry river, carrying the old railway line. Looking up the river bed to the left you can see vegetation and greenery – evidence of the rainwater that feeds the soil of the river banks in winter. This is the Wadi Ghazzah (*wadi*, meaning dry river bed, and *Ghazzah*, the Arabic word for Gaza). Since the earliest times it has been the city's front line of defence to the south.

Where the wadi reaches the sea it opens out into a broad estuary. In the winter, when rainwater flows down from the Negev desert, it carries soil and sand with it into the sea, colouring the waters of the shoreline a muddy brown. Just on the south side of the estuary is a small, rounded sandy hill – no higher than a circus marquee. This is Tell Jemmeh (*tell*, the Arabic word for hill), the closest to modern Gaza of a series of tells that line the Wadi Ghazzah. It is from beneath these tells that archaeologists have discovered much of the evidence which enables one to build up a picture of Gaza and its surrounds in its beginnings.

These tells have yielded clues to the earliest occupants of the area, the buried signs of the people who occupied the Gaza area from the time when small groups of Chalcolithic hunters and farmers established communities in the late 4th millennium BC. Successive excavations over the past 70 years have scraped away the layers of Tell Jemmeh, Tell al-Ajjul and Tell al-Farah to reveal evidence of the peoples who came and went for nearly two thousand years. Archaeologists have pieced together a story of a land constantly under threat, a land seized and occupied by a succession of invaders from neighbouring superstates.

From its beginnings, Gaza was part of 'a land, whether we call it Canaan or Israel or Palestine, doomed . . . to be the land bridge and meeting place and battlefield of great Empires – Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, the Hellenistic kingdoms and Rome. Their peoples and armies moved up and down the Way of the Sea, one of the oldest roads in the world, which spanned the country from North to South, traversing the coastal plains and the plain of Jezreel, the site of many armed clashes.'[1] Biblical descriptions and the writings of ancient Egypt add weight to the idea that Gaza itself, in the two millennia before the Christian era, was witness to many of those armed clashes. It was a city of strategic importance. For armies approaching from Egypt Gaza was the first city on the coastal plain to be encountered on the route towards the richer territories of Syria and Phoenicia. The Egyptians knew that control of Palestine was important for access to the timber reserves of Phoenicia and also imperative if the Valley of the Nile itself was to be protected.

Study shows that small groups of hunters and farmers established communities on the tells as early as 3300 BC. Gaza has no public museum in which to display finds from this, or indeed, from an other period. Like any strategic territory repeatedly fought over, Gaza has lost most of its archaeological treasure to foreign plunderers. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem, for example, has a fine collection of excavated material from this very early period. It includes the largest and oldest metal horde ever discovered, consisting of copper mace heads and ceremonial maces.

In subsequent centuries the Canaanites – a Semitic people – began to move into the region. Archaeological evidence suggests

that the earliest Canaanites established settlements in the Gaza area around 3000 BC, although the Biblical land of Canaan did not come into existence until later. Material remains from the earliest period suggest that the economy was based on agriculture and crafts, as well as organised trade. The Canaanites imported copper from Sinai and luxury items made of alabaster from Egypt – in exchange for the export of olive oil.

Between 1800 and 1500 BC (the Middle Bronze Age) Canaan truly came into existence. A reference in the first book of the Bible places Gaza firmly in Canaan. But even this first mention shows clearly Gaza's function as a border town with all the strategic importance which that implies. Gaza has never lost that importance. 'And the border of the Canaanites was from Sidon as thou camest to Gerar, unto Gaza as thou goest' (Genesis X v 19).

Excavation of the tells along the Wadi Ghazzah has revealed much pottery evidence of this period of settlement. For example, the Israel Museum has among its collection a broad-based painted chalice taken from Tell al-Ajjul. It stands about 30 centimetres high and is decorated with dark terracotta-coloured stripes. From Tell Nagila, 35 kilometres east of Gaza, is further evidence of the period. In an excavated tomb 150 pottery vessels were found, as well as objects made out of alabaster, bronze, bone and ostrich egg shell. Some of these had clearly been imported from Egypt and Cyprus, showing how even in these early years Gaza was becoming a trading centre and a place of settlement for travellers. At that time large numbers of immigrants had moved through Canaan to seize control of lower Egypt. These were the Hyksos pharaohs, the 'rulers of the desert uplands' as one historian described them, and they controlled the city states in Canaan. Two fortresses, one at Tell al-Ajjul (also called Beth-eglaim and close to modern Gaza) and the other at Joppa (Jaffa) enabled them to control the coastline. Gaza was already beginning to experience the disadvantages as well as the advantages of its strategic location: Canaan, including Gaza its capital, had become an Egyptian province. Gaza had become a pawn, its fate resting in the hands of powerful neighbours.

But the people of Gaza continually asserted their independence – as they were to do for centuries thereafter.

Although Egyptian rule over Canaan, first by the Hyksos pharaohs and subsequently by other dynasties, lasted for four hundred years Egypt's control of the coastal area of the eastern Mediterranean was often weak. Successive pharaohs were obliged to march north at the head of their armies to reassert authority there. The governors of Gaza swore loyalty to Egypt only under pressure.

The end of the Hyksos era came in 1580 BC when they were driven out of Egypt by Ahmose, the founder of the VIIIth Dynasty; but by this time Egyptian control over the lands of the eastern Mediterranean had diminished, and powerful leaders in Syria threatened the Nile valley itself. Ahmose's descendant Tuthmosis III, a century or so later, one of the most successful military pharaohs, gained full control of the eastern Mediterranean coastal plain. He began the process of reestablishing Egyptian supremacy in the area by the conquest of Gaza.

The man who led the Egyptians back into Gaza was a formidable warrior. As one historian, P H Newby, has written, 'if ancient Egypt can be said to have had its Napoleon it was Tuthmosis III.'[2] He had been hampered in his kingship by a powerful stepmother and aunt, Hatshepsut, who had acted as co-regent with him since he had come to the throne while still a child. During her lifetime Egyptian power in Syria and Palestine had waned and the local warlords had seized the opportunity to exploit their own strength. On the death of Hatshepsut, the Syrian princes, anxious to take advantage of instability in Egypt to further their ambitions to control Egypt, united and became a powerful threat. Thus Tuthmosis III rode out at the head of a vast army from his frontier fortress at Tjel (near modern Kantara on the Suez Canal) to 'overthrow that vile enemy and to extend the boundaries of Egypt in accordance with the command of his father.'[3]

Travelling at about fifteen miles a day Tuthmosis and his troops would have reached Gaza, the first major settlement on the road, ten days later. The firmer soil of the coastal plains around Gaza would have made the going speedier for the chariots after the sand of the desert. Archaeologists believe that Gaza had defensive mud-brick fortifications at this time.

A sentry posted on the walls could have spied a formidable army approaching, the dust from thousands of hooves signalling its approach. P H Newby has created a vivid picture of how the scene might have been: 'A desert patriarch encamped with his family in the hills of Sinai could have looked west one morning during that spring of 1468 BC and seen the pharaoh's army as a cloud of dust moving north with the blue Mediterranean behind it. As the day progressed and the angle of light changed he would see the glint of the chariots and spears. It was an army that intended to live off the land, one not so fat as Egypt no doubt but, in pockets, rich. Nevertheless, hundreds of trotting donkeys carried basic rations of bread, fruit, and oil to see them through to Gaza. A certain amount of water was carried in jars, though the army depended for its main supply on the wells that had been sunk along this already ancient road for just this purpose. Tents, furniture, battering rams, spare poles, axles and wheels for the chariots, were packed either into the chariots themselves or tied on to the backs of the donkeys. Tuthmosis drove his own chariot. Attempts had been made over generations to make the desert road practicable for chariot traffic and a special effort had been made following Tuthmosis's own sortie against Gaza on an earlier, minor campaign during Hatshepsut's lifetime.'[4]

Tuthmosis's troops are said to have numbered twenty thousand, charioteers, infantry, bowmen and all manner of supply troops. In those days, before stirrups made horse-back warfare effective, the charioteers were the elite enjoying all the prestige of later cavalries. From his small chariot platform the Egyptian warrior could hurl a javelin, swing a short sword and shoot arrows.

Land which more recently has heard the thunder of tanks and artillery and the scream of jets overhead would have echoed then to the rumble of wooden chariot wheels, the clash of spears and the pounding of hooves as the first battles for this much fought over territory took place.

It seems that Gaza fell quickly to the Egyptian ruler. The army took provisions and pushed on to the north. The capture of Gaza had occurred simply because it was there, the first city on the Way of Horus (as the Egyptians called the ancient Way of the Sea), not a great prize in itself, but of strategic importance and

the first chance for the great army to test its might. It was an event set to repeat itself.

So, in 1468 BC, Canaan was again firmly under Egyptian control. Its governors were answerable to the pharaohs. Evidence of this period has came from an extraordinary source. In 1887 AD the villagers of Tell al-Amarna in Egypt found a hoard of some 300 clay tablets covered with cuneiform text. These writings, (some of which can be seen in the British Museum in London) turned out to be extant samples of diplomatic correspondence between the pharaohs and the rulers of the great powers of the day as well as the local vassal states of Syria and Canaan. During this period the Egyptians maintained several centres for administrative purposes in Canaan; Gaza was one of the centres where they posted a commissioner.

Canaanite society appears to have functioned in a way similar to Europe in the Middle Ages. Each small city state usually consisted of a major town with subordinate neighbouring towns around it. All the villages were subject to the overlordship of the local 'king' and his nobles. The land appears to have been cultivated by tenant farmers working for the nobles; they also served as infantry. Every city state was subject to tribute payments and its fighting men were liable to call-up whenever the Egyptian king required them to march in his army. In one of the texts, Yahtiri, governor of Gaza and Joppa (Jaffa), writes to the pharaoh for permission to come to Egypt to serve in his army. 'To the king, my lord, my pantheon and my Sun-god I speak: Thus says Yahtiri, your servant, the dust of your feet. At the feet of the king my lord, my pantheon and my Sun-god, seven and seven times I fell. Moreover, I am a faithful servant of the king my lord. I looked here and I looked there, but there was no light; I look to the king my lord and there is light. And even though one brick might move from beneath its neighbour, I will not move from beneath the feet of the king my lord. And let the king my lord ask Yanhamu, his deputy! When I was young he brought me to Egypt, and I served the king my lord and I stood in the gate with the king my lord. And let the king my lord ask his deputy whether I guard the gate of Azzati and the gate of Yapu. And I, with the troops of the king my lord, will go wherever they go. And now indeed have I set the front of the king's yoke upon my neck and

I will bear it.'[5]

The Amarna letters show clearly how different the relations were between the pharaohs and the powerful states on the one hand, and between Egypt and the lesser vassals in Syria and Canaan on the other. In communications with Egypt, the leaders of the powerful states like Babylon and Assyria address the pharaohs as 'brother'; whereas the Canaanite leaders were more likely to affect humility, like Yahtiri, and refer to themselves as the 'dust under the feet' of the pharaohs. They positively grovelled in their communications with Egypt, indicating the low status of Gaza at this time within the land controlled by the pharaohs.

The clay tablet letters describe in great detail the gifts – given more often than not to buy loyalty – that were constantly being exchanged between the powerful foreign 'kings and their "brother" the pharaoh. Horses, chariots, inlaid furniture, lapis lazuli, and ivory *objets d'art* were the most common objects exchanged, but the most valuable and sought after commodity was gold.'[6]

The pharaoh's 'brothers' in the neighbouring superstates had gold on their minds, whereas the leaders of the weaker states were more concerned with their personal safety and with the safety of their villages. Gaza and the other cities of Canaan were vulnerable, weak militarily, subject to Egypt and fearful of attack from the increasingly powerful Hittites to the north. 'The city weeps and her tears are running, and there is not help for us,' reads one of the Amarna tablets from a town in Syria. 'We have been sending to the King . . . of Egypt for twenty years; but not one word has come to us from our Lord.'[7]

The letters also shed light on another group causing concern for the towns and cities of Canaan. This was the Habari (also spelled 'Apiru'), so-called outlaws and outcasts, who were only too willing to ally themselves with the disloyal Egyptian subjects. The Habari were 'runaways who for various reasons had to flee from their own city states. They tended to band together in isolated places hill areas . . . whenever they appear in the Amarna letters they are portrayed as engaged in violent or subversive activity.'[8] The Amarna letters speak frequently of their actions. Several of the letters are pleas to the pharaoh for

support against these marauding bandits. 'The Habiri plunder all the lands of the king. If the archers are here this year, then the lands of the king, my lord, will remain; but if archers are not here, then the lands of the king, my lord, are lost' (al-Amarna letter 287). The inhabitants of Gaza and the other cities in Canaan were under threat from more than one enemy.

There exists much excavated material to throw light on this period between 1450-1200 BC. Remnants of a large building of that time, possibly a palace, have been revealed and excavations have shown that the tells on the Wadi Ghazzah were fortified from this period – no doubt in response to the waves of attacks from the Habiri. According to a study published in *Archaeology* magazine, a short stretch of mudbrick wall of the Tell Jemmeh fortification still survives, along with one of the gateways. Large quantities of pottery from this period, much of it imported from Greece and Cyprus, can be seen in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Also in the Israel Museum from this period are the spectacular finds from Deir el-Balah, a town just south of Gaza city, which illustrate a high level of sophistication in society at that time – the 1200s BC. The core of the collection is made up of several large pottery sarcophagi – resembling in shape Egyptian mummy coffins. Human faces and tiny arms are depicted on the lids. The headdresses and ornaments also echo the Egyptian style. Stored inside the sarcophagi along with the bodies was a fine collection of pottery and delicate jewellery, including a bone scarab inscribed with the name Tuthmosis III set in a bronze ring. Another scarab, this time faience set in gold, is also inscribed with his name. The identity of the occupants of these extraordinary sarcophagi remains unclear. The speculation must be that they were either Canaanites influenced by the Egyptian belief in the after-life; or perhaps that they were Egyptian officials stationed in Canaan by the pharaohs. Either way the quality and individuality of the workmanship indicate that the people of the Gaza area at that time were used to handling finely crafted and beautiful objects – either locally made or imported from Egypt.

Tuthmosis's success in reestablishing Egyptian control over Canaan was short-lived. Subsequent pharaohs found the

subjugation of the territories to the north increasingly difficult to maintain. The people of the Gaza area, true to form, did not relish foreign control. Egypt's prestige in those lands fell in the century following Tuthmosis's campaigns. Around 1300 BC, about 150 years after Tuthmosis had marched north, another pharaoh, Sethos I, set out in the first year of his reign to reestablish influence in Canaan and Syria. His aim was to restore the glory of Egypt and define again the outlying frontiers of the pharaoh's suzerainty. He referred to his reign as a period of renaissance.

Like Tuthmosis, Sethos was a warrior and set about his task with great energy. In his mission he was no longer guided by the god of his predecessors, Aton, who 'filled every land with beauty'. In keeping with his aggressive aims he marched northward protected by the god Amon whose 'heart is satisfied at the sight of blood . . . (who) cuts off the heads of the perverse of heart . . . (who) loves an instant of trampling more than a day of jubilation.'[9]

Like Tuthmosis III, Sethos's campaign trail began at the fortress of Tjel (close to modern Kantara and a place well known to soldiers more recently in the two world wars and the subsequent Middle Eastern wars). By now Egyptian communications were less secure. Sethos's army had to fight even in Sinai where he found many of the 'migdol' fortresses, built to protect the wells along the military route, under siege from bedouin tribesmen. According to one historian 'the Egyptian army had to begin fighting as close to home as the southern Sinai where the Shasu Bedouin were disrupting the smooth flow of travellers and material along the approximately 120-mile roadway known as the Way of Horus that led from Egypt to Gaza.'[10]

Pictorial evidence of Sethos's march north at the head of his army comes from wall reliefs in the great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak in Upper Egypt. The illustrations show clearly Sethos's aggressive and warlike character. One scene depicts him walking with a Syrian prisoner under each arm. The climax of the relief shows Sethos returning in triumph to be greeted by the god Amon. Behind Sethos come long lines of captives who are to become slaves in the workshops of the temple at Karnak – in all

probability some of the defenders of Gaza were among the prisoners.

But much of the relief at Karnak concentrates on the campaign march itself in the form of a pictorial map which depicts Gaza and confirms its status as a significant strategic city needing to be captured along the way.

The lowest line of pictures on the eastern side of the wall at Karnak shows the various landmarks along the route, including the besieged water sources. Access to these was essential to this and all later campaigns against Gaza from the south. The map indicates 'the military road along which Sethos's army had to pass before he could reach his main objectives in northern Syria. The way led across the waterless desert of the Sinai peninsula beyond a small canal now replaced by that of Suez. The reliefs display in correct order the many small fortified stations built to protect the indispensable wells, and these together with a town of lost name which is evidently Raphia (Rafah), 110 miles from Tjel, constitute the earliest equivalent of a map that the ancient world has to show. Twenty miles further on, described as the "town of Canaan" is Gaza.'[11]

Tuthmosis's easy victory over Gaza was not to be repeated. Sethos found a city more strongly fortified than in the past. By this time Gazans had experience of defending their city and were not going to give up without a fight. For Sethos it was an all-important battle; this was the first year of his reign and Gaza was the first city standing in the way of his declared renaissance of Egyptian supremacy. Sethos took Gaza by storm; the details of the battle are obscure, but it is fair to surmise, given the reports of Sethos's bloodthirsty nature, that Gazans took a considerable bruising. But, having secured the city, the conqueror moved on to the north, leaving the inhabitants of Gaza to carry on as before.

By the end of the Bronze Age (around 1200 BC) Gaza was important enough a place to be marked firmly on a map; it was the site of a thriving Canaanite settlement; and it had its own governor and ruling hierarchy, even though it was subject once more to the pharaohs.

In its first 2,000 years of recorded history the pattern of Gaza's relationship with its powerful neighbours was established. On

several occasions armies from the south had succeeded in crossing the Wadi Ghazzah and taking the city. But Gaza was never the goal of the campaigns; no invader stayed to enjoy it as a prize. As a result the city, between invasions, could develop an internal autonomy. The inhabitants of Gaza seemed able to pay lip-service to foreign masters while maintaining the city's independent spirit.

Around 1300 BC Gaza and the rest of Canaan had become a wedge between the two big powers of the day, Egypt to the south and the Hittites of Syria to the north. The great pharaoh Rameses II spent at least a decade in efforts to recapture Egypt's Syrian possessions. Inevitably in these northern campaigns, Gaza, on the Way of the Sea, had a role to play. In particular, in Rameses's second campaign he used Gaza (the most important Egyptian provincial city controlling the southern coastal area) as a garrison where he divided his force into two units to confront the Hittites on two flanks.

During the rule of Rameses II and his successor Merneptah, Egyptian scribes continued and refined the tradition of recording and collating information collected during forays into Canaan. One document contains a gazetteer of the twelve principal forts along the coastal route from the Egyptian border to Gaza. These forts were built specifically to protect wells, the sweet water from which was vital for the success of military campaigns.

While Merneptah was in power a postal register was established, recording the movement of messengers from the pharaoh to and from Gaza and cities further to the north. Another interesting record from this time is an inscribed basalt stela. It contains a hymn of triumph to the pharaoh for his victory over Canaan, and mentions the towns in the province. The stela also talks about victory over a new people called Israel settled in the foothills to the east of the coastal plain. This is the earliest mention of Israel in ancient texts. Although never settling in Gaza, these newcomers were to play a major part in the history of the city. However, another set of new arrivals who came from much further afield did settle and changed the character of the city for ever.

These travellers did not arrive via the Wadi Ghazzah as the

Egyptians had done, but by sea from the west and by land from the north.

Notes

[1] Michael Grant, *History of Ancient Israel*, London, 1984, p. 7.
[2] P H Newby, *Warrior Pharaohs – The Rise and Fall of the Egyptian Empire*, London, 1980, p. 46.
[3] Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, Oxford, 1961, p. 109.
[4] Newby, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
[5] *The Times Concise Atlas of the Bible*, London, 1991, p. 25.
[6] *Biblical Archaeologist*, March 1989.
[7] Al-Amarna letter number 59, quoted in the *Biblical Archaeologist*, March 1989.
[8] *The Times Concise Atlas of the Bible*, p. 2.
[9] *Biblical Archaeologist*, March 1989, p. 2.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[11] Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

CHAPTER 3

The Roots of Palestine

From the centre of Gaza city you get no sense that you are close to the sea – yet the Mediterranean shore is only about five kilometres away. Life in the city has traditionally focused on the land routes through Gaza rather than its sea approaches. In past centuries the port was a separate city beyond a barrier of sand dunes and shrubbery, influenced by its proximity to Gaza but with a character of its own. Today the city has sprawled westward to the sea shore, and work is under way on a new port. The aim is to break the links with Israel and reestablish Gaza as a coastal trading city in its own right, echoing its status as a major trading terminus two thousand years ago.

In the 1200s BC, when Gaza remained a province of pharaonic Egypt, the sea began to play a more important part in the city's history. It was from the sea that waves of new settlers started to arrive in about 1175 BC – immigrants who created strong, prosperous city states along the coast and left an indelible cultural imprint. For a start, the largest group amongst them, the Philistines, gave their name to the land – Philistia, a name which survives today in the word Palestine.

The immigrants were called the Sea People and in their thousands they represented the 'greatest threat to the stability of

the countries of the southeastern Mediterranean since the movement of the Hyksos three centuries earlier.'[1] In fact the Sea People came by land as well as by sea. By land they travelled from Anatolia southwards into Syria, bringing their families and goods by ox-drawn waggons. They were heading for Egypt, a land of legendary wealth in gold and abundance in food.

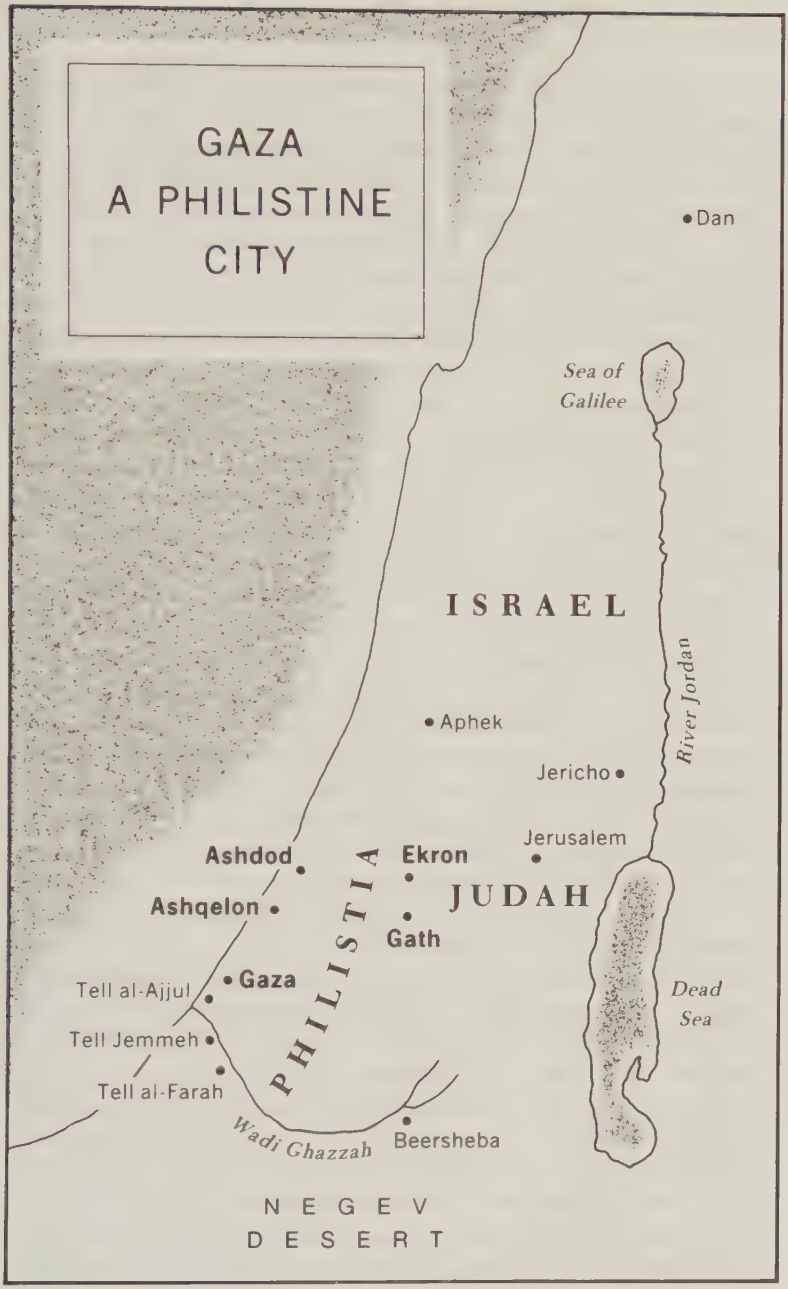
By sea the new arrivals came mainly from Crete and Cyprus, bringing with them the cultural traditions of the Mycenean world. Much of our evidence of the arrival and settlement of the Sea Peoples comes from the Old Testament of the Bible. Their displacement of the people of Gaza is mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy (II v 23): 'As for the Avim, who had lived in settlements in the vicinity of Gaza, the Caphtorim, who came from Caphtor [Crete], destroyed them and settled in their place.'

The appearance of such large numbers of new inhabitants, many of them fighting men, posed a threat to Egyptian supremacy as much as it unsettled the local Canaanite population.

Some 150 years after the pharaoh Sethos had reestablished Egyptian rule in Canaan, one of his successors, Rameses III, had to commit a huge land and naval force to counter the new threat. His warriors fought the Sea People on two fronts and their victories were recorded on impressive stone reliefs.

One scene of battle where the invaders were defeated by the Egyptian army was the coastal plain north of Gaza. The newcomers from the north battled, in the manner of the Hittites whom they had clearly encountered on their march from southern Anatolia, from chariots, each with two armed men and a driver. Formidable fighters, the Philistines were depicted on Rameses's victory frieze as tall warriors wearing tasselled kilts and distinctive ribbed helmets.

Off the eastern shores of the Nile Delta, meanwhile, Rameses's forces engaged the Sea People in a great maritime battle. The superior Egyptian navy with its powerful ships manoeuvred by skilled oarsmen trapped the sailors from across the Mediterranean, whose ships were powered by sail only, near the shores where bowmen were waiting to pick them off. One historian recounts that for 'those who came forward together on the sea, the full flame was in front of them at the river mouth


GAZA
A PHILISTINE
CITY
Dan
Sea of
Galilee
ISRAEL
River Jordan
Aphek
Jericho
Jerusalem
Ashdod
Ekron
JUDAH
Ashqelon
Gath
PHILISTIA
Tell al-Ajjul
Gaza
Tell Jemmeh
Tell al-Farah
Dead
Sea
Wadi Ghazzah
Beersheba
NEGEV
DESERT

while a stockade of lances surrounded them on the shore. They were dragged in, enclosed and prostrated on the beach, killed, made into heaps from tail to head. Their ships and their goods were as if fallen into the water.'[2] While the newcomers were defeated on both fronts, the cost to the Egyptians was such that they could not drive them away permanently.

Egypt was victorious but drained of resources. From this period, exhausted of both revenue and resolve, Egypt fell into decline that lasted for centuries, removing the threat to Gaza from the south.

But Gaza had to come to terms with the increasing number of new settlers on the land, because Rameses, the victor in the battles against the Sea People, had no option but to allow them to remain in the land of Canaan. The southern part of the coastal plain, a fertile strip some 70 kilometres long and up to 35 kilometres wide became Philistia. Power was concentrated in a pentapolis consisting of the cities of Gaza, Ashqelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath, each of which was ruled by a local lord. Gaza, with its former status of a capital, became the most powerful of the Philistine city states. Three of the cities, Ashqelon, Ashdod and Gaza, were beside the coastal road. Ashqelon had long possessed a harbour and enjoyed a prosperous trade. The same was true of Gaza. In addition to the five recorded city states, there were other Philistine settlements as well. Two of the most notable were a busy fertile town called Yavneh (Jamnia) which in ancient times included a port, and another harbour town at Tell al-Qasili near the northern extremity of Philistine occupation on the bank of the River Yarmuk.

Despite the fact that Egypt was in decline, the Philistine leaders, while responsible for the defence of their own cities, still nominally answered to the pharaohs and were obligated to raise tributes for them. But gradually their role as vassals or mercenaries of the Egyptians diminished as the influence of the pharaohs faded. A striking illustration of the change in relationship between the peoples of the coastal province and Egypt comes in the reports of one of the pharaonic envoys, Wen Amun, who was dispatched to Byblos in Phoenicia around 1100 BC to procure cedar wood. The prince of Byblos apparently would not even receive Wen Amun and forced him to camp on

the beach for almost a month, all the while sending him messages to 'get out of my harbour'. Such behaviour by a Canaanite leader towards a high ranking Egyptian official during the reign of Tuthmosis III or Rameses II would have been unthinkable.

For all practical purposes, then, the city states of the Philistines became independent. Their people put down roots and became settled, flourishing as merchants, traders and warriors. Excavations and the reports of Wen Amun show how the Philistines established maritime trading with Phoenicia in the north, and actively competed with them for control of the lucrative eastern Mediterranean sea trade. Trading was also conducted by land in caravans moving into the deserts of the interior.

Archaeological evidence in the form of imported pottery shows that the Philistines maintained trade links with their former homelands, Crete and Cyprus. Pottery manufactured by the Philistines during this period can be seen in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The shapes of the pottery and some of the decorative features clearly reflect styles from the Aegean which the Sea People presumably brought with them. The display shows bowls with horizontal loop handles, stirrup jars and other vessels all decorated with distinct Philistine patterns. Red and black are the dominant colourings and most have a wide band of colour in which spirals, triangles and other patterns are painted. Another common decorative feature is a leaf-shaped bird, its wing spread and its head turned backwards.

Philistine deposits have been uncovered all over Tell Jemmeh, on the Wadi Ghazzah, which appears to have been a 'daughter town' of Gaza, a neighbouring town under Gaza's control. The most important find of this period on the tell is an enormous 12th century technologically advanced ceramic kiln.

But while maintaining links with their homelands, 'over the years in which they were settling down in their new homes the Philistines gradually became assimilated to the civilisation of the Canaanites and presumably intermarried with them as well; even their language [non-Semitic] was eventually replaced by a local Canaanite dialect. Excavations at Ashdod have shown how many Canaanite elements became blended with their originally non-Semitic way of life. Thus the gods of Aegean origin whom they

brought to the country were given the names of Canaanite deities. These included Dagon,[3] to whom a large temple was devoted in Gaza and which figures in the Biblical story of Samson.

The five strong Philistine cities, which were ruled by military elites, soon came into conflict with another group of immigrants, the tribes of the Israelites (Hebrews) who, according to the Book of Exodus and Jewish tradition, had been led by Moses out of Egypt where they had been in slavery. The frequent references to Gaza and the Philistines in various books of the Old Testament appear in the context of the developing conflict between the Philistines and the tribes of Israel. The accounts inevitably view the friction from the perspective of the Israelites.

In the earliest reference to the Philistines, the area of their supremacy is defined when the Lord reminds Joshua of the land waiting to be claimed by the Israelites. 'This is the land that still remains: all the regions of the Philistines, all those of the Geshurites from the Shihor, which is east of Egypt, northward to the boundary of Ekron, it is reckoned as Canaanite: there are five rulers of the Philistines, those of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashqelon, Gath and Ekron' (Joshua XIII vv 2-3). Later in Joshua (XV v 47) the inheritance of the tribe of the children of Judah is listed according to their families – 'Ashdod with her towns and her villages, Gaza with her towns and her villages into the river of Egypt.' Gaza was seen as rightfully belonging to the nascent Israelite state, God-given, to be gained and held. It did not yield easily.

As the Philistine city states grew they became established as independent military powers, and even though they had no central government were still able to present a united military front when necessary. Conflict with the Israelite tribes occurred when the Philistines attempted to extend their influence inland into the hill country. There were constant skirmishes between the Israelites and the Philistines. Israelite patrols targeted Philistine trading caravans travelling to the coast from the desert, and threatened constantly to make incursions into the plain. The Philistines, for their part, set up frontier posts east of their cities which encouraged the Israelite tribes in the belief that the rulers of the coastal plain were about to invade their hill settlements.

In the several mentions of Gaza in the book of Joshua, it is always referred to as the furthest point of Philistine territory in the sights of the Israelites. For example, in the chronicles of his great battles (Joshua X v 41): 'And Joshua defeated them [the enemies of the Israelites] from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza and all the country of Goshen as far as Gibeon.'

There is no complete chronicle of the encounters between the Philistines and the Israelites, but the Bible paints a picture of an era marked by battles interspersed with periods of calm. The Israelites held the high ground, but were faced with a formidable enemy on the plain – a string of city states built on military might which united when necessary against a common enemy. But they also had one other enormous advantage over the tribes of Israel: they 'enjoyed a local monopoly on the manufacture of iron, the secret of which they had presumably learned from the Hittites who had had a similar monopoly.'[4]

The Philistines were skilled smelters of ore, particularly of iron. Thus they could manufacture chariots from which to fight, while the armies of Israel consisted of foot-soldiers. As one historian has written, 'the ill-trained, ill-equipped Israelite tribal levies could stand little chance against such a foe in open battle.'[5] Frequent references in Joshua and Judges bemoan the military superiority enjoyed by the Philistines because of their technological skills. In Joshua XVIII v 16 one reads: 'The tribe of Joseph said, "The hill country is not enough for us; yet all the Canaanites who live in the plain have chariots of iron."' And again in Judges I v 19: 'The Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had iron.'

The Bible also records the Philistines' unwillingness to share their knowledge with the Israelites. 'Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears."' (I Samuel XIII v 19)

There are many Biblical stories, in which the threads of myth and history are tangled, about the conflicts between the Philistines and the Israelites. Gaza is the setting for one of the most dramatic of these. It is the story of Samson, who is portrayed as a superhuman figure from the Israelite tribe of Dan.

The tribe had been forced by the Philistines to leave the foothills and settle to the north. Scripture sees him as a *nazirite* – a person consecrated to God – born to deliver the tribe from their misfortune. As Judges (XIII v 5) puts it: 'It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.'

Samson had a soft spot for Philistine women and his exploits in Gaza began when he went to visit a prostitute within the city. The Gazans saw an opportunity to ambush this Israelite giant on his way out of the city at dawn, and lay in wait for him. But Samson left at midnight, and seeing his way out barred 'took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.' (Judges XVI v 3)

Samson then fell in love with a Philistine woman Delilah who was persuaded by the Philistine lords to coax out of him the secret of his extraordinary strength. Finally he told her 'a razor has never come upon my head: for I have been a nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me: I would become weak and be like anyone else.' (Judges XVI v 17)

Delilah was paid by the lords to cut Samson's hair as he slept. And then, while he was weakened, the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. 'They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles; and he ground at the mill in the prison.' (Judges XVI v 21) While there, the story goes, Samson's strength began to return as his hair grew again.

The Philistines offered a great sacrifice to their god Dagon in thanks for the capture of Samson. 'And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, and let him entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison and he performed for them.' He asked to stand between two pillars of the temple where he could feel the columns under his hands. Three thousand men and women were watching him when he said '"Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it.' (Judges XVI vv 25-30)

The descriptions of Samson's superhuman strength are clearly mythical. But the setting of a city of considerable stature, well fortified, with a prison and with a temple big enough to

accommodate at least 3,000 people, is probably accurate. In which case Gaza under the Philistines was a solidly established city with a justice system and a flourishing practice of pagan worship. This temple may have been built over the one of Amon which Rameses III erected.

As for Samson's exploits, they are clearly folk tales. However, according to one historian, 'he was probably an historical individual all the same: not perhaps one of the judges as the Bible regards him, but a tough resistance leader who made a name for himself.'[6]

The tribes of Israel eventually managed to unite for a time to face their common enemy, the Philistines. In 1050 BC a large Philistine army gathered at Aphek, a frontier post close to the Israelites. They faced an army consisting of members of practically all the tribes of Israel. On this occasion the Israelites suffered total defeat and the Ark, the shrine housing the Ark of the Covenant, the throne of the invisible Yahweh [God] and the focal point of the Israelite tribes, was captured by the Philistines. It was taken to Ashdod and placed in the temple of Dagon there. The only account of these events is Biblical and is inevitably coloured by the Israelite version of history. The Bible relates how the presence of the Ark brought plague and calamity to the Philistines wherever it was taken. After seven months it was sent back to the Israelites. From this point on, in the face of the increasing integration of the Israelites and their growing strength, the Philistines no longer enjoyed automatic supremacy either in military or commercial affairs, and victory was not always a foregone conclusion.

The Israelites, acting more and more in unison, looked for a leader 'because a unified military command was needed to drive the Philistines out of Israel's hills.'[7] Saul became the first king of Israel, spending the whole of his reign at war, much of it facing the major challenge from the Philistines 'whose efficient united forces still held down the greater part of the country.'[8] Saul defeated them in at least three major battles, compelling them to withdraw their forces from the inland regions and redeploy them on the coastal plain. The Philistines were becoming less of a military threat, with their monopoly of iron taken from them. But Saul could not deal the major blow needed to subdue them definitively.

Saul's end came in a disastrous battle against the Philistines in which his three sons, including his heir Jonathan, were killed. He himself, wounded in the fighting, died by falling on his own sword. The Philistines displayed his severed head in one of their temples, and nailed his body, together with that of his sons, on to the city wall at Beth-shan. And they reoccupied the greater part of the country.

Around 1000 BC, David, who as a boy soldier during the reign of Saul had earned fame when he killed the great Philistine soldier Goliath, became king. He won decisive battles against the Philistines and fought unprecedented wars of conquest, vastly enlarging the Israelite dominion.

David's victories over the Philistines ushered in a new era of Israelite supremacy, with Jerusalem for the first time the centre of power. The Bible portrays David as carrying out the word of God in defeating the Philistines. Once again the Philistines made a raid in the valley. When David again inquired of God, God said to him, 'You shall not go up after them; go around and come on them opposite the balsam trees. When you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then go out to battle; for God has gone out before you to strike down the army of the Philistines.' (I Chronicles XIV vv 13-15) Thus, it is said, David drove the Philistine armies from Gibeah to Gezer. It is not clear whether he annexed Gaza and the other Philistine city states. However, 'they had been completely deprived of their power: pinned into a narrow strip of territory, they lost both their maritime and land traffic to David and their trading town of Tell el-Qasili became a commercial centre of the Israelites instead. A new sort of Israelite pottery, derived from Philistine models, began to appear, with a hand-burnished slip coloured dark-red with haematite (natural ferric oxide).'[9]

Gaza and the other Philistine city states were reduced to helplessness, no longer militarily powerful and obliged to recognise Israelite supremacy. In the first book of Kings (IV v 21) Philistine subjection to Israelite rule in the reign of king Solomon, David's successor, is spelled out. 'Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.'

The reference to 'the borders of Egypt' seems to indicate that Gaza and the other Philistine city states may have been tributaries to David and Solomon.

However, it appears that the Philistines began to escape Israel's domination towards the end of Solomon's reign and to look to Egypt for aid against the Hebrew kings.

Five years after Rehoboam (Solomon's son and successor – around 928-911 BC) came to power Egypt reasserted itself, and once again a pharaoh sent a force to the north. This time it was the pharaoh Shishak who led the march. At this point the land of the Israelites had become divided into Israel and Judah – the latter occupying the hill country to the east of Philistia and encompassing Jerusalem.

The route of Shishak's march is unclear, but the best evidence suggests that he passed through Judah into Israel; and Gaza once again featured in the campaign. 'According to the place list on the Temple of Amon at Karnak the starting point of Shishak's campaign in Asia was apparently Gaza. From there one force advanced to the north, and another to the Negev. On his way home Shishak must have passed Gaza again; in the last row of the record is the name of Raphia [Rafah]. Since no other Philistine town is mentioned, apparently an understanding existed between Egypt and the Philistines and in particular between Egypt and Gaza.' Shishak died shortly after the campaign and before he could restore Egypt's grip on Asia. However, the tribes of Israel were never again a threat to the stability of Gaza.[10]

Documentary evidence of Shishak's campaigns in Palestine is slight and questionable. Over the next century fleeting historical references to Gaza depict a city subject to changing fortunes and to shifting alliances aimed at protecting its increasingly important status as a terminus for the valuable trade in spices and incense from the Arabian peninsula.

As the power of Israel declined, so the lands of the eastern Mediterranean became vulnerable again to powerful neighbours.

The period of Philistine rule was one of the most significant in Gaza's history. There is a clear echo today of the Philistine heritage in the name Palestine – in Arabic, *Filastin*. At same time, though, the word Philistine has been used rather unfairly in

Western culture over recent centuries in a completely different context. It has acquired a pejorative sense, the origins of which are not easy to understand. One English language dictionary defines a Philistine as 'a person of material outlook, indifferent to culture.' The Philistines, it is true, were aggressive fighters; and their treatment of Samson, as reported in the Bible, showed awful brutality. Whether or not they were indifferent to culture is not clear. But in any case it seems unfair that history should have decided to single out the Philistines for particular abuse.

Notes

[1] *Biblical Archaeologist*, March 1989.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
[4] John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Philadelphia, 1981, p. 169.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 180.
[6] Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[10] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 2, New York, 1992. p. 913.

CHAPTER 4

Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians

At the northern edge of the Gaza strip Israeli-registered trucks can be seen entering a huge compound encircled by a high wire fence. The compound is filled with factories and warehouses. It is an industrial zone established by Israel on Gazan soil at Erez, next to the main crossing point into the territory. Gaza would prefer it if compounds like this one were in their own hands and that trading and business affairs in the territory were under their control. The history of trading in Gaza dates back at least to the days of Philistia, and its strength in commerce made it an attractive prize for successive foreign invaders.

Although confined to the coastal plain it would appear that Gaza and the other Philistine cities continued to function as effective ports and trading centres during the period of Hebrew domination. In the 8th century BC another neighbouring power, Assyria (a region to the north-east, centred on the river Tigris), laid claim to the towns and cities of the eastern Mediterranean. Gaza, with its unique position on the major international trade routes, its flourishing port and its proximity to the bigger prize of Egypt, was once again a natural target for conquest.

Assyrian rule in Philistia lasted only a century, from about 730

to 630 BC, and the Gazan role in resisting the invaders is well documented. Much of the evidence comes from letters on clay tablets in cuneiform script.

The Assyrian invasions began in 742 BC with the campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III whose initial target was control of the trade from the Phoenician ports of Byblos, Arvad, Sidon and Tyre, on the Mediterranean. Once Assyrian rule over those cities was established, Philistia became the next target.

Trade was uppermost in the minds of the Assyrians. The text of a letter found in Calah (a city in Assyria) to Tiglath-pileser from an official stationed in Tyre sheds some light on the background to Assyrian aims in Philistia. The official states that he has sent instructions to the inhabitants of Sidon that they should not trade with the Philistines and the Egyptians. It appears that the Assyrians wanted to monopolise Phoenician trade in timber. The date of this letter is unclear, but it is thought to be about 738-734 BC. If so, the letter would give added weight to the argument that the main aim of Tiglath-pileser's first campaign in Philistia in 734 BC was to secure Mediterranean ports and gain control over their trade.[1]

A fragmentary inscription of Tiglath-pileser from Calah gives some detail of the first Assyrian campaign into Philistia and specifically refers to Gaza. According to this fragment of clay tablet the Assyrian army set out from Phoenicia marching south along the coast.

The only Philistine city mentioned is Gaza, which was captured and sacked – something that happened repeatedly throughout history and which accounts for the paucity of ancient remains in Gaza today. The king of Gaza at the time of the Assyrian invasion, Hanun, receives special mention. It appears that although the royal family was captured he managed to escape the attacking army and flee to Egypt where he unsuccessfully sought the help of the king of Bubastis. Having failed, he returned to Gaza where he was pardoned by Tiglath-pileser, and surprisingly, was reinstated as king. But Gaza became an Assyrian vassal, incorporated into the realm of Tiglath-pileser's tribute bearing states. Nevertheless, following normal Assyrian practice, the conquerors allowed it to retain autonomy as the largest commercial city on the threshold of

Egypt. The Assyrians only annexed territory that bordered directly on Assyrian lands and at that time their southernmost province was Simirra in Phoenicia.[2]

Having captured Gaza, like conquerors before and after, Tiglath-pileser moved on, this time south as far as the 'City of the Brook of Egypt' (near or at modern El-Arish) where he set up a stela to indicate the southernmost limit of his empire. The erection of this stela symbolized the final military achievement of the Assyrians in 734 BC. 'Now, having conquered all of Syria and Palestine, from the Taurus to the Egyptian border, the Assyrian emperor could justifiably declare himself ruler over all the lands "from the Bitter Sea of Bit Yakin . . . as far as Egypt, from the horizon to the heights of heaven."'[3] The list of vassal leaders who paid tribute that year included almost all the kings of southern Anatolia, Syria and Palestine – among them Hanun of Gaza.

The effects of Tiglath-pileser's ventures into Philistia were felt for some years afterwards, and news of his death in 727 BC caused unrest across the country. It was this event that prompted Isaiah, to prophesy against Philistia: 'Do not rejoice, all you Philistines, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the root of the snake will come forth an adder and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent . . . ' (Isaiah XIV v 29)

The Philistines' resentment against foreign domination was not strong enough at this time, however, to tempt them to join Samaria in its last war against Assyria. Samaria was defeated and fell to Shalmaneser V, Tiglath-pileser's successor.

But when Sargon II ascended the throne at the end of 722 BC, Hanun of Gaza joined a coalition of cities, led by Yaubi'idi, king of Hamath (a city in northern Palestine), opposed to Assyrian domination. This Syro-Palestinian revolt, which was supported by Egypt and encompassed cities across Syria and Palestine including Simirra and Damascus, failed. In 720 BC Sargon suppressed the rebellion in the west, then defeated the coalition in central Syria before turning south towards Gaza crushing all of Philistia on the way.

Once again Hanun called for help from Egypt and although an Egyptian force set out it was intercepted at Raphiah (Rafah), just south of Gaza. Raphiah was taken and, without the aid of the Egyptian forces, Gaza was doomed. The city offered no

resistance, and Hanun was captured and led to Assyria in chains, leaving Gaza once again a vassal city. After this abortive blow for freedom, despite the unrest and resentment that simmered away in Palestine during the reigns of Sargon and his successors, Gaza remained loyal to Assyria.

In an economic sense the relationship between Gaza and its Assyrian overlords appears to have been mutually advantageous because, as has been seen, the motives for Assyrian control over southern Philistia and the borders of Egypt seem to have been largely commercial. Gaza, by then, was a city of considerable economic importance. Control of the city enabled Assyria to extend her rule further into Arabia while Gaza would continue to reap profit from the Arabian trade – spices, incense, perfume and other luxury goods being in particular demand.

Following a further campaign to consolidate his strength in the Egyptian border region Sargon appears to have established a military garrison in the vicinity of the destroyed town of Raphiah. This was a settlement of exiles forming a buffer region which, while not being annexed to Assyria, remained loyal to it. The pharaoh of the time, Osorkon IV, also appears to have had commercial interests at heart and was not interested in fighting Assyria. Both sides seem to have wanted peace and normal trading. Economic endeavour rather then territorial acquisition and the subjection of foreign populations were the achievement of Sargon's military victories in Philistia.

In return for relative autonomy the cities of Philistia continued to pay tributes to Assyria. One letter from this period (some time after 716 BC) informed the king that foreign chieftains from Egypt, Gaza, Judah, Moab and Ammon had arrived at the capital with tributes. Gaza's tribute of twenty-four horses is singled out for a special mention. Another interesting example of rich tribute levied on Philistia is found in a letter sent to Sargon, most probably by Sennacherib, then crown prince. It is a detailed account of the tributes of two Philistine cities. Parts of the letter are broken making identification of the cities difficult, but it is believed that one of them was probably Gaza. The tax consisted mainly of silver, linen suits, robes, tent cloth, dried fish and sheaves of papyrus for the chief scribe.

Sargon's death on the battlefield in Anatolia in 705 BC

sparked off rebellions throughout the Assyrian vassaldoms. Babylon rebelled first and the majority of the territories in the west soon followed. In 701 BC, after settling affairs in Babylon, his successor Sennacherib set about quelling the rebellions in Philistia, consolidating them once again as a semi-neutral buffer area between Assyria and Egypt; but again neither annexing them nor exiling their inhabitants.

However, Sargon's son, Esarhaddon, favoured a much more aggressive military policy and it is from the period of his rule that the excavations at Tell Jemmeh revealed remarkable evidence of the military control of Philistia by the Assyrians at that time.

In 679 BC, approximately a year after his accession, he undertook his first expedition into Philistia and plundered the town of Arsa, a hitherto unknown place on the border of Egypt (Arsa is the town associated with the excavations at Jemmeh some twenty miles from Gaza), and carried its king Asuhili back to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh (near Mosul in modern Iraq). This campaign against what must have been an insignificant town was probably intended as a show of force against the new Nubian king Tirhaka who was having some success in extending Egypt's sphere of influence into Philistia. Archaeological evidence suggests that Esarhaddon built a new military base at Arsa (Jemmeh), to guard the border of his empire and to serve as a base for his campaigns against Egypt in 674, 671, and 669 BC.

One of the finds at Tell Jemmeh was a large building with a mudbrick barrel vaulting, unique in the region and dating back to the period of the Assyrian occupation. Archaeologists believe that it may have served as the residence of the military governor or general commanding the Assyrian base. The plan of the mud-brick construction corresponds to a well known Assyrian building type. A report on the find in *Archaeology* described the construction of the palace in detail: 'The building's walls were constructed with rectangular mudbricks laid header-stretcher in alternating courses in what is today known as "english bond". The bricks were laid with sand mortar kept in place by a thick layer of mud plaster, large areas of which survive inside the rooms. All rooms are floored with mudbrick, and against the end wall of each small room is a ledge that was probably designed to hold several lamps for these lightless rooms.'

The pottery found inside the structure has led to interesting theories about its original occupants. 'A number of locally made storage jars were found on the floors of the basement rooms; one had apparently been suspended from the vault by ropes. In one room, where a thick ash layer rested on top of the fallen portion of vaulting and continued under the intact vault, archaeologists found many fragments and one unbroken bowl of a type of pottery known as Assyrian Palace Ware. It seems certain that the building's pantry or kitchen was directly above this room, and that this fine dinner service had been stored there. If this magnificent vaulted building did indeed serve as the residence of an Assyrian military governor or general it is quite possible that the imported Assyrian Palace Ware was his personal dinner service. In one corner of the room where the floor bricks were missing was a debris-filled cavity with a cache of about 150 carnelian and faience beads. A few iron spearpoints and arrowheads were also found in these rooms.'[4]

The vaulted building survived Esarhaddon's death in 669 BC and probably continued as the major residence during the reign of Ashurbanipal who carried the conquest of Egypt as far as Thebes in 663 BC. But there it seems Assyria overreached itself and Egypt soon broke free, forcing Assyrian troops back into Philistia. No reference to the Philistine cities has survived from the latter part of Ashurbanipal's reign, and Assyria's supremacy rapidly declined after his death.

Nineveh fell in 612 BC and with its fall came a resurgence of nationalism among the nations previously under Assyria's power. Egypt was enjoying one of its periodic moments of self-confidence, looking once again beyond its own borders to the north. Indeed, an Egyptian army joined forces with the Assyrians to confront a new power threatening the region, Babylonia. They fought the Babylonians on the banks of the Euphrates river. The Egyptian army must have passed through Gaza on its way northwards and the assumption is that, for this brief period at least, the city was once again a vassal of Egypt. 'There can be no doubt that Gaza was Egypt's vassal in 609 BC when Neco II (610-595 BC) hurried to Harran to help the Assyrians against the attacks of the Babylonians. In that battle (605 BC) Nebuchadnezzar, still as crown prince, totally defeated

the Egyptian forces.'[5] The Bible account portrays the Babylonian victory as absolute: 'The king of Egypt did not come again out of his land, for the king of Babylon had taken over all that belonged to the king of Egypt from the Wadi of Egypt to the River Euphrates' (II Kings XXIV v 7).

Despite this emphatic statement by the Judaean chronicler in the Book of Kings, it appears that further battles occurred in Philistia between the Babylonians and the Egyptians. Given the location of Gaza it is safe to assume that the city became a pawn in the hands of the two great powers. The great Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar II, the most powerful of the six kings who ruled Babylonia between 629 and 535 BC, undertook several campaigns in the south between 604 and 586 BC to establish authority. Gaza came under Babylonian control in 601 BC, subdued yet again by an army on the move. It is thought that a great battle between the Babylonians and the Egyptians took place on the Gaza plain in that year. Documents of a later period indicate the likelihood that Gaza became, for the Babylonians, a garrison town at that time – as it has for other foreign armies so often in its history. By the end of those early campaigns Babylonian influence held sway as far as the Brook of Egypt (El-Arish) on the Palestine-Egypt border.

There is little to suggest that life in Gaza changed dramatically with the transfer of overlords. Tribute still had to be paid, only it was now sent to Babylon instead of Nineveh. The last mention of the Philistine leaders in cuneiform documents is a reference to the kings of Gaza and Ashdod, together with the kings of Tyre, Sidon and Arvad. Their names appear at the end of a list of high court officials who performed certain duties at the completion of Nebuchadnezzar's palace.

Babylonian domination of the Near East was shortlived. The Babylonians had been coming under increasing pressure from the Persians. A new and powerful state had been created in Persia with a fusion of Medes and Persians. Between 559 and 530 BC, King Cyrus created an empire which eventually covered most of the modern Middle East. In 539 BC Cyrus and his army entered Babylon and effectively Gaza had new rulers from afar. In 525 BC Cyrus's successors overran Egypt and 'it could be said that for the Egyptians 2,000 years of foreign rule had begun.'[6]

Gaza and the cities of the Mediterranean coast during the time of Persian rule cannot have been considered as great prizes. Although dominated by and paying tribute to the Persians, there is no evidence that attempts were made to assimilate their populations into Persia. Their individuality appears to have been respected. For the Persians the significance of the old cities of Philistia lay in their location. Like the Philistines before them, the Persians had their eyes on the wealth of Egypt. Gaza, as usual, was the obvious place to prepare for an attack on Egypt. Tells in the vicinity of Gaza, Tell al-Farah, Tell Jemmeh, Tell al-Hesi and Tell al-Sharah are thought by archaeologists to have been military installations. The tells were in fire-signalling distance of each other, and their proximity to Gaza and Ashqelon, coupled with their ready access to the Egyptian border, would have made them obvious locations for forward-staging areas as well as combat support stations for the Persian army in its campaigns against Egypt.

Cyrus's successor, Cambyses, invaded Egypt in 525 BC. Maritime support for the invasion was provided by the Phoenicians while the Arabs protected the water supplies on the desert route from Gaza to Egypt. 'The Arabs are first mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions of about 850 BC as a nomadic people of the north Arabian desert who paid their tribute to their Assyrian overlords in the form of camels – which had first been domesticated in the Arabian peninsula some 500 years earlier.'[7]

Gaza, after Cambyses's invasion of Egypt, became the bridge between Persian Asia and Persian Egypt. In 517 BC Cambyses's successor, Darius, visited Egypt. It is more than likely that he stayed in Gaza on his journey. Excavations indicate that Gaza became a strong fortress town for the Persians. At Tell Jemmeh two large buildings and storehouses belonging to the Persian period were uncovered; more than likely they had been constructed for Persian troops garrisoned in Gaza.

The strongholds may have been occupied by Greek mercenaries under the command of Persian officers and it is probable that the sites stored food supplies so that the army could fight in the border regions without having to expend precious time foraging for supplies. Much of this is supposition as very little is known about the period of the Persian occupation of

Palestine. However, archaeological evidence that does exist suggests that the tells contained storage facilities for grain, and large quantities of pottery of the period from Attic and other Greek or East Greek markets suggest that the occupants of the sites came from further afield.

It appears that under Persian rule at the beginning of the 4th century BC coins were struck in Palestine which imitated coins of Athens showing Athena and an owl. Two such coins are on display in the British Museum in London. One has the letter 'O' in the cheek of the goddess Athena and the second has two Phoenician letters above the wings of the owl which refer to Gaza.

From this time on the five cities of Philistia ceased to hold any kind of position in international affairs. However, within the immediate region Gaza, for one, remained an important urban centre, well fortified and prosperous. The Greek historian Herodotus, in 450 BC, reported that the city was almost as large as Sardis (a city in Asia Minor). Under the control of regional administrators called satraps, Persia allowed the different nationalities under its sway to retain their laws and customs, and Gaza presumably continued to function as a trading centre.

In 350 BC, Egypt once again reasserted itself, this time with the help of mercenaries from Sparta – finding themselves in conflict with the Greeks based in Gaza who were fighting alongside the Persians. The Egyptians conquered Gaza in that year and extended their military operations as far as Syria. But this period of Egyptian domination was brief. Another Persian ruler, Artaxerxes III Ochus, began the first of two campaigns to reconquer Egypt, establishing his base in Gaza.

In the light of what was to follow in Gaza's history, it is interesting to see how Greeks were beginning to play a role in the military campaigns for the control of Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. And just as Gaza had been strategically important for the hirers of Greek mercenaries, the Egyptians and the Persians, so its position on the eastern Mediterranean crossroads ensured that it would regain its prominence when Greek culture became dominant – in the Hellenistic age.

Notes

[1] *Biblical Archaeologist*, vol XXIX 1963, p. 88.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 88.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[4] *Archaeology*, January-February 1983, pp. 17-18.
[5] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 914.
[6] Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East*, London, 1991, p. 5.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

CHAPTER 5

The Rule of Greece and Rome

Gaza in the 20th century is caught up in the waxing and waning fortunes of successive superpowers; its history, like that of any small city trapped between powerful and ambitious neighbours, one of reaction, entrenchment and self defence. In this century, the ambitions of Turkey, Britain, Egypt and Israel have all had a bearing on Gaza's fate. And for much of the time the events in Gaza were played out in the context of the battle of the Cold War, as the United States and the Soviet Union sought to secure zones of influence in the Middle East.

The burden of keeping foreign populations subdued has always involved the outlay of huge resources – in the ancient world no less than in the modern. In Palestine, wedged as it has always been between superstates, as soon as one power found the weight of empire too heavy to carry so another was waiting in the wings to take it over.

In the case of the Persians, too, there was a foreign power watching for signs that the empire was beginning to crumble. The next major player ready to come on stage was Philip II of Macedonia who ruled between 359 and 336 BC. He sought revenge for the Persians' invasion of Macedonia and Greece in the previous century and for their more recent support for his own opponents in Greece. The Persians were the only potential

enemy of any size left to threaten Philip's desire for empire, expansion and power.

But long before he had achieved his territorial aims Philip was murdered at the age of only 42. His nineteen-year-old son Alexander III (the Great) took up the mantle with enthusiasm. Alexander's achievements in establishing an empire stretching as far as India and central Asia exceeded by far the ambitions of his father.

Given what Alexander ultimately achieved it is worth recording an anecdote about an incident in his growing years which reveals much about his character – particularly as the story centres on Gaza. 'Once, when the young prince was offering sacrifice, with would-be royal lavishness he scooped up two whole fistfuls of incense to cast on the altar fire. This brought down a stinging rebuke on his head from his tutor. "When you've conquered the spice-bearing regions, you can throw away all the incense you like. Till then, don't waste it." Years later Alexander captured Gaza, the main spice-entrepôt for the whole Middle East. As always, he sent presents home for his mother and sister. But this time there was one for Leonidas [his tutor] as well. A consignment of no less than 18 tons of frankincense and myrrh was delivered to the old man (enough to make him rich beyond his wildest dreams on the resell price), "in remembrance of the hope with which that teacher had inspired his boyhood" together with an admonition to cease being parsimonious towards the gods.'[1]

In 334 BC, at the head of 40,000 Macedonian and Greek troops, he crossed the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and began his conquest of the Persian Empire. In 333 BC he defeated the Persian king Darius III Codomannus and then began to make his way down the eastern Mediterranean coast towards Egypt.

Much of Phoenicia came readily over to his side but Tyre refused to allow him access to the temple on the island of the city god Melqart. Alexander thought himself descended from Heracles, and regarded the city god of Tyre as a manifestation of the great fighter. The people of Tyre refused to allow a foreigner – even Alexander – to offer a sacrifice on the island. As a result of this, Alexander prepared to lay siege to the island. His shipborne arsenal was formidable – siege towers on ships

equipped with scaling bridges, and powerful torsion catapults capable of firing huge stones. Alexander's army was eventually victorious, the city fell and a gruesome massacre followed with 8,000 of Tyre's defenders killed, 2,000 of them being crucified along the coast as a warning to any of the inhabitants who considered resisting the foreign army.

As reports of the fall of Tyre spread, the coastal cities along the route to Egypt sent notice of their submission to Alexander – with one exception: the walled stronghold of Gaza.

Built as it was on a tell a couple of miles inland, Gaza controlled the approaches to Egypt. Its location was also important, standing at the head of the caravan route for the trade in spice and luxury goods from Arabia. This made it a clearing centre for the eastern trade in frankincense and myrrh. Gaza had become an international commercial centre under the Persians, thanks to the political alliance and economic cooperation both with the Persian authorities and with neighbouring Arab tribes.[2] Its inhabitants, a mixture of Philistines and Arabs, were wealthy, making the city something of a prize both economically and strategically.

Gaza's commander Batis, a eunuch loyal to Persia and one determined to save the city for the Persian crown, apparently decided to stand siege to Alexander. This might seem like an absurdly courageous decision, given that he must have known what had befallen the people of Tyre. Batis laid in weapons, stockpiled provisions and hired Arab mercenaries. He was confident in the knowledge that for the past two centuries, since the assault by the Persian leader Cambyses, the city had not been taken by storm.

Alexander sent one of his generals to Gaza by sea carrying the siege equipment which had been so successful at Tyre. One of the general's important tasks would have been to bring food and water (it was summer and the wadis would have been dry). Battles for Gaza, before and since then, have been lost because of the failure of attacking armies to secure water supplies.

Alexander's army, meanwhile, had an uneventful journey on foot down the coast, welcomed by the inhabitants of the towns on the way. But Gaza stood firm.

The siege of the city lasted two months (August and

September 332 BC). Sandy soil around the city walls, which prevented the effective use of siege towers, slowed the progress of the attackers. The defenders fought fiercely; Alexander himself was wounded through the shoulder by a catapult bolt early in the siege. Eventually the city walls were weakened by mines placed in the sandy soil and siege armaments were used in the final assault.

'Three assaults on the ramparts were repelled, but they were gradually stripped of defenders by the artillery barrage and the walls were finally occupied, the hypaspists as usual leading the attack. Alexander was in the forefront and received a second, minor, wound in the leg. His blood was up and his troops were ready for the slaughter, their temper soured by the weeks of hardship preparing for the assault (water in particular would have been in very short supply over the months of September and October). The predictable massacre followed, as the fighting men of Gaza were exterminated, resisting until the end. Women and children became the prizes of war.'[3]

Accounts of the capture of Gaza speak also of Batis, the commander of the city, being taken prisoner and, because he refused to honour Alexander by kneeling before him, being executed in horrible fashion. He was bound by his heals to Alexander's chariot and dragged round the city, 'thus sharing a fate similar to that of Hector who was killed by Achilles in the Trojan War.'[4]

Defeat at the hands of Alexander had been total: the city was bereft of all its fighting men, and its women and children were sold into slavery. It seems that Gaza was then repopulated with people brought in from towns and cities round about and established as a military base, as ever, to control the route to Egypt. With Gaza secured, Alexander moved on towards the Nile Delta, having subdued all the cities of coastal Palestine.

The conquest of Gaza was vital in Alexander's ambition to gain control of the source and markets of perfumes and spices. From Gaza he sent to Macedonia a cargo of ten ships loaded with the booty he had captured there, and these ships had to bring back new recruits to fill the ranks of the army which had suffered heavy losses in Gaza.[5]

Alexander died in 323 BC and his empire did not survive

beyond his death. He died without a competent heir and a period of fighting ensued. Gaza became caught up in a power struggle in which his generals fought for shares of his vast empire. After about 40 years of conflict three big states emerged, each of them a hereditary monarchy, with the Antigonids ruling in Macedonia, and the Seleucids in Syria, Babylon and the east. Ptolemy Soter, Alexander's governor in Egypt, seized power there on the emperor's death and his descendants subsequently ruled the province for nearly three hundred years. Egypt was the largest and richest of the successor states and initially swallowed up the Palestinian cities.

A major archaeological discovery dating from this time supports the notion that Gaza had become a military stronghold, perhaps a garrison town. It appears that Jemmeh, the excavated tell closest to modern Gaza, 'became the site of a vast grain storage depot, not unlike the large grain centres in the American midwest, but unique in the ancient Near East. In addition to 10 large granaries that Petrie [Sir Flinders Petrie, the eminent British archaeologist who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries uncovered much evidence about ancient Palestine] excavated, in whole or in part, archaeologists working in 1970-2 excavated one on the west side of the tell and, in 1978, partially excavated another on the previously untouched east side. It is virtually certain that the entire site was covered with these structures in the late fourth to third centuries BC. There may have been a few houses scattered among the granaries for officials and keepers, but most of the other buildings from the period appear to be warehouses constructed of two parallel walls and partitions formed by cross walls.'[6]

Careful measuring of one of the largest granaries led to a calculation that its capacity would have been about 156 cubic metres, capable of containing about 132 tons of wheat. That is, apparently, enough to feed one thousand people, each consuming two pounds per day, for just over four months.

Archaeologists saved every potsherd found in the excavations, and hours of painstaking work have gone into the reassemblage of many jars and pots. A remarkable amount of Greek sherds, including Attic Black and Red-Figure ware, Black Ware and plain amphorae were found in the granaries.

One of the potsherds found in the granary has a painted Arabic monogram spelling the name 'Abum. This name appears in at least three other inscriptions found along the Arabian incense route and indicates that Arabs from southern Arabia (Yemen) had visited Jemmeh probably as caravaners bringing frankincense and myrrh to Gaza. It is highly likely that caravans stopped at Jemmeh to purchase wheat for the long journey – made in 65 stages, according to the historian Pliny – along the western fringe of the 'Empty Quarter', the great desert in Arabia, back to southern Arabia.[7]

As one historian has written, 'in view of the long history of grain management in Egypt, it is not surprising that the Ptolemies established a central grain storage depot in the southernmost cereal growing region of Palestine, an area that earlier had served as the border between Palestine and Egypt. In all probability, grain from all over was brought to this centre from which it could be transported to Egypt, shipped overseas through Gaza, or traded locally.'[8] Because Jemmeh was situated close to the military stronghold of Gaza it would obviously have meant that Egyptian troops on the march would be able to replenish their supplies there.

From 301 to 198 BC Gaza was under Ptolemaic rule and was as a thriving commercial centre for trade with Egypt. An Egyptian record known as the Zenon Papyri specifically mentions Gaza's prosperity. Zenon was the chief agent of Apollonius, the Ptolemaic equivalent of a minister of finance, and after his visit to Palestine in 260 BC he cited Gaza as one of the most important Palestinian cities. Commodities being traded in the markets of Gaza were slaves, olive oil, Syrian wheat and other grains, fish, wines and dry fruits. More importantly, Gaza was renowned as the centre of 'the Arab trade' – in spices and perfumes. The Zenon Papyri mentions a Ptolemaic official stationed in Gaza who had the title 'Officer-in-Charge of Frankincense'. Trading activity of the Arab tribes branched out as far as India and the Far East. Goods reaching Gaza from there included Indian tree resin, dyes, aromatic essences, ginger, pepper, balsam, persimmon, fragrant creams, vermilion, specially processed woollen cloth, precious woods, silk, brocade and medical drugs.[9]

During the Ptolemaic period Gaza was deeply involved in the

Syrian wars (beginning in 270 BC) in which the Seleucids laid claim to territory of the Ptolemies. In 217 BC, Ptolemy IV defeated Antiochus III (the Great) in the battle of Rafah. But in 200 BC Antiochus was the victor in the battle of Panion (on the Lebanon-Palestine border) against Ptolemy V for control of Palestine. Antiochus annexed Judaea (Judah), the religious state of the Jews, and with it the old Philistine coastal cities down to Gaza which he held under siege. Apart from new masters demanding taxes there is no indication that life in Gaza was any different as vassals of the Seleucids from life under the Ptolemies.

Seleucid control of Palestine provided the setting for a wider extension of Greek culture. Greek became the official language of the whole Near East; and under the Seleucids a union of Hellenistic (meaning, after the time of Alexander the Great, Greek) and oriental civilization developed. 'In both the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires the senior civil servants, and the leading businessmen, scholars, and intellectuals were Greek. Both empires encouraged immigration from Greece, but the Greeks remained a minority. In their armies the Greeks formed the core or phalanx bearing pikes, but the archers and slingers were Arabs, Kurds and Persians.'[10]

The basis of Seleucid power lay in cities, and immigration of Greeks to the cities of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, where Hellenistic influence was strongest, was encouraged. The Hellenistic cities of Alexandria and Antioch and the new capital Seleucia near Babylon supported populations of between 100,000 and 200,000 each.

Partly destroyed and then repeopled by Alexander, Gaza could well have been one of the first cities of the Greek type in Palestine and as such must have shared in the transmission of Greek ideas, so much a feature of the city culture of the age. It was an era of academic achievement, especially in science. Huge libraries were established at Alexandria and Pergamon, and Ptolemy I also founded the Museum, an institute for advanced study. Traditions were established that were strong enough to endure through the Christian era, though much of its content has been irretrievably lost.

There are few records to show the nature of Gaza as a

Hellenistic city. It is said there was a great library there too, although little is known of it. But it is reasonable to assume that Gaza's proximity to the great seat of learning in Alexandria, with its astronomers, scientists and mathematicians, must have led to some transmission along the coast of the scholarship of the day.

Hellenistic civilization was undoubtedly richer than its predecessors. It was a period of prosperity – Alexander's conquests had generated great wealth and made available enormous booty. The ruins of many Hellenistic cities show vast expenditure on the amenities of Greek urban life. One finds the ruins of theatres and gymnasia in many places. It is certain that beneath the crowded streets and buildings of modern Gaza lie the remains of structures built to house the entertainments for the citizens of the city in the 1st century BC. Through the culture of the cities Gaza and the east generally were Hellenized in a way which lasted until the coming of Islam.

After his victory at Panion, Antiochus directed his attention westwards to Rome. Rome had just finished crushing Carthage and the Carthaginian general Hannibal had taken refuge in the Seleucid court. With Hannibal's encouragement Antiochus marched into Greece. Rome quickly declared war and drove Antiochus out of Europe. The Romans followed him into Asia and in 190 BC defeated him at Magnesia near Smyrna. In suing for peace Antiochus had to give up all Asia Minor except Cilicia and pay an enormous indemnity. It was the beginning of the decline of the Seleucid empire.

The decline of the Seleucids led to a brief period in which the Jews of Palestine gained ascendancy. The Hasmonaean dynasty (beginning in 142 BC) extended the boundaries of Judah to the borders of Egypt. Gaza, which in late Seleucid times had enjoyed a large measure of independence, resisted Jewish control. As a result of its hostility the Hasmonaeans attacked the city and burned to the ground the areas approaching it. Under siege Gaza successfully sued for peace; however, the Hasmonaeans took some of the city's archons as hostages and carried them off to Jerusalem. Thus Gaza's aim of achieving full independence failed.[11]

The early Hasmonaean control of Gaza was clearly not total. In 103-102 BC, it appears that Gaza was used as a military base

by the Ptolemaic governor of Cyprus who wanted to invade Egypt and depose his mother, Queen Cleopatra III. When he failed, Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmonaean king jumped at the chance to reconquer Gaza. Reports of this battle for Gaza (in 100-99 BC), unlike all the Biblical reports, are sympathetic to the Gazan position, rather than that of the Jews. They come, ironically, from a Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, who sided with the Romans. They portray Jannaeus as a bloodthirsty tyrant and the Gazans as victims who were tricked into surrender. 'Jannaeus isolated Gaza from its hinterland by capturing Anthedon in the north and Raphia as well as Rhinocorura (El-Arish) in the south. When the city had been cut off from its own port to the west, the Gazans desperately appealed to Aretas II (the Nabataean king) for aid, but their hopes proved to be in vain. Apollodotus, the city commander, mounted a night raid on the Jewish besiegers but at daybreak the Jews gained the upper hand. The fate of the city itself, however, had not yet been determined. Only after a fight had broken out between Apollodotus and his brother Lysimachus in which the former met his death did Jannaeus succeed in breaching the walls of Gaza. Fierce fighting broke out in the city streets, and when the Gazans realised that they had no chance of victory they set their property on fire and many preferred suicide rather than capture by the Jews.'[12] The campaign, which had lasted a year, had been the longest battle for Gaza thus far in its history.

Gaza remained under the Hasmonaeans for another 36 years. In 63 BC history was set to repeat itself with the arrival of a new power from Europe – whose empire would build on the foundations of that of Alexander. Rome was now the important power in the Mediterranean region.

In the 2nd century BC Rome was at war on every front. To the west as a result of the wars with Carthage, it gained the provinces of Hispania (Spain) in 197 BC; and Africa in 146 BC. In the east Roman legions defeated the Seleucids in 190 BC, and Macedonia and Asia were annexed in 148 and 133 BC. In the following century, motivated by the threat posed by pirates from Cilicia (modern day southern Turkey) to corn shipments from Egypt, the great Roman general Pompey set off on a campaign to capture the principalities of Asia Minor, taking Crete and Cyprus

on the way, and eventually arriving in Syria in 64 BC.[13]

At the same time Pompey reduced the recently expanded Hasmonaean kingdom to Judaea, Galilee and Peraea. Gaza was freed from Hasmonaean rule the following year and the twenty or so Greek cities which Janneus had captured regained their independence. Local rulers became 'client-kings' and were diplomatically termed 'friends' (*amici*) or 'allies' (*socii*) of Rome.[14] As a mark of gratitude to Pompey, Gaza and some other cities adopted the Pompeian calendar, dating the years from 61 BC when the reconstruction of the city began. The full programme of rebuilding Gaza (along with Anthedon, the nearby port, and Rafah to the south) after decades of warfare began a few years later under the eye of Gabinius, governor of Syria.[15]

But even after the Romans were in control of Gaza city, Hasmonaean power in the area was not totally broken. In 40 BC Gaza was formally assigned by the Romans to the kingdom of Herod whose territory took in the whole of Palestine; but Herod took control of Gaza only when he had defeated on the battlefield the last Hasmonaean king.

At this point, Gaza's fate became entangled with the power struggle that ensued in the Roman dominion as the Republic entered its last days. In Rome itself the Republican structure was under severe strain as Pompey and Julius Caesar contested for power. Pompey's victories in the east had been matched by Caesar's conquests in Gaul which became a province in 49 BC. In the following year Pompey was killed in Egypt by Ptolemy XIII. Julius Caesar, who had pursued Pompey to Alexandria, avenged his rival's death. He also stayed on 'long enough to dabble in the Egyptian civil war and became, almost incidentally, the lover of the legendary Cleopatra' – Ptolemy's sister.[16] Back in Rome Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC by Republican sympathizers. They, in turn, were defeated by Mark Antony and Caesar's nephew, Octavian, the man who was to become the first Roman Emperor.

Octavian and Mark Antony fell out, and the latter withdrew to Egypt where he married Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies. In 36 BC, when Antony assumed control over Egypt and the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, Herod, the ruler of Judaea, was

forced to hand over several city-territories to the new Roman leader. Gaza was one of these cities – which Mark Antony in turn gave to Cleopatra.

But this period of renewed Egyptian control of Gaza was brief. In 31 BC Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra. Herod, declared king of Judaea by the Senate in Rome in 37 BC, had backed the winning side. He had supported Octavian against Antony and Cleopatra and his loyalty was rewarded by the successful Roman leader. He was accorded the status of 'client-king', thus producing the new Jewish state that existed under the early Roman Empire. In 30 BC Octavian handed back to Herod Gaza and the cities which had been ceded to Cleopatra.

Octavian, who in 27 BC took the title Augustus Emperor of Rome, saw in Herod's rule a chance to secure the region, with its strategic and profitable trade routes, against Nabataean and bedouin elements. The kingdom was divided into city-territories and toparchies, regions without any settlement which had free city status. Some cities remained independent of Herod's direct control. Gaza was one such place with 'free city' status.

Herod initiated many extravagant building projects – palaces, fortresses, temples and theatres were constructed throughout his kingdom, although Gaza, presumably because of its location far from Jerusalem, was not awarded any such symbol of Herodian power. Also 'it seems that Herod was suspicious of Gaza because of its close relations with the Nabataeans, his enemies. It is possible, therefore, that he rebuilt the port of Anthedon (then called Agrippias after Marcus Agrippa, Augustus' commander-in-chief) in order to compete with Gaza and to diminish its economic power.'[17] Evidence of the workings of the port are expected to come to light when planned archaeological excavations of the area begin.

In general, in this early period of Roman influence in the easterrn Mediterranean, Gaza continued to maintain a large degree of independence, enjoying the prosperity accruing from its traditional role as a trading city, while nominally coming under the control of the Roman governor of Syria.

With the Roman empire came a further spread of Hellenization, and cosmopolitanism was encouraged by the Roman administration. 'Rome sought not to impose a uniform pattern of

life but only to collect taxes, keep taxes, keep the peace and regulate the quarrels of man by a common law.'[18] Rome's greatest triumph rested on the bringing of peace, helping to create a second great Hellenistic age in which men could travel from one end of the Mediterranean to the other without hindrance.

Rome continued the Hellenistic process of mixing the cultures of east and west, and the Romans themselves made much of their inheritance from the Greeks. Education changed little, Roman literary forms derived from Greek and all educated Romans spoke both Latin and Greek.

Great Roman achievements were in the practical spheres of law and engineering, particularly in building – bridges, roads, basilicas and great places of public entertainment still exist at many locations in the eastern Mediterranean as a legacy to the skill of Rome's engineers, architects and builders. In Gaza, though, because of the numerous occasions in which the city was attacked and destroyed in the centuries which followed, none of these great structures have survived in the way they have in other cities.

The period of Roman control was not entirely calm in Gaza. In 66 AD Gaza and Anthedon were attacked by rebel Jewish zealots during the First Jewish Revolt against Roman rule. Josephus, the historian who wrote with an unsympathetic view of the Jews, stated that Gaza and Anthedon were totally destroyed; but subsequent research, based on the discovery of coins from this period, indicate that his reports were exaggerated.[19]

Whatever the true extent of the damage inflicted on Gaza, disruption to the thriving commercial activity in the city appears to have been minimal. Sixty years later, under the rule of the emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD), economic life in Gaza is reported to have enjoyed particular prosperity. The emperor visited the city in 130 AD – an event celebrated by the minting of special coins.

Gaza, one can assume, enjoyed the security of being part of such a large and well organised empire. 'The empire was a huge area and required the solution of problems of government which had not been faced by the Greeks or solved by the Persians. A complex bureaucracy appeared with remarkable scope. To cite

one small example, the records of all officers of centurion rank and above were centralized in Rome. The corps of provincial civil servants was the administrative armature, sustained by a practical reliance for many places upon the army, which did much more than merely fight. Bureaucracy was controlled by the adoption of fairly limited aims. These were above all fiscal; if the taxes came in, then Roman rule did not want to interfere in other ways with the operation of local custom. Rome was tolerant. It would provide the setting within which the example of its civilization would wean barbarians from their native ways.'[20] Gaza, therefore, paid taxes to Rome and enjoyed all the benefits that membership of such a powerful empire brought it. But, as so often in its history, the city retained much of its traditional character.

The Roman empire was not, however, totally benign. Its prosperity was based partly on brutality – not least on the purchase and sale of slaves, a thriving traffic at the heart of Roman society. Gaza traded in slaves as much as it did in commodities. Trading in slaves was particularly profitable in 135 AD after another Jewish uprising, the Bar Kokhba revolt, against Roman rule had finally been suppressed. The revolt collapsed when the rebels' two-year hold on Jerusalem was broken and their leaders were killed. The slave markets of Gaza and other cities in Palestine are said to have been filled at that time with Jewish prisoners. Many were sold to Egypt, packed off there on ships, or sent over land. Some remained in Egypt, while others were resold and found themselves being transported to cities to the west. In the view of one historian, 'taking into account the long enmity between Gaza and the Jews, it seems that the defeat of Bar Kokhba and the Jewish national disaster were probably cheered by the people of Gaza. It is possible that the city served as an important staging base for Roman troops sent to crush Jewish resistance in the southern parts of Judaea (and in Idumaea [southern Judaea] in particular). Gaza undoubtedly played an important logistical role as a station between Egypt and Judaea, supplying water, equipment, and services to the auxiliary forces coming from the south.'[21]

The material world of the Roman empire was a model of sound organisation, served by a well-ordered bureaucracy and an

efficient military. The spiritual life in Roman times is less easy to characterise. While the Jews of the Roman empire had their monotheistic faith, non-Jews practised an eclectic kind of paganism with all manner of beliefs. 'For the most part, the peasants everywhere pursued the timeless superstitions of their local nature cults, townsmen took up new crazes from time to time, and the educated professed some acceptance of the classical pantheon of Greek gods and led the people in the official observances. Each clan and household, finally, sacrificed to its own god with appropriate special rituals at the great moments of human life: childbirth, marriage, sickness and death. Each household had its shrine, each street corner its idol.'[22]

As the Roman empire expanded, so the individual and his close world felt increasingly insignificant and powerless. State religion came to be dominated by ritual; and emperors acquired something of the status of gods.

The time was right, therefore, for a religion which had appeal on an individual level and offered even the lowliest citizen ultimate salvation. Christianity, with its roots in the lands of the Roman empire, was set to fill the void.

Notes

[1] Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon 356-323 BC – An Historical Biography*, California, 1974, p. 42.
[2] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 915.
[3] A A Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire – The Reign of Alexander The Great*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 68.
[4] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 915.
[5] *Ibid.* p 915.
[6] *Archaeology*, January-February 1983, p 18.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Archaeology*, January-February 1983, p. 19.
[9] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 916.
[10] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[11] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 916.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 916.
[13] *The Times Concise Atlas of the Bible*, p. 102.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
[15] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 916.
[16] J M Roberts, *The Penguin History of the World*, London, 1990, p. 239.
[17] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 916.
[18] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
[19] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 916.
[20] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 246.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 917.
[22] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

CHAPTER 6

Under the Byzantine Cross

Gaza was a flourishing centre of paganism up to and beyond the 3rd century AD when Christianity took hold of the region. Proof of this is seen in some of the archaeological finds of the period. Many of the cities under Roman rule produced their own coinage. One coin unearthed in Gaza, and now on display in the British Museum in London, reflects the paganism of the time. It dates from the reign of the Emperor Caracalla (198-217 AD) and portrays the temple of the city goddess along with the inscription 'Gaza'. It is the size of an old English penny, but thicker and made of bronze.

The appearance of Christianity in Gaza has to be seen in the wider context of the gradual establishment of the new faith as a religion separate from Judaism – where its roots lay. It took a considerable time for Christianity even to make an impact on Gaza – even though the city lay only 80 kilometres from Jerusalem where the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ occurred. The 'Jewish' Christians built up a following, more among the Gentiles than the Jews, around the central belief that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah who had been put to death and had come to life again. The emphasis on this belief, combined with the practice of baptism and the celebration of the Last Supper, turned what had been a sect of Judaism into a religion in its own right.

Gaza was not a city to embrace Christianity with enthusiasm. The new faith had more appeal to the poor and disadvantaged, to whom it offered a hope of personal salvation, than to the people of a metropolis like Gaza which was prosperous and commercially-minded.

In the 1st century AD St Mark is credited with having taken the Christian message to Egypt where it spread among the masses. St Peter and St Paul, meanwhile, were heading towards Europe. In the lands of the eastern Mediterranean Christianity was making a limited impact. But by the beginning of the 3rd century there were Christians in all classes and Christianity was enough of a threat to Roman authority to be subject to persecution. The Emperor Diocletian (284-305), against the background of the declining Roman empire, made one last effort to stamp out Christianity and restore the unique, almost god-like, status of the emperor. In 303 he ordered the final Roman persecution of Christians, targeting officials of the church and the buildings and written works of the new religion. In Egypt and Palestine the persecution was harshest and lasted longer than elsewhere in the empire. Failure to sacrifice at pagan temples incurred the death penalty.

Diocletian's policy failed. Persecuting believers in a religion which drew its spiritual force from a victim of persecution and held up acceptance of suffering as a way of salvation inevitably had the opposite of the desired effect. Within thirty years, Diocletian's successor, Constantine (306-337), through genuine belief or political expediency, had reunited the Roman empire under Christianity, being baptized on his death-bed. Seven years earlier, on the ancient site of Byzantium, he had founded the new eastern and Christian capital of the Roman empire which became known as Constantinople (Istanbul). The emperor in the east 'was a theological as well as a juridical figure; the identity of Empire and Christendom and the emperor's standing as the expression of divine intention were unambiguous.'[1] In time Constantinople overtook Rome in splendour. The city became the centre of the Christian Hellenic-oriental Byzantine world which encompassed Gaza.

It is not known exactly when Christianity reached Gaza, but it is recorded that a bishop Sylvanus, 'the bishop of the churches

around Gaza',[2] was put to death under Diocletian. The first half of the 4th century was marked by the activities of Hilarion, a leading figure in the history of Christianity in Gaza. He was born a few miles south of Gaza and studied in Alexandria. Hilarion returned to Palestine and led an ascetic life in the desert, gradually gathering followers around him. He built a church and monastery in what is today Deir el-Balah (*deir* being the Arabic word for monastery); traces of the floor of the church have been found by archaeologists. Hilarion is considered to be the founder of monastic life in Palestine.[3]

During the reign of the Emperor Julian (361-363), who tried to restore pagan cults – for which he earned himself the title of 'Apostate' – there were anti-Christian riots in Gaza and Hilarion's monastery was destroyed. Hilarion was away in Cyprus at the time where he died. His body was later brought back to Palestine for burial.

Christianity was formally adopted in Gaza at the end of the 4th century, but the process of establishing roots in the staunchly pagan city had not been easy. By comparison, in the adjacent port city of Maioumas there had been a mass conversion of the local population to the new religion, to the anger of the people of Gaza city who made strenuous efforts to keep the port, the outlet to the Mediterranean which was vital for commerce, under their control. The Gazans tried to convince the Byzantine authorities that Maioumas was an extension of the inland city and should, therefore, submit to the will of that city. But Maioumas kept its own bishop and church administration until the 6th century, long after Gaza had become a Christian city.

But at the time when the inhabitants of Gaza were expressing concern about the fate of their port city they were continuing to show faint enthusiasm themselves for Christianity. In the words of one historian, the pagans of Gaza 'energetically resisted the expansion of Christianity.'[4] Early converts to Christianity paid a high price for their belief, as another historical account makes clear. 'At Heliopolis in Syria, the great pagan city of Baalbek, and Ashqelon and Gaza in Palestine (the latter the citadel of the great god Marnas, whose hold over the population was only loosed with great difficulty by an energetic bishop around 400 AD) groups of priests and nuns were put to death with horrible

savagery, by filling their dismembered bodies with barley and feeding them to the pigs. Unless the sources wrongly attach the same incident to the three cities, the repetition of such bizarre methods would indicate that the pagan rabble of one got the idea from that of another.' Throughout Palestine there appears to have been action on the part of pagans against encroaching Christianity. In one place near modern-day Beirut a pagan fanatic burned down the church and was ordered to rebuild it at his own expense. In other cities, Gaza for one, there was mass pagan rioting. These incidents 'reveal a great bitterness of feeling on the part of pagans in at least some part of the largely Christian provinces of the east Mediterranean, surrounded as they were with flourishing and triumphant Christianity, with its outward and visible signs of multiplying churches, ostentatious processions and the like.'[5]

The 'energetic bishop' referred to above was Porphyry, who had been appointed in 394 and became the leading figure in the establishment of Christianity in Gaza. His secretary, Marcus Diaconus, wrote an account of the life of the bishop and his efforts to suppress paganism. Porphyry's initial efforts to wean people away from their long established habits of pagan worship failed, and in 398 he turned for help to the Roman Emperor Arcadius. An imperial decree ordered the closure of the eight temples in Gaza – but exempted the Marneion, the temple of the Cretan god Marnas, worshipped locally as a rain god.

The continued existence of this major temple stood in the way of the bishop's missionary efforts, so in 400 he travelled to Constantinople to seek the support of the wife of Arcadius, the Empress Eudoxia. She prevailed upon her husband to drop the exemption enjoyed by the Marneion, and a decree to this effect was issued. In the summer of 402, the destruction of all the temples was carried out. The operation was supervised by an imperial official, civil and military governors, and a large body of troops. According to reports from the time, the local Christian community joined in the work with enthusiasm. According to one historian, 'many of the pagans, including most of the richest citizens of Gaza, fled from the city, abandoning their homes.' The temple of Marnas was destroyed, and a large church was built on the site.[6] The church was subsequently called the

Eudoxiana as a mark of gratitude to the empress who provided funds for the project. She is said to have assigned to the construction of the church, 200 pounds of gold (14,400 gold pieces) from the revenues of Palestine.[7]

In the bustle of the commercial centre of Gaza today one finds the money changers, the gold sellers, the shoe repairers and many other small traders in the covered souq. It has the look and feel of a market area in any busy Arab city. Stepping among the barrows of clothes and fruit and vegetables you find the door to the Mosque of Umar ibn al-Khuttab, known as the Grand Mosque. When you pass through the outer entrances and go into the main body of the mosque you are greeted by the dimensions and grandeur of a great cathedral, with baptistries and grand pillars lining the nave. The Mosque of Umar itself was built on the site of the church of the Empress Eudoxia.

Close by what was once the great church of Gaza is a contemporary and thriving Greek Orthodox church. This structure, with enormously thick walls, but otherwise of much smaller dimensions than the Eudoxiana, lies on the site of an earlier building. According to Gazans the original church was built in the middle of the 5th century. Inside the building today, next to the iconostasis under the high vaulted ceiling, lies a tomb which is said to be that of Bishop Porphyry. His portrait hangs above the tomb.

Near this church one finds one of the oldest streets in the centre of Gaza called today Hammam al-Samarra (where a Turkish bath was once located). It is crammed with mudbrick and sandstone buildings and runs straight north-south, coming out at what would once have been the west door of the Eudoxiana church. The street clearly formed part of the original grid pattern on which Gaza was built, and shows how the church was once the focus of life in the city.

The first pictorial impression of Gaza during the Byzantine period appears on a 6th century mosaic map discovered in Madaba in Jordan and known as the Madaba Map. 'The vignette of the city, only approximately half of which survives, depicts a walled city built on a Roman street plan, with colonnaded main streets running north-south and east-west, leading to gates in the city walls and meeting in a large *forum* in the centre. A small

domed structure in the middle of the *forum* may be the elaborate clock described by Procopius of Gaza [a leading figure in the city's Rhetorical School who died around 526]. A semi-circular structure at the south-east corner may possibly represent a theatre, but is more probably simply a colonnaded courtyard. The south-western quarter is filled by one large building, presumably a church, which cannot, however, be positively identified with any of the churches known through literary sources [although some historians believe the building is the Eudoxiana church]."[8]

The houses of Gaza at this time were made mostly from mudbrick and had flat roofs. Also – as is evident from streets like Hammam al-Samarra today – packed closely together.

The Byzantine period generally for Gaza was one of great economic prosperity and great cultural achievement – with Aramaic being the common language, and Greek spoken by the upper levels of society. The city was at the peak of its achievements during the reign of Emperor Justinian the Great (527-565). Many new buildings were erected and the city walls were repaired. While Gaza came under attack from time to time from bedouin tribesmen from Arabia and Egypt, the fortifications were such that the assaults had little impact on life in the city. The Byzantine period was one of tranquillity for Gaza (especially when matched against the turbulence affecting the city before and since that time). One gets the strong impression of a flourishing and self-confident metropolis. As a colony of Rome, Gaza was subject to the rules of law and administrative organisation of the empire. A city council ran day to day affairs under the supervision of magistrates. In the later years of the Byzantine period bishops assumed an increasingly important role in public as well as church affairs.

The picture of Gaza that emerges from the writings of an Italian pilgrim in 570 – known as the Piacenza pilgrim – is of a thriving and hospitable city. He admired Gaza for its civilisation. 'We went to the city of Maioumas of Gaza, the resting place of the martyr Saint Victor. Gaza is a lovely and renowned city, with noble people distinguished by every kind of liberal accomplishment. They are welcoming to strangers. Two miles from Gaza is the resting place of our holy father Hilarion."[9]

The Piacenza pilgrim is only one of many Christians who began to visit the Holy Land after the 4th century – often including Gaza in their itinerary. The Eudoxiana church was built with a hostel specifically intended to accommodate visiting pilgrims. Gaza and other cities in Palestine and Syria benefited economically from the movement of pilgrims and from the sale of religious artifacts. It was also the habit of Christians to take back home with them cakes of dried earth from the sites of the Holy Places. Special clay stamps were sold to make an impress on the blocks of soil. The Israel Museum has on display a round clay stamp – dated somewhere between the 4th and 7th centuries – showing Mary with the child Jesus. The stamp was found east of Gaza. The inscription reads: 'Blessing of our Lady. Mother of God, Mary.' Such stamps were also used to make impresses on loaves of bread.

Gaza and Maioumas had a tradition of extending a welcome to strangers partly through the experience of greeting Christian pilgrims but much importantly through dealings with foreign traders. The prosperity of the two cities, as ever, rested on trade. Reports from this period speak of sizeable knots of foreign merchants in the two cities.

While trade was central to the economy of Gaza, the nature of commerce had changed over the centuries. There was still a movement of goods between Gaza and the Arabian peninsula, but the spice trade – on which the city's former prosperity had been built – was coming to an end. Instead, Gaza's economic success stemmed from the export of another commodity, wine. The first mention of wine being sent abroad from Gaza – to Egypt and Syria – comes as early as the middle of the 4th century. Later the scope of the wine producing industry and the range of export destinations expanded considerably. According to one account, 'the economy rested largely on the export of high quality wine, particularly to western Europe. Agriculture in southern Palestine was flourishing as a result of the sophisticated water conservation and irrigation techniques developed by the Nabataeans, and excavations in a number of Negev towns have revealed elaborate wine presses, evidence of wine production on an industrial scale.' By the end of the 4th century, according to Marcus Diaconus [the biographer of Bishop Porphyry] 'a colony

of Egyptian wine merchants was resident in Maioumas. From the 5th to the 7th century a number of Latin writers refer to the strength and quality of Gaza's wine. Pottery identified as amphorae from Gaza has been found on several sites throughout Europe and the Near East.'[10]

Aside from handling shipments of wine, Gaza continued to be the distribution centre – as it is today – for agricultural produce from nearby villages. Produce which was surplus to the demands of the city was exported through Maioumas.

Local industries serviced the commerce of the city by manufacturing the amphorae for the wine and the pots for carrying agricultural produce and other commodities. Excavations at Maioumas have revealed the existence of a dyeworks. It is clear that some of the inorganic dyes were imported from Italy and Greece.[11]

Another archaeological find at Maioumas points to the existence of a Jewish community in the port city at the beginning of the of the 6th century. In 1965 archaeologists uncovered the mosaic floor of a synagogue. It had been part of a building next to the sea divided by four rows of columns into a central nave with two narrower aisles on either side. One part of the colourful mosaic, removed by the Israelis after they occupied the Gaza Strip in 1967 to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, shows King David sitting on a throne portraying Orpheus playing his lyre to a group of animals.

Artistic skills during the Byzantine period were matched by achievements of scholarship. Shortly after the emergence of Alexandria as the major centre of learning in the region several centuries earlier, a tradition of scholarship had developed in Gaza. Late in the 5th and early in the 6th centuries the city boasted a school of rhetoric which gained a wide reputation, attracting students from cities far away, including Athens. Its scholars produced a wide range of literary works, some secular, others strongly influenced by Christianity. One of the leading members of the school was Procopius who produced a number of Biblical commentaries which have survived to the present day – along with some speeches and a big collection of letters.[12]

Oratory, originating, no doubt, from the school of rhetoric, provided 'the most elevated form of entertainment in Byzantine

Gaza, and was part of the frequent and elaborate festivals which took place there, some under the patronage of the Church, others, such as the "Day of Roses", evidently survivals from the Pagan tradition. Others, perhaps more popular, amusements included mimes, performed in the city's theatres, instrumental and choral concerts, chariot racing, wrestling and athletics.'[13]

The period of stability and prosperity in Gaza under Roman rule lasted for three centuries. For most of this time the eastern Roman empire faced a threat from the 'aggressive and expansionist Sassanian Persians to the east. However, for at least two hundred years the Byzantines were able to secure peace with the Persians through diplomacy.'[14] The change in the balance of power between the two empires came when the Emperor Justinian the Great turned his attention to the west. He decided to try reconquering provinces in the western half of the Roman empire with a view to reestablishing unity. The Persians saw an opportunity to extend their control. From the early years of Emperor Justinian's rule (in the 530s) until 629, the Persians kept up their attacks on the Roman controlled provinces of Syria and frequently had to be repelled. In 615, under Chosroes II, the last great Sassanid leader, they made even bigger inroads into Roman-held territory, sacking Jerusalem and ravaging other cities in their path. Three years later they took control of the whole of Palestine, capturing Gaza in the process. Their brief sojourn in the city appears to have been peaceful and uneventful; and when in 629 Heraclius, the former imperial viceroy of Carthage and one of the greatest soldier emperors, retook Palestine, life in Gaza soon returned to the way it had previously been under Byzantine rule.

But the calm did not last long. Both Byzantium and Persia, 'the superpowers of the ancient world' were overstretched and weakened.[15] Just as a popular hunger for spiritual fulfilment had helped the rapid spread of Christianity in the opening centuries of the millennium, so the declining political and military power of the Byzantine and Persian empires contributed to the successes enjoyed by the next wave of invaders to take control of the lands of the eastern Mediterranean in the 7th century.

The invaders came from the Arabian peninsula, conquering the land in the name of a third monotheistic religion. This had

been born in the Arabian peninsula at the very moments when Heraclius and his army were struggling to evict the Persians from Palestine and Syria. The religion was Islam and its imprint can still be seen on the life of Gaza and its people today.

Notes

[1] Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 280.
[2] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 917.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 918.
[4] John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Jerusalem, 1977.
[5] Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian*, London, 1978, p. 130 ff.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 918.
[7] Wilkinson, *op. cit.*
[8] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 920.
[9] Quoted by John Wilkinson, *op. cit.*
[10] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 919.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 919.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 920.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 920.
[14] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

CHAPTER 7

The Arrival of Islam

Shafiq is a man in his late seventies living in the densely packed Shuja'iya neighbourhood of Gaza city in a house built in the Turkish style with high, domed ceilings and a central courtyard. 'My family came originally from the Arabian peninsula during the Ottoman period,' he said. 'Khalil was a merchant in camels, goats and sheep. He travelled between Jeddah, Gaza and Turkey. He sold mainly to the Turkish army. He decided to settle in Gaza. He married 5 times and had 15 sons.'[1]

The Shafiq family history, like that of many others, is interesting because it contains echoes of the connection between Gaza and the family of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca in the Arabian peninsula in the 6th century. By this time Gaza was well established as a trading centre. Not only were commercial links with the Arabian peninsula firm, but an Arab community had settled in Gaza and in other cities further north. A key figure in this trading pattern was Hashim ibn Abd Manaf, the great-grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad who saw that 'the struggle of the two great powers [the Byzantines and the Persians] to dominate the trade routes and centres in Arabia was coming to a standstill . . . The real change in Makka's [Mecca's] fortune occurred with the change of its trade from local to international. This is now proved to have been the achievement

of Hashim, great-grandfather of Muhammad, who lived around the middle of the sixth century. It is a remarkable tribute to the astuteness of Makkan merchants that they were quick to perceive the vacuum created in the international commerce of their time.'[2]

Gaza was already experienced in international trade, so it is not surprising that the merchants of Mecca saw the city as an important outlet to the world across the Mediterranean. Hashim, therefore, had become well known in Gaza as he passed through the city en route to Egypt or to Syria. On one such journey he died while staying in Gaza and was buried in the city. His body is said to lie in a tomb in a small domed building with decorated, curved iron bar windows, in an eastern corner of the courtyard of the Sayyid Hashim mosque. Gazans say that the tomb was discovered in a cave early in the 7th century, before the birth of Islam. After the spread of Islam to Gaza the cave is said to have became the focus of attention for travellers through the city and is mentioned by Arab travellers in later centuries. Not until 1855 was a mosque built in Hashim's name. It is significant, the citizens of Gaza say, that, being a trader, he was staying and died in the mercantile centre of Gaza city where the mosque in his name is located. Because of the connection with the family of the Prophet, Gaza is known among Arabs and Muslims as Ghazzata Hashim – Hashim's Gaza.

The Prophet Muhammad was born into a world dominated by commerce ('It is impossible to think of Makka in terms other than trade; its only *raison d'être* was trade. It was first established as a local trading centre around a religious shrine.')[3], and there are suggestions that the Prophet had some experience in the business himself. He certainly understood the workings of Mecca well enough to realise that the corruption practised by a handful of rich manipulators and the growing appeal of idolatry were endangering the prosperity of the city. Muhammad had the Call of God as he was approaching the age of 40. When he began denouncing the religions of Mecca and preaching about the unity of God and the prospect of divine judgement, he won support from the poorer people; but at the same time he encountered fierce opposition from the powerful figures in business who saw their prosperous livelihoods being threatened.

In 622, in the face of increasingly hostile opposition to his

preaching, Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina – known in Arabic as the *Hijra*, a key event in the development of Islam. (The Islamic calendar takes this year as its starting point.) No longer was Muhammad a private citizen advocating reform in the name of God; now he was a religious, political and military leader.

This broad range of leadership responsibilities was passed on by the Prophet to his successors – known as caliphs from the Arabic word *khalifa* – and reflects the way in which Islam is a religion that directs all aspects of a believer's life as well as the life of the community in which he lives. The universality of Islam – with none of the metaphysical mysteries of Christianity – and the emphasis on the life of the community gave the religion immediate popular appeal. This was the case particularly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, when Islam burst out of the Arabian peninsula. The Arab armies were able to make progress precisely because of what the Prophet had achieved in his lifetime. In the view of one historian, 'to the pagan peoples of western Arabia he had brought a new religion which, with its monotheism and its ethical doctrines, stood on an incomparably higher level than the paganism it replaced. He had provided that religion with a revealed book [the Quran] which was to become in the centuries to follow the guide to thought and conduct to countless millions of Believers. But he had done more than that; he had established a community and a state well organised and armed, the power and prestige of which made it a dominant factor in Arabia.'[4]

The dominance of the Arab Islamic armies coming out of the Arabian peninsula soon spread far across the region. 'If the achievements of the Islamic faith in the lifetime of Muhammad were remarkable, those during the brief rule of his three successors . . . were even more astonishing. The small forces of the faithful went on to challenge the two great empires of Byzantium and Persia.'[5] But both empires were exhausted, and resistance to the invaders was remarkably weak. The march of the invading army followed the well-known caravan route, leading from Mecca and Medina northwards to Damascus, along what in later decades and centuries became the route taken in a southerly direction by Muslim pilgrims to the sacred cities of the

Hejaz. The first territories that came under the control of the Islamic armies were those east of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. Only when Damascus and territory in the north had been taken did Galilee, the lowlands of Jordan, and Palestine, fall to the Muslims.

The Arabs began attacking Palestine in 634. The army of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius was defeated at the battle of Yarmuk in 637 and his forces pulled out of Syria. The Arab conquest of the rest of Syria was achieved without great difficulty. Gaza's reputation both as a trading centre and a strategic crossroads was well known, and there are indications that the commander of the army of 'Amr ibn al-'As decided that the city should be one of his first objectives. Some of the earliest battles against the Persians (who had occupied Gaza in 618) were fought in this area. A troop of Persian soldiers defended Gaza but were overcome; they were later put to death by the conquering army for refusing to convert to Islam. But aside from the resistance put up by the Persians, the Arab conquest of Gaza was swift and peaceful; it was completed in June or July 637. The Arabs set up an administrative centre in the city and it was from here that the surrounding region continued to be governed.

Two aspects of the Islamic conquest of Gaza and other cities in the region are remarkable. One is the lack of resistance – either military or popular – to the spread of Islam. The Gazan people responded with alacrity to the call to convert to the new religion (in contrast to their response to the arrival of Christianity), and they asked, according to local historians, that the great church in the centre of the city be converted into a mosque. The mosque was named after one of the earliest caliphs, Umar. According to Arab writers of the late 10th century, 'here in Gaza, too, was once the man who later became the Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab. In the days of ignorance [before Islam] he grew rich here; for this place was a great market for the people of the Hejaz.'[6]

The Mosque of Umar, the Grand Mosque, dominates the centre of Gaza city today. Evidence of how the church of Eudoxiana (prior to that, the Temple of Marnas) became the focus of Islamic worship can be seen clearly by looking down at the structure from a neighbouring building. Growing out of the southern side of the former church – the shape and windows of which are still clearly

discernible – is a separate structure containing the *mihrab* (focus of prayer in the direction of Mecca) and an area to accommodate worshippers.

Not all Christians agreed to convert to Islam when the Arabs arrived; and they were given the right to worship in the church of Porphyry (built in 442) – which still occupies the same site near the centre of Gaza city.

The other interesting aspect of the Arab conquests is the degree to which the new arrivals left the administrative structures which they found in place. 'The attitude of the Arab conquerors to the countries they now invaded was one of caution. They themselves had little understanding of the economic system of the region where they had obtained control, and with remarkable restraint decided as far as possible to preserve the existing order. Thus they avoided disrupting the commerce of the area, which was far in advance of what they had known in the cities of the Arabian desert. They permitted Christians and Jews to remain in their own religions on condition that they paid poll tax, and they carried out the occupation of their newly conquered lands not by monopolising the existing cities but by building camps, usually on sites not hitherto occupied. Thus it was that Ramla eventually came into existence as the capital of Palestine. In contrast with the Persian invasion, the Muslim conquest seems to have caused little material damage.'[7] The fact that Gaza already had strong trading links with Arabia as well as an Arab community of its own within the city must have contributed to the ease with which the newcomers took it over. It is quite conceivable, too, that the invaders may have encountered friends or family when they entered Gaza.

It seems generally in Gaza and elsewhere that the local population welcomed the change of rulers – 'they found the new yoke much lighter than the old, both in taxation and other matters. Even the Christian populations of Syria and Egypt preferred the rule of Islam to that of the orthodox Byzantines.'[8]

In the early years of Arab rule in the eastern Mediterranean, during the Umayyad dynasty when Damascus was the capital, Syria was divided into four military districts, each of which was called a *jund* – meaning literally an army – so called because a special body of troops was assigned to each. The military districts

corresponded exactly to the earlier Byzantine provinces. Gaza was part of the Palestine district.

While Arabic was the language of the new power in the region as it was the language of the Quran, Greek and Aramaic continued to be spoken for some time after the Arab conquests of Syria. Indeed, matters involving writing and translation, as well as the control of fiscal matters, were frequently left in the hands of Christians and Jews who tended to be fluent in Greek – the *lingua franca* of the time.

Not until the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in 750 and the rise of the Abbasids, who moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, did the Arabs break their ties with Byzantine traditions. Even in styles of pottery in the early Islamic years, the Arabs copied the Byzantines. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem has examples of 'slipper-type' clay oil lamps from this period which mirror the Byzantine style. But the move to Baghdad signified a major change in outlook. Arabic became the dominant language of a vast empire in the same way that Islam had already become the dominant religion. Once the empire was established, by the 9th century, Islam had developed a character and style that were easily recognisable. These, in themselves, helped to unify the empire. But it was a time of great movement within the boundaries of empire. The spread of Islamic influence was achieved in part by the movement of armies and people. But trade also flourished. Textiles, metalwork, soap and perfumes were carried vast distances over land, and across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Artists and craftsmen were lured to move from one city to another by the promise of patronage. Goods bearing the distinctive Islamic style formed the body of long-distance trade.

Gaza, although situated a long way from the heart of empire, was at the crossroads of the movement described above. In this period Gaza adopted the strong Arab and Islamic character which it retains today.

Even in the early days of the Islamic empire, Gaza gained a reputation as a centre for Islamic study. It was also the birthplace of al-Shafi'i (767-82), the founder of the Shafi'i school of Islamic law. But still as late as the 10th century, the Arab geographer and historian, Muqaddisi (born in Jerusalem in 946) noted how

Christians were continuing to play an important role in formulating Islamic law. 'It is seldom recorded that any jurisprudist of Syria propounds new doctrines, or that any Muslim here is the writer of aught; except only at Tiberias, where the scribes have ever been in repute. And verily the scribes here in Syria, even as is the case in Egypt, are all Christians, for the Muslims abandon to them entirely this business, and, unlike the men of other nations, do not hold letters a profitable subject of study.'

By the time Muqaddisi was writing, Arab scholarship was coming into its own. For the first two centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad the study of history and geography was slow to develop, and so the written record of what Gaza and other cities were like during the early periods of Islam are scanty. The earliest extant Arab books on geography and history date from the 9th century. From this period onwards, though, one finds some interesting and detailed portraits of aspects of life in Gaza, seen through Arab eyes.

A glimpse of economic life in Gaza in the 9th century is provided by the great Arab historian of the 14th century, Ibn Khaldun. He found records on this subject dating back to around 780. They show both the degree of organisation and the considerable contribution of Gaza and the surrounding area to the coffers of the Arab empire. Palestine, the documents say, provided 310,000 dinars (gold coins), and 300,000 *ratls* [variable measurement of weight from this region] of olive oil to the central revenue of Syria in Damascus. During the reign of Harun al-Rashid in 800 a similar record also shows Palestine paying 310,000 dinars. In addition, all the Syrian *junds* provided 300,000 pounds of raisins. In 903, the Palestinian contribution had risen to 500,000 dinars.

In the 9th century the Arab geographer, Ya'qubi, noted that the ancient capital of the military district of Palestine was Ludd (Lydda), on the coastal plain north of Gaza. 'The Caliph Sulaiman subsequently founded the city of Ramla which he made the capital, and Ludd fell into decay . . . The population of Palestine consists of Arabs of the tribes of Lakhm, Judham, Amilah, Kindah, Kais and Kinanah.' Ya'qubi described Gaza as 'a city of Palestine on the sea-coast. It stands on the limit of the

Third Climate. There is here the grave of Hashim ibn Abd Manaf.' He also identified Gaza as 'the last town in Syria on the road from Ramlah to Egypt.'

Not surprisingly, many of the writers comment on Gaza's continuing role both as a centre for agriculture and a flourishing trading city. Mas'udi, who wrote in 943, gave the following account of the arrival of oranges, today one of the most common fruits in the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, in Palestine. 'The orange trees were brought from India beginning in the year 912 and were first planted in Oman. Thence they were carried by caravans from Al-Basra to Iraq and Syria . . . The trees have now become very numerous in all the Syrian coast towns, with those of Palestine and Egypt, where, but a short time ago, they were unknown.' Bait Lihya, near Gaza, near the northern edge of the Gaza Strip today, was described by another traveller in 1300 as 'a village with many fruit trees', as it still is.

Muqaddisi wrote the following about commerce in Palestine in the 10th century: 'The trade of Syria is considerable. From Palestine comes olives, dried figs, raisins, the carob-fruit, stuffs of mixed silk and cotton, soap and kerchiefs.' Mas'udi travelled extensively through the Islamic world of the day, and was also much impressed by Palestine. 'The lower province of Syria is even more excellent than the north, and pleasanter, by reason of the lusciousness of its fruits and in the great number of its palm trees . . . Unequalled is this land of Syria for its dried figs, its common olive oil, its white bread and the Ramlah veils. Also for the quinces, the pine-nuts called "Kuraish-bite [snubur pine nut]", the Ainuni and Duri raisins, the Theriack antidote [drug against dangerous bites], the herb of mint, and the rasaires of Jerusalem. And further know that within the province of Palestine may be found gathered together six-and-thirty products that are not found thus united in any other land. Of these, the first seven are found in Palestine alone: pine-nuts called Kuraish-bite, the quince, the Ainuni and Duris raisins, the Kafuri plum, the fig called al-Saba'i and the fig of Damascus. The next seven are the water lily, the sycamore, the carob or St John's bread (locust tree), the lotus-fruit, the artichoke, the sugar-cane and the Syrian apple.'

Gaza, Muqaddisi said, is 'a large town lying on the high-road

into Egypt, on the border of the desert. The city stands not far from the sea. There is here a beautiful mosque; also to be seen is the monument of the Caliph Umar.' Exports of agricultural produce and other commodities passed through Maioumas port (the outlet to the sea adjacent to Gaza). Muqaddisi described it as 'a small fortified town which lies on the sea and belongs to Gaza.'

Istakhri and Ibn Haukal (who wrote in 951 and 978) were merchants by trade; but in a double book, they produced a systematic Arab geography defining the territory and mentioning the limits of Philistia. Gaza in this latest period, too, was clearly an important strategic city. 'The frontiers of Syria are the following: on the west, the Bahr Rum (the Greek or Mediterranean Sea) . . . The furthest point south of Syria towards Egypt is Rafah.' They described Palestine as 'the westernmost of the provinces of Syria. In its greatest length from Rafah to the boundary of Al-Lajjun (Legio), it would take a rider two days to travel over; and the like time to cross the province in its breadth from Jaffa to Jericho . . . Filastin [Palestine] is watered by the rains and the dew. Its trees and its ploughed lands do not need artificial irrigation . . . In the province of Filastin, despite its small extent, there are about twenty mosques with pulpits for Friday prayer.'

Another Arab geographer, Muhallabi, commented on the landscape around Gaza. He wrote (in 990) that about three miles from Rafah in the direction of Gaza are 'many sycamore trees that border both sides of the road, to the right and left. There are near a thousand trees here, their branches touching each the next, and they extend for close on a couple of miles. South of Rafah the lands of the Jifar District begins, and the traveller strikes into the desert.'

Gaza's relations with other coastal cities in Palestine in the 10th century are described in a fascinating passage in the works of Muqaddisi. 'All along the coast of Filastin (Palestine) are the watch-stations, called Ribat, where the levies assemble. The war-ships and the galleys of the Greeks also come into these ports, bringing aboard of them the captives taken from the Muslims; these they offer for ransom – three for the hundred Dinars. And in each of these ports there are men who know the

Greek tongue, for they have missions to the Greeks and trade with them in divers wares. At the Stations, whenever a Greek vessel appears, they sound the horns; also, if it be day, they make a great smoke. From every Watch-station on the coast up to the capital Al-Ramla there are built, at intervals, high towers, in each of which is stationed a company of men. On the occasion of the arrival of the Greek ships the men, perceiving these, kindle the beacon on the tower nearest to the coast station, and then on that lying next above it, and onwards, one after another, so that hardly is an hour elapsed before the trumpets are sounding in the capital, and drums are beating in the towers, calling the people down to the Watch-station by the sea. And they hurry out in force, with their arms, and the young men of the village gather together. Then the ransoming begins. Some will be able to ransom a prisoner, while others (less rich) will throw down silver Dirhams, or signet-rings, or contribute some other valuable, until at length all the prisoners who were in the Greek ships have been ransomed. Now the Watch-stations of this province of Filastin, where this ransoming of captives take place, are these: Ghazzah (Gaza), Maioumas (Gaza port), Askalan (Ashqelon) Mahuz-Azdud (the port of Ashdod), Yubna, Yafah (Jaffa) and Arsuf.'

As for the administrative arrangements in Palestine, changes had been made since the days of the early caliphs. Muqaddisi, in 985, described Syria as divided into six districts which differed in some minor points from the original military districts (*junds*). But Gaza still came under the district of Palestine. By this time the need for the cantonment of troops had passed. The system of military districts came to an end in the 12th century with the arrival of the Crusaders. Thereafter, Syria and Palestine nominally belonged to the rulers of Egypt, but in point of fact the territory was divided up among a number of minor sultans.

For several centuries, as an integral part of the Muslim empire, Gaza enjoyed a relatively peaceful and uneventful period. But, as usual, the territory was to become a pawn in the struggle of larger powers for control of the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. The threat to Syria from the Byzantine empire re-emerged in the 10th century with a string of military attacks into the region having to be repulsed. From the south the

Fatimids of Egypt also posed a threat to the stability of the eastern Mediterranean. But in the 11th century the three competing powers of the region, the Byzantines, the Fatimids and the Abbasids, were all on the decline. This left the way open for a new military force made up of nomads from central Asia, known as the Seljuq Turks. In 1050 they captured Baghdad, 'reducing the Abbasid caliph to the status of a vassal. In 1071, they took Syria and Palestine and drove the Fatimids back to Egypt. By the end of the century the Seljuq Empire included Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine.'[9]

Gaza, then, was once again under foreign domination – albeit Islamic, the Seljuqs being Sunni Muslims. One major change brought about by the Seljuqs was in the ownership of land, developing what amounted to a feudal economy. The historian, Imad al-Din, writing in the Seljuq period, pointed out that the only way to give the turbulent Turkish tribesmen and soldiery an interest in the prosperity of agriculture was to give land to officers, assigning to them both the yield and the revenue. The change of system brought about social upheavals. Former landlords were hard hit by the rise of a new class of non-resident feudal lords. 'Trade withered and declined. Perhaps the clearest indication of the decline of trade is to be found in the coin hoards of Scandinavia. During the 9th and 10th centuries Arabic and Persian coins are very numerous and indeed predominate in these hoards. During the 11th century they decrease greatly in numbers; thereafter they disappear.'[10] Gaza's role, therefore, as a major trading city was, for the first time in its history, in decline.

What the people of Gaza and other cities did not know, as they adjusted to the new conditions, was that the arrival of the Seljuq Turks in the eastern Mediterranean, and particularly in the land of the Christian holy sites, was a source of profound concern in territory far to the west. Adding to the concern felt there was the fact that the Byzantine empire was looking in danger of collapse. Western Christendom had come to count on Byzantium acting as a shield against Islamic expansion westwards. Unknown to the people of Palestine, in France an army was being got ready to travel to the Holy Land with the aim of wresting the Christian holy sites from the hands of the infidels.

Notes

[1] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[2] M A Shaban, *Islamic History AD 600-750 (AH 132) A New Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 6.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[4] Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, London, 1968, p. 47.
[5] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
[6] Istakhri and Ibn Haukal (who wrote in 951 and 978). Quoted by Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems. A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from AD 630 to 1500*, London, 1890. This remarkable work is the source, unless indicated otherwise, for the quotations from early Arab geographers and historians that follow in this chapter.
[7] Wilkinson, *op. cit.*
[8] Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
[9] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
[10] Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

CHAPTER 8

The Crusaders

In the courtyard on the northern side of the Umar mosque in Gaza city one comes across a surprising sight – a Christian font. It stands at the foot of a weathered buttress on an outer wall of what must once have been a cloister. The grey marble font is in the shape of a cross; today, weeds grow in and around it. At one time a pipe is said to have protruded from the wall above to allow water to be poured directly into the font.

The font is a relic of the period in the 12th century when the Crusaders took over the Mosque of Umar and used it once again as a church – the mosque having been built over the 5th century Eudoxiana church. The Crusaders made another change to the building – they added a bell tower. The circular interior of the tower, complete with hole for the rope, can still be seen in the mosque.

The process which led to the arrival of a Crusader army in Gaza began with an appeal from the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus to Pope Urban II in 1095. With his own empire in danger of collapse Comnenus asked for military help in repelling the infidel Seljuq invaders from the Holy Land. Unlike the Muslim Arabs, the Seljuqs – less tolerant of Christianity – restricted the access of the many Christian pilgrims to the holy sites.

For the pope, the appeal from Constantinople was fortuitous.

The emergence of an outside enemy offered him a chance of distracting the warring knights of Europe from internecine strife. After the fall of the Roman empire Europe was passing through the Dark Ages. 'War was endemic; every petty lord fought every other petty lord in the district, and there was no central authority strong enough to control them, let alone put an end to their eternal and murderous feuds. War was their business, their pleasure, and their sole occupation except for hunting. A warrior class directly descended from the various barbarians who had conquered the empire now dominated its shattered fragments.'[1]

In November 1095 Pope Urban, a charismatic public speaker, launched a campaign to recruit a fighting force to march to Palestine to protect the holiest of places from the Turks. He told his audiences that the Turks were 'maltreating innocent men and women and desecrating their churches.' He said it was time for Christians in the West 'to rise up in righteous wrath and march to the rescue,' setting aside their own petty squabbles. The pope promised 'absolution and remission of all their sins' for those who died in battle.[2]

Within weeks, a huge force was on the march towards the east. They reached Jerusalem in 1099 and laid siege to the city, eventually taking it on 15 July. Their bloody massacre of virtually all the inhabitants of the walled city of Jerusalem has never been forgotten. In the words of an Arab chronicler of the day, 'the population of the holy city was put to the sword, and the Franj [as the Crusaders were referred to by the Arabs] spent a week massacring Muslims.'[3] The Jewish population were herded into their synagogue and burnt alive; and even the Arab Christians, whose oriental rites were despised as alien, did not escape persecution.

Reports of the massacre in Jerusalem spread throughout Palestine. In Gaza and other cities civilians feared for their lives as they watched and waited to see what these barbaric invaders would do next. It seems that many people fled from their cities, because the first historical reference to Gaza at around this time speaks of a city with few inhabitants. The prosperity of Gaza, which had been in decline since the arrival of the Seljuqs and the introduction of a feudal-style economy, sank further during the Crusader period. The city, which had once been a thriving

commercial centre and a focus for scholars, became nothing more than a garrison town for the competing forces.

On Christmas Day in 1100, one of the leaders of the Crusade, Baldwin, was crowned King of Jerusalem. He reigned for 18 years, during which time the lands of the eastern Mediterranean were divided into four Latin kingdoms. The kingdom of Jerusalem, into which Gaza fell, encompassed Palestine and the coastal area of modern-day Lebanon and southern Syria. The other three Crusader territories were centred on Tripoli, Edessa and Antioch.

The Crusaders' hold on the territory within the kingdoms was patchy. Their firmest grip was on the ridge of hills running north and south of Jerusalem and in the Galilee area. Many villages in these districts, including Bethlehem, had always been Christian; while Muslims had fled in the path of the Crusading armies with their reputation for violence, Christians tended to remain.

In the early days of the Crusader occupation Gaza garrisoned Egyptian troops of the Fatimid dynasty. Its location on the fringes of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem meant that the Crusaders did not control the city until some years later.

For the civilian population of Palestine the whole period of the Crusades was uncertain and dangerous. For a start, they could never be certain who controlled a particular area at any given time. Aside from the constant struggle of the Muslims to unseat the Crusaders, there was also continual strife among the leaders of the armies from the West, and friction between the Egyptians and the Turks. For example, 'in the south the Negev was dominated by the Frankish [Crusader] garrison at Hebron. But the Castle of St Abraham [the Mosque of Abraham at Hebron], as it was called by the Franks, was little more than an island in a Muslim ocean. The Franks had no control over the tracks that led from Arabia, round the southern end of the Dead Sea, along the course of the old spice road of the Byzantines; by which the Bedouin could infiltrate into the Negev and link up with the Egyptian garrisons at Gaza and Ashqelon on the coast. Jerusalem itself had access to the sea down a corridor running through Ramla and Lydda to Jaffa; but the road was unsafe except for military convoys. Raiding parties from the Egyptian cities, Muslim refugees from the uplands and Bedouins from the

desert wandered over the country and lay wait for unwary travellers.'[4]

Of the four Latin Kingdoms, Jerusalem was the poorest. Its principal source of revenue was the payment of tolls. Because the kingdom controlled the coast it also had the ports within its grasp. Produce from the fertile regions inland was taxed as it left the harbours in the kingdom. However, for the first time in history, Gaza appears to have lost its status as a trading city.

Armies continued to pass through Gaza as they have done in every period in history. In the opening years of the 12th century the Egyptian Fatimid leader al-Afdal led his army northwards along the ancient Way of the Sea in a series of unsuccessful attempts to defeat the Crusaders and destroy the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Egyptians did manage to hold on to the old Philistine city of Ascalon (Ashqelon) which, unlike many other cities of Palestine, refused to surrender or sue for peace.

Towards the middle of the 12th century, resistance to the Crusaders (whose presence later boosted by the Second Crusade of 1147) was gaining in strength. A Seljuq leader, Zengi, captured Mosul in 1127 and set up a new state in northern Mesopotamia and Syria. Seventeen years later he captured Edessa. Zengi was the first leader in the region to see the possibility of Muslims putting aside their differences to face Islam's common enemy. His son, Nur al-Din, carried on leading the resistance to the Western occupation in the north.

The king of Jerusalem at the time, Baldwin III, realised that his army was no match for that of Nur al-Din in the north. But wishing to be seen by his subjects as doing something he turned his attention to the south where Fatimid military power was in decline. In particular Baldwin set his sights on the port city of Ashqelon which had remained in Egyptian hands. In order to block the coastal road and prevent supplies and reinforcements reaching Ashqelon from Egypt, the Crusaders needed to take control of the strategic city of Gaza. Baldwin decided that Gaza would become the base of operations for the attack on Ashqelon and gave control of the city to the Knights Templar.

The Templars were so named because they were based on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (the site of Al-Aqsa mosque and the spot where the Jewish Temple of Solomon once stood). Their

primary task was to protect pilgrims from attack by Muslims or common bandits as they journeyed to Jerusalem and the other holy sites. As a knightly order they became a military elite whose courage was said to have been unsurpassed.

When the Templars entered Gaza they immediately began strengthening the city's defences. Fortifications were built. The indications are that Templars were occupying a city that had been abandoned. A Crusader chronicler at the time described the construction of the city's new defences. 'The first fort of 1149 was very small. It was located on a slightly raised hill [where Palestine Square and the Grand Mosque are located today], and enclosed a rather large space within its walls. Our people, seeing that their energies would not suffice for the present to rebuild the entire area, occupied part of the hill only; and after they had laid the foundations to a suitable depth they built the structure with a wall and towers.'[5] After a few years a small city grew there. 'As the castle could not occupy the whole hill on which the city was founded, but people who gathered there to settle the place, so that they should stay in more security, tried to fortify the rest of the hill with gates and a wall, though weaker and more modest.'[6] Similar forts began to dot the landscape of the kingdom – one was built at Darum, on the main route to Egypt, just to the south of Gaza [close to Deir el-Balah and the present day Israeli settlement of Darom]. The 13th century Arab geographer, Yaqut, mentioned Darum, describing it as 'a castle that you pass after leaving Gaza on the road towards Egypt. It stands about a league from the sea, which you can see from thence. It was dismantled by Salah al-Din when he took possession of the place with the remainder of the coast towns in 1188.'[7]

Once Gaza was secure, Baldwin started assembling a huge army outside Ashqelon. The pick of the Templar Knights from Gaza and the Knights Hospitaller from Jerusalem were with him, as well as the patriarch, archbishop and bishops who carried the relic of the True Cross. Ashqelon was a tremendous fortress and the siege took some months to succeed. Because the Crusaders had control of the land route, at Gaza and elsewhere, the Egyptians had no choice but to send a force by sea to try to help the defenders of Ashqelon. They managed to get supplies into the city, but then sailed away. Eventually, after continued

attacks on the city in which many Templars were killed, the Egyptian defenders of the city surrendered on condition that the citizens of Ashqelon be allowed to leave in safety. Thus the Crusaders took over the citadel and port, and the lordship of Ashqelon was given to King Baldwin's brother, Almaric.

The capture of Ashqelon represent a triumph for the Kingdom of Jerusalem; but it was to be its last major success. From this moment on, the Crusader hold on the land came under increasingly united Muslim pressure.

The man credited with mustering the Muslim resistance to the Crusaders and eventually breaking their hold on the land is a Kurdish general, Salah al-Din (known in the West as Saladin, perhaps the only Muslim leader to be accorded respect and admiration in traditional European accounts of the Crusades). He was the nephew of one of Nur al-Din's generals. Nur al-Din had captured Damascus in 1154 and had turned Syria into a single Muslim state. The Crusaders were faced for the first time by a strong and coordinated adversary.

Salah al-Din was sent as Nur al-Din's *wazir* (minister) to the Fatimid court in Cairo in 1169. The Fatimids were in an advanced state of collapse, giving Salah al-Din the opportunity to seize power. This spelt the end of the Fatimid dynasty, to be replaced by the Ayyubids, the brief dynasty of Salah al-Din and his successors. With Salah al-Din in control of Egypt and Nur al-Din in Syria, the balance of power had shifted firmly against the Crusaders. After Nur al-Din's death, Salah al-Din assumed control of Syria as well as Egypt.

In June 1170 fighting between the Crusaders and the Muslims was interrupted by an earthquake. But by the end of the year, Salah al-Din was deploying his forces against the southern frontiers of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Once again, Gaza found itself one of the first cities under attack. In December 1170 Salah al-Din's army attacked Darum and was successful in breaching the city walls. He then moved on to Gaza, still in the hands of Templar knights. Salah al-Din took the lower part of the city, outside the walls, and massacred the civilian inhabitants. However, the citadel was by this time so strong that Salah al-Din did not attack it. Instead, he took his army back to Egypt.

In August 1177, with the Crusaders in increasing disarray,

Salah al-Din assembled a large Egyptian army ready to attack both Gaza and Ashqelon. The mood of the Muslims was said to have been over-confident, and they were scattered by a surprise attack led by King Baldwin IV.

But such setbacks were rare, and by 1187 Salah al-Din was taking the fight to the Crusaders in a major way. In July of that year he defeated them at the crucial battle of the Horns of Hattin near the Sea of Galilee. It was a catastrophic defeat for the Crusader army and spelt the end of Latin domination of the Holy Land, even though some Crusader strongholds remained and new waves of Crusaders continued to arrive.

After the victory at the Horns of Hattin, Salah al-Din headed westward to the Mediterranean coast and began to capture with ease most of the cities there. Only Antioch, Tripoli and Tyre stood out against him. In September 1187, the Crusader defenders of Ashqelon surrendered; and the Templars in Gaza gave up soon after that. After a two-week siege in October, Salah al-Din won his biggest prize, Jerusalem.

But this was not the last appearance of the Crusaders either in Jerusalem or in the southern region of Palestine. The Third Crusade (1191) saw the arrival of Philip Augustus of France and Richard Coeur de Lion of England in the Holy Land. The following year Richard recaptured Darum and then moved northwards to Ashqelon. The assumption must be that he took control of Gaza as well.

Certainly Gaza was under Christian control when the next great wave of invaders, the Mongols, came into the lands of the eastern Mediterranean in the first half of the 13th century. One of the dynasties taken over by the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, during their initial sweep through central Asia into Persia was the Khwarazmian Turks. Their army had fled westward into Syria; and it was the Khwarazmians who put an end finally to the Western occupation of Jerusalem. Although Salah al-Din had retaken the city in 1187, one his successors, ruling from Cairo, had handed it back to a European leader in 1229. In the summer of 1244 a force of several thousand Turkish cavalry attacked Jerusalem and sacked it. Shortly after this, the Turks, joined by a force of Egyptians, drove the last Christian forces out of Gaza. But the Christians escaped with their lives, thanks to dissent

within the ranks of the attacking forces.

In the meantime, the Mongol threat returned. The Mongols had paused in their destructive march westward when Genghis Khan died in Persia in 1227. But in the middle of the century they set off again. In 1258 they conquered Baghdad, killing the last Abbasid caliph and destroying the city. In 1260 they took Syria and Palestine. Gaza, once more found itself in the role of garrison city – this time for the Mongols.

The Mongols were, no doubt, regrouping for an assault on Egypt. But their long period of success was suddenly reversed by the Egyptian army of the newly installed Mamluk dynasty – which had superseded that of the Ayyubids founded by Salah al-Din. The Mamluks were descended from Turkish slaves brought into Egypt as mercenaries and Turkish was the dominant language among them. They gradually became powerful enough to seize control of Egypt. The Mamluk army attacked the Mongol garrison at Gaza, catching the defenders off guard. The Mongols barely had time to organise resistance before they were routed.

In a matter of only a few decades, then, control of Gaza had passed from the hands of the Crusaders, to the army of Salah al-Din and his successors, back to the Crusaders, then to Turks, followed by the Mongols and finally to the Egyptian Mamluks. There can be few more graphic examples of how Gaza's location on one of the major strategic crossroads of the region meant that it was destined to be trampled over by succeeding armies.

The whole two-century period of the Crusader presence in the region was one in which Gaza's importance as a commercial and cultural centre in its own right declined. It became nothing more than a fortified garrison. The experience of contact for the first time with armies and peoples from western Europe brought little that can be counted as positive to Gaza and the rest of the east Mediterranean region. The Franj (as the Muslims called the Crusaders) were seen as barbaric, uncultured and ignorant in practical sciences like medicine. One Arab chronicler of the time said: 'All those who were well informed about the Franj saw them as beasts superior in courage and fighting ardour but in nothing else, just as animals are superior in strength and aggression.'[8]

One contemporary Western historian makes the following assessment of the Crusaders' influence: 'Apart from a few magnificent castles and some of their blood through intermarriage, the Crusaders left little which endured. Their greatest achievement was drastically to weaken the superior civilization they encountered and to undermine its moral standards. However, in one vitally important respect the Crusaders showed that they had an advantage over their Muslim enemies: this was their ability to create sound and workable political institutions.'[1]

Because of Gaza's position as a strategically important town, many more invaders were to enter it after the Crusaders, eliminating any legacy of Templar rule; and in Gaza, there is not even a magnificent Crusader castle to admire – the citadel which kept Salah al-Din's forces at bay was destroyed long ago. The last remnants of it disappeared more than a century ago. One Arab traveller of the 13th century, al-Fida, described Gaza as 'a city of medium size, possessing gardens by the sea-shore. There are here a few palm trees, also many fruitful vines. Between it and the sea are sand dunes, which lie beside the gardens. There is a small castle over Gaza.'

Notes

[1] Anthony Bridge, *The Crusades*, London, 1980, p. 18.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[3] Ibn al-Athir. Quoted by Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, London, 1984, p. 50.
[4] Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Cambridge, 1962, p. 5.
[5] Quoted by Joshua Prawer, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, London, 1972, p. 298.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 298.
[7] Guy Le Strange, *op. cit.*
[8] Quoted by Maalouf, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
[9] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

CHAPTER 9

Ottoman Domination

In the centre of modern day Khan Younis, a bustling town south of Gaza city, stands a solid arched stone gateway with a tower at one end. Among the ornamentation in the stonework one can see a lion – symbol of the great Mamluk Sultan Baibars, who ruled from 1260 to 1277. The gateway is part of a *khan* – inn – built by the Mamluks as a staging post – giving the town its name. The *khan* was one of several linked by well kept roads for Mamluk postal relays which ran between Cairo and Damascus.

The great achievement of Baibars was to stop the Mongols in their tracks as they threatened Egypt and force them into retreat. He defeated them at the battle of Ain Jalout in Palestine in 1260, a momentous encounter that decisively influenced the fate of the region. In the words of historian: 'In that it saved the heartlands of the Muslim world from being overwhelmed this was one of the decisive battles in the history of the world.'[1] Having done this Baibars was able to unite Syria (including Palestine) and Egypt in a single state. He established a nominal caliphate in Cairo; but power rested in the hands of the Turkish Mamluks themselves.

His other great achievement was to eliminate most of the remaining pockets of the old Crusader kingdoms. Because the Crusaders still had supremacy on the sea, Baibars decided that the best way to keep them at bay would be to prevent them from

landing. To achieve this, he destroyed the settlements and fortifications right on the coast, encouraging shepherds to use the cleared ground for grazing. Mamluk viceroys were appointed to major cities, including Gaza. The Arab geographer, Dimashqi, writing in 1300, spoke of Syria being divided into nine principalities. One of these was Gaza, with the city as the capital. 'It is a city so rich in trees,' Dimashqi wrote, 'as to be like a cloth of brocade spread out on the sand. In the Gaza area at times were counted Ascalon (Ashqelon), which belonged to the Franks, and which the Muslims took and destroyed; Jaffa, Caesarea, Arsuf, Al-Darun and El-Arish. Of towns lying between the coast and the mountains belonging at times to Gaza are: Tell Himar, Tell al-Safiyah, Karatayya, Bait Jibrail, Hebron, and Jerusalem. Each of these has a separate governor.'[2]

The likelihood is that the viceroy of Gaza would have lived in what today is one of the finest of the old buildings still standing and in daily use in the city. It is a solid, imposing building of stone and marble which has the appearance of a citadel – which is how Gazans today, incorrectly, refer to it. The building, again with the lion of Baibars set in relief in the stonework in several places, would once have dominated the city within the walls. Today it houses al-Zahra' secondary school for girls.

The Mamluks adapted the feudal fiscal system introduced, to the detriment of the landowners and merchants of Gaza, by the Seljuq Turks. Mamluk officers, with units of troops assigned to them, were apportioned areas of land rather than given fixed salaries. As a rule the officers did not live in the area under their control. They were 'interested in revenue rather than possession. The system therefore developed no *châteaux* or manors or strong local authorities of the Western type.'[3] With this feudal system in place there was no opportunity for the people of Gaza to revive their traditional role as entrepreneurs. In fact, Gaza and the region as a whole was entering a five-century period of introspection, not to say cultural, political and economic stagnation. In the view of one historian: 'Although the epoch of the Crusades ignited a genuine economic and cultural revolution in Western Europe, in the Orient these holy wars led to long centuries of decadence and obscurantism. Assaulted from all quarters, the Muslim world turned in on itself. It became over-

sensitive, defensive, intolerant, sterile – attitudes that grew steadily worse as world-wide evolution, a process from which the Muslim world felt excluded, continued.'[4]

Gaza also was afflicted on at least one occasion during this period with disease. The great Arab traveller of the 14th century Ibn Battuta describes, on one visit to the city, finding 'most of it empty because of the fact that many people had died of disease. The city's *qadi* [religious judge] told us that of the 80 notable men of honour, only a quarter remained. The number of dead in the city had reached 1,100 a day.'[5]

Aside from coping with illness, during the three centuries of Mamluk rule, Gaza could at least enjoy a period of peace. With the Mongol and Christian threats receding there was the opportunity for scholarship and the arts to thrive again in Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo. At this time these three cities became wealthy trading centres with goods flowing to and from the east. If Gaza did benefit from this cultural renaissance – as it surely must have, given its location on the north-south road – little evidence of fine Mamluk architecture has survived. In Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo, by contrast, the Mamluk architectural heritage is rich.

While there was stability of a kind, below the surface in the world of Mamluk politics things were anything but stable. The Mamluks rejected the idea of hereditary rulers which in practice meant that succession was decided instead by force of arms. The result was that a sultan's period of rule was rarely longer than a few years. The effect of this lack of continuity was to breed political uncertainty, leading ultimately to the weakening of the dynasty.

Another important factor contributing to the decline of the Mamluks was the undermining of their involvement in international trade between the Far East and Europe. The Mamluks depended on revenue from this commerce. The blow to their status as entrepreneurs was dealt by the Portuguese. In May 1498 the great navigator, Vasco da Gama, discovered the sea route, via the Cape of Good Hope, to India. When he returned to Lisbon a year later with a cargo of spices, Europeans quickly realised that this was a route to the East that was both safer and cheaper than the old one over land. There was nothing

that the Egyptians or the Venetians (who also lost revenue after the discovery of the Cape route) could do. Diplomatic intervention failed; and the superior ships of the Portuguese dealt easily with the challenge from Egyptian vessels in the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and elsewhere when the Mamluks tried to block the new trade route.[6]

Gaza, one can surmise, felt the effects of Egypt's decline as a commercial centre as powerfully as any city in Syria. And it is beyond dispute that the Mamluk viceroys and officers in Syria – as much as the sultans and their aides in Cairo – were too distracted by their own economic and political difficulties to notice the emergence of a new and powerful force to the north.

After the Seljuqs had lost power in Syria in the 13th century, the remnants of their army had moved north to Anatolia. There the area had been divided up into a number of different Turkish principalities. One of these emerged powerful, the Osmanli, named after its eponym, Osman. In Arabic his name was Uthman and the dynasty which bore his name (Uthmani) has been known ever since in the West as Ottoman. In 1453 the Ottoman leader, Muhammad II, captured Constantinople, and put an end to the Byzantine empire. From there the Ottomans expanded even further to the west. Not until the beginning of the 16th century, when the Mamluk dynasty was in crisis, did the Ottomans turn towards the south and east. In 1516, Selim I, known as Selim the Grim, marched the Ottoman army into Syria, defeating the Mamluks near Aleppo. In a matter of months his army had marched across the Sinai desert to take Gaza, which once again was regarded as the vital crossroads for Egypt. Once Gaza was secure, Selim took the fight to the heart of Egyptian power, capturing Cairo in January 1517.

For Gaza, Ottoman occupation put the seal on what for centuries had been the gradual increase in Turkish influence in Palestine – beginning with the Seljuqs and continuing with the Mamluks. While the Arabs of Gaza continued to be immersed in Arab-Islamic culture, they were to be ruled for the next four centuries by Turkish administrators.

Gaza found itself in the new Ottoman province of Syria – at that time divided into three *pashaliks*: Damascus, Aleppo and Tripoli. A fourth, Sidon, was added in 1660. By the 19th century

maps of the eastern Mediterranean show a separate *pashalik* of Gaza which included the towns of Ramla and Jaffa, and extended south to El-Arish.

Gaza was a largely insignificant part of an enormous empire centred on Constantinople where the sultan, who also held the title of Caliph of Islam, was based. The empire encompassed much of north Africa, Egypt, the Red Sea coast of the Arabian peninsula, spreading up north through the countries of the Levant to present day Iraq; and then westwards from Turkey into the Balkans. The pashas of Syria exercised considerable power, and one of their chief responsibilities was levying and collecting taxes from which the empire drew its wealth. Most of the land continued to be organised along feudal lines, and taxes were collected either in money or in kind. A vast, multi-layered bureaucracy came into existence to manage the empire.

In the early days, the citizens of Syria welcomed the sense of order which Ottoman rule brought after the uncertainties of the last days of the Mamluks. But by the end of the 18th century, popular perceptions had changed. The Turkish rulers were seen as decadent and corrupt; and life stagnated.

At the very end of the 18th century an event occurred which set in process a movement that would lead to the reappearance of European powers in the eastern Mediterranean. While Gaza and other cities in the region in the three centuries since the start of Ottoman rule had not moved out of the middle ages, Europe had undergone startling changes and had progressed into the industrial age. The event, the French occupation of Egypt under Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798, was a pivotal moment in the history of the Middle East. Curiously, Gaza had a role to play in this crucial episode.

In 1799, having secured Cairo, Napoleon led his army northward out of Egypt. Like other army commanders before him, his first stop was at El-Arish. Napoleon had with him 'an elite body of troops who laid siege to the fortress of El-Arish where some fifteen-hundred soldiers of the Ottoman empire, mainly seasoned fighters from Morocco and Albania, were entrenched. Short of food and water, the outnumbered enemy surrendered to the French on February 18, after a ten-day siege, and were paroled on condition they went to Baghdad and no

longer bore arms against the French.'[7]

From El-Arish the French continued 'in their hard-slogging march up the coast'[8] along the Way of the Sea, as Tuthmosis III, Salah al-Din, and other legendary generals had done. According to one report, at Khan Younis, he had a lucky escape. Napoleon's 'main army, ahead of him, turned off accidentally into the desert; Napoleon took the direct route and, thus missing them, rode into Khan Younis surrounded only by his staff. He was surprised to see a number of Arabs in the market square hastily mounting and galloping away. They thought it was the French army. Had they waited and captured Napoleon the history of the world since then would have been changed at Khan Younis.'[9] On 24 February 1799 Napoleon's army took Gaza without a fight. According to local tradition, Napoleon spent at least one night in the city while his army remained camped outside. Again, tradition has it that he stayed in the large Mamluk building in the centre of the city which had been the home of the viceroy in the days of Baibars and is now a school. To this day, Gazans refer to it as Napoleon's citadel. In the course of his visit, local historians say, his army destroyed some of the city's mosques and the remaining fortification. Gaza originally had seven city gates – two to the east, one to the south, three to the west and two to the north.

Also following the example of Tuthmosis and other conquerors, Napoleon did not stay in Gaza but moved his army on to the north. While the French are said to have caused considerable material damage to Gaza, the lot of the citizens was more fortunate than the inhabitants of Napoleon's next target, Jaffa. Here the Ottomans refused to surrender. When the French eventually took the town they slaughtered many of the citizens there.

Further north, in Acre, Napoleon encountered further resistance. The French besieged the city. But nine small boats bringing Napoleon's siege artillery northwards were captured by the British Royal Navy. They were subsequently used against the French. With British support, the Ottomans were able to break the siege and roundly defeat the attacking force.

Napoleon's Syria campaign was ultimately, then, a resounding failure. Many of his men died of plague, and he did not have a

force large enough to secure the cities that he had conquered. In May, the ragged band of surviving French troops marched back to Cairo. Napoleon was coming under increasing threat from the British, a new power in the eastern Mediterranean who were intent on protecting the route to their imperial lands in India. Admiral Nelson had sunk Napoleon's fleet shortly after the French had first come ashore in Egypt. The French army was weakened and demoralised. Napoleon escaped from Egypt by sea in August 1799, leaving his army behind.

Britain cooperated with the Ottoman authorities in plans to oust the French. As negotiations to secure a peaceful French withdrawal continued, an Ottoman-led army was assembled ready to march into Egypt. Once again, Gaza was the garrison town chosen for the new force. In January 1800, with the negotiations having failed, the army moved south and overran the nearest French position at El-Arish.

Napoleon's venture into Egypt and Syria was a mere brushstroke on the canvas depicting foreign military intervention in the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. But there was an important secondary dimension to the French presence in the region. Napoleon was accompanied not only by an army of 40,000 men, but also by scientists and academics. The French set up an Institut d'Egypte to study antiquities and languages, and began making geological surveys. Put succinctly, the French breached the wall that had been keeping the peoples of the Middle East isolated from the rapid scientific and technological progress of the Europeans.

Another effect of the Napoleon venture was to alert Britain to the threat posed by the French to the routes to India. From this point on the British could not be indifferent to the fate of Egypt and other lands in the region which lay mid-way between Europe and India. The fate of Gaza, a strategic city on the approaches to Egypt, was bound to be of concern to the British.

But before the day came when Britain committed itself on the ground in the Middle East, Gaza experienced another period of direct control from Egypt.

After the French had been forced out of Egypt by an Ottoman army, supported by Britain, the country nominally came back under the umbrella of Constantinople. But developments in

Egypt in subsequent months showed that the power of the sultan to keep the outlying provinces under his control was declining fast. Within the Ottoman army that had gathered in Gaza prior to driving the French out of Egypt in 1801 was a unit of Albanians. Their leader was Muhammad Ali. He remained in Cairo, building up his power base, until a point came when the Ottoman authorities had no choice but to accept him as governor of Egypt. Muhammad Ali realised the value of Western ideas and technology, not least in the creation of a strong army. He sent hundreds of young Egyptians to study in France and set up schools in Cairo. This was the beginning of a process in which Arab nationalism had its origins.

Egypt quickly became the strongest province in the Ottoman empire, presenting a clear challenge to the authority of Constantinople. Muhammad Ali decided that to consolidate his power he should bring the human and material resources of Syria under his control. In 1832 he dispatched a force of his modernised and reorganised army, with his eldest son Ibrahim in command, to conquer Syria. The Egyptian army headed northward, taking Gaza and most of the coastal cities without a struggle. Only Acre held out, as it had done against Napoleon, before submitting to the Egyptians.

For the people of Gaza, the arrival of the Egyptians was a mixed blessing. At first they welcomed the new rulers who established local councils to run day-to-day affairs and involved the people of Gaza in a way that the Ottomans had not. But the city was subject to a new centralised form of government which required high taxation and which cut across the interests of powerful semi-autonomous sects and clans. There was another unpopular measure introduced by the Egyptians – a ruthless campaign to enlist the people of Palestine into the army. Under Turkish rule the population had not been required to serve in the Ottoman army.

The British, who were becoming increasingly sensitive to events in the Middle East, viewed with alarm the emergence of a powerful new state in the region. They decided that the new power cut across their interests and tried to enlist the support of France and other European states to force the hand of Muhammad Ali. In the end, through a combination of military

pressure and the instigation of a revolt among the disaffected population of Syria, Britain was able to force the withdrawal of the Egyptian army from Syria.

In 1840, with Muhammad Ali's forces having passed through Gaza on their way back to Egypt, the city fell once again under Ottoman control. A number of tough new economic reforms were introduced to raise central taxes and break the hold of the local landowners. The effect of these measures was to increase the general economic prosperity of Palestine. But Constantinople began to demand, as Cairo had done during the brief period of Egyptian rule, that young men from Syria and Palestine should join the army. Many were recruited in the 1870s to fight in the Ottoman army during the Russian and Balkan wars.[10]

The population of the eastern Mediterranean were alienated further from Ottoman rule after the revolt of the Young Turks began in 1908. The Young Turks believed that Constantinople could keep the empire together only by stressing its Turkish roots. This caused a reaction among the Arab communities, which resented the imposition of the Turkish language in place of Arabic in schools and public offices as much as they continued to dislike being administered by Turkish officials sent from Constantinople. A comment by the distinguished British archaeologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, suggests that Ottoman officials had little in common with the Arabs under their administration. On a visit to Gaza in 1890, Sir Flinders had commented on the cosmopolitan background of the Ottoman Kaimmakam or District Governor. He found him to be 'much Europeanized in ways and feelings', having spent much of his life in Berlin and Vienna.[11]

The other continuing grievance related to conscription, with Arab troops being sent to Yemen to fight in the Ottoman army against other Arabs.

This growing sense of dissatisfaction with Ottoman rule was accompanied by an increasing awareness of the changes – political and cultural, as well as technological – that were taking place in Europe. In 1882, the British had invaded and occupied Egypt, taking that country out of Ottoman control in everything but name. At the same time Christian missionaries from Europe

and the United States were beginning to establish themselves in Arab countries. The Americans and the French concentrated on Lebanon and Syria – founding, among other things, the American University of Beirut and the Collège Protestant; while in Egypt and Palestine, British missionaries were active. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) began to offer limited medical services to the Palestinians of Gaza in 1882. In 1891 the CMS rented a house near the centre of Gaza city which they turned into a rudimentary clinic. Sir Flinders Petrie, recording his visit to Gaza in 1890, spoke of being received kindly at the home of a medical missionary: he found it reassuring to find that the doctor had a fully equipped dispensary 'within human reach' of the archaeological site (Tel Jemmeh) where he was working.[12]

Despite the limited facilities, the two Britons who ran the clinic were soon treating up to 70 people a day. It was the only medical centre of its kind for the whole of southern Palestine and northern Sinai; and reports from the end-of-century years spoke of patients coming to the Gaza clinic from El-Arish, Beersheba and beyond – sometimes travelling by camel or donkey for up to eighteen hours to get there. In 1893 a priest from Germany was responsible for building a second floor to what then was being called a 'hospital' to cater for female in-patients. He was followed around the turn of the century by a certain Canon Sterling MD; and the hospital and its facilities continued to expand. The expansion included facilities for a nursing school. In 1908 the Bishop of Jerusalem opened a new hospital building with 46 beds; and records for 1912 show that around 30,000 people were treated as out-patients and 700 were admitted that year. Given that the total population of Gaza at that time was less than 40,000 it is easy to see the extent to which the city had become a regional centre for medical treatment.

Dr Sterling's name became closely associated with the hospital during this period. As a result it became known either as the English Hospital or Dr Sterly's (a corruption of Sterling's). Today the facility, having been rebuilt on the original site by Dr Sterling's son, Robert, after being damaged in the First World War, lies to the south-east of Palestine Square in a quiet compound with trees and gardens. It is known officially as the Ahli Arab Hospital. But staff at the hospital say that elderly

patients still sometimes call it the English or Dr Sterly's hospital when they are asking for directions there.

By the time the First World War broke out in 1914, Britain was ensconced as the power behind the throne in Egypt. British officials in Cairo were beginning to consider what might become of the eastern Mediterranean lands once the Ottoman empire had collapsed. Similar thoughts were going through the mind of the French government. Europe was poised to move into the Middle East in a major way.

But while Ottoman power was crumbling, the Turks still occupied large areas of the eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea coastal strip of the Arabian peninsula. For Britain, the power in Egypt, to oust the Turks from Palestine and Syria, it would have to do what dozens of military powers before it had done: capture Gaza.

Notes

1 Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
2 Le Strange, *op. cit.*
3 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
4 Quoted anonymously by Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 21-22.
5 Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, Beirut, 1992, p. 666.
6 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 157-158.
7 Paul Fregosi, *Dreams of Empire*, London, 1989, p. 160.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
9 Rennie Mac Innes, *Notes for Travellers by Road and Rail in Palestine and Syria*, London, 1933, p. 11.
10 Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
11 Margaret S Drower, *Sir Flinders Petrie – A Life in Archaeology*, London, 1985, p. 159.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

CHAPTER 10

The First World War – 'A Scene of Sad Desolation'

In 1914, Gaza was, according to one chronicle, 'a white walled town in a shallow fertile valley between sand-dunes on the west and irregular hills to the south and east. It is surrounded by small fields and gardens, delineated by high cactus hedges. Its population is about 40,000.'[1]

On to this quiet and untroubled landscape tumbled, in 1917, the horrors of the First World War.

In November 1914, the authorities in Constantinople announced that they were supporting Germany in its war with Britain. In doing so they were taking a step which would mean the eventual end to centuries of Turkish domination of the lands of the eastern Mediterranean.

Jemal Pasha was put in control of the Ottoman forces in Syria, declaring that he would not return before he had entered Cairo.[2] In January 1915, assisted by an inspired German chief-of-staff, von Kressenstein, Jemal Pasha launched an attack on what had become the most precious link in Britain's route to India, the Suez Canal. The British, with many of their troops from Egypt deployed in France, were in a weak position to defend the canal. But with the assistance of the French navy the Ottoman-German assault was repulsed. In April 1915, French warships close off the shore of Gaza bombarded the city in an attempt to relieve the military pressure on Egypt. But the attack did not weaken the

Turkish hold on Gaza. Over the following year and a half von Kressenstein, with supplies of men and equipment passing through Gaza, continued to tie down the British army in the canal zone. But in the summer of 1916 the Allies were well prepared for another strong attack on the waterway. Not only did they repulse the Turks, but they drove them out of Sinai. In December 1916 the British army, led by General Sir Archibald Murray, was in El-Arish ready to head northward to Gaza.

While this was happening British officials in Cairo and the French government were musing over what might become of the territories of the eastern Mediterranean if the Turks could be defeated there. Britain had taken steps to win Arab support in its military campaign. In the Hejaz, the eastern Red Sea coastal strip of the Arabian peninsula, the traditional leader of Mecca, the Sharif, had promised to help the Allies. Sharif Hussain said he could lead à revolt against the Turkish occupation in return for what he took to be a British promise to grant the Arabs independence in the former Ottoman lands of the Middle East. In June 1916 he declared that the Arab Revolt had begun.

But Britain and France had other ideas. In a series of secret meetings they reached agreement which envisaged the liberated Turkish territories being divided into areas of British and French influence. The secret deal, worked out in London, came to be known as the Sykes-Picot agreement.

In the early weeks of 1917 only a handful of people knew about the existence of the Sykes-Picot accord. Sir Archibald Murray and his advisers were working out how they might dislodge the Turks from Gaza and cities to the north. In February, the cavalry of the Egypt Expeditionary Force (made up of British and Dominion forces) set off from El-Arish. On 27 February they entered Khan Younis, midway between Rafah and Deir el-Balah. The Turks had withdrawn their line to Gaza, Tell Sharia and Beersheba, strengthening it as they had done so.

As the Allies advanced northwards they set down – with the help of Egyptian labourers – a railway track and a pipe to bring water from Egypt. The construction of the railway was an important development both for the Allied war effort and for the future of transport after the war connecting Egypt and Palestine. It was an immense and difficult task. The Right Reverend

Rennie MacInnes, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem from 1914 to 1931, commented wryly in *Notes for Travellers by Road and Rail in Palestine and Syria*, published first in 1924, that 'when our armies, with the magnificent assistance of the Egyptian Labour Corps, began to make this railway, they called it the "Milk and Honey Railway". Later, finding nothing but sand all the way, they called it the "Desert Railway".'[3]

The pipe alongside the track eventually brought water from the River Nile, when the railway was extended, all the way to Gaza. Bishop MacInnes recalled that there was 'an old tradition in South Palestine that the Turks would hold the country "till the waters of the Nile flow into Palestine," – i.e. an almost impossible contingency. But it was eventually effected by General Sir Archibald Murray.'[4]

From Khan Younis the Allies moved on to Deir el-Balah which became the railhead. An aerodrome and camps were established there. According to Bishop MacInnes, Deir el-Balah was 'commonly called by the British troops "Dear Old Bella".' During the summer of 1917, he wrote, 'an enormous rail-head camp' was established there.[5]

The Turks, meanwhile, with their German advisers had built an impressive defensive wall in Gaza which consisted not just of infantry, but also artillery – including four heavy batteries and two batteries of desert guns – in addition to machine guns and other lighter weapons. They used the Grand Mosque as a store for their provisions and ammunition. The civilian inhabitants of the city were told to leave for their own safety.

On 26 March 1917, Sir Archibald Murray led an Allied army force of 44,000 men in an attack aimed at surrounding and driving the Turks out of Gaza. It was a city described in one contemporary newspaper account as 'this fortress of long standing, situated on the coast road into Palestine. But capturing it would not be easy. Its natural defences from an attack from the south [primarily, the Wadi Ghazzah] were strong. And British movements were constricted by the problem of supplying water (not least for the 9,000 horses) beyond the railhead. To surmount the latter problem, an attack must capture Gaza, where wells could be found in abundance, within 24 hours.'[6]

It is striking how the problems faced by an army commander

trying to capture Gaza in the 20th century were so similar to those confronting other commanders many centuries earlier. For a start he had to fathom how to cross the natural defensive line of the Wadi Ghazzah, while concentrating all the time on securing enough water for his army. The provision of water supplies had been one of the priorities of the Egyptian pharaoh Sethos II, for example, as far back as the 12th century BC when he took the route followed by General Murray.

Sir Archibald's idea was to approach the city from three directions: Tell Jemmeh and Wadi Ghazzah in the south; from Tell Al-Mantar from the east; and from Beit Hanoun and Jebaliya (two villages in the Gaza Strip today) from the north. The operation against Gaza 'was skilfully planned and well executed. The infantry pressed up from the south with determination. Meanwhile the cavalry outflanked the town on the landward (eastern) side and then swung west to encircle it. Within the allotted time Gaza was cut off, and its capture was imminent.'[7]

But a problem arose. The third force was delayed taking the northern positions. Because of poor communications its fate was unknown. The British army commanders assumed, incorrectly, that the force had run into an ambush. 'With the coming of sunset the point had been reached where it seemed that the forces must be withdrawn for lack of water. Further, the British command had learned that Turkish reinforcements were approaching from the north.'[8] So, Sir Archibald Murray ordered a withdrawal of the rest of the force. In the process of retreat more losses were suffered, bringing the total number of Allied soldiers killed to 4,000, with Turkish losses only half this number. But Sir Archibald declared the battle a major success.

The lie which he told is exposed in an awesome way at the British War Cemetery close to the highway to the north of Gaza. To pass through the austere granite archway into the cemetery is to step from one world to another – from the bustle and disorder of modern Gaza to a silent and immaculately manicured garden. Here, under trees, and amid flowering jacaranda and oleander, lie ranks of gravestones – hundreds and hundreds of them. One only needs to start reading the inscriptions on the headstones to realise that the First Battle of Gaza was a disaster. 'Private W Pearson, Essex Regiment. Died 26th March 1917; Private

G Dickens, Aged 26, Died 26 March 1917, Private S P Spurgen, Aged 21. Died 26 March 1917 . . . '

But because of the optimistic assessment of the battle reaching the War Cabinet, Sir Archibald was ordered to make another attempt to capture Gaza a month later. According to T E Lawrence, the British commander knew that the task was hopeless, but was 'too weak or too politic to resist . . . and we went into it, everybody, generals and staff-officers, even soldiers, convinced that we should lose.'[9]

Sir Archibald's second attempt was no more successful than the first. By this time, any element of surprise had gone, and the Turks had had an opportunity to reinforce greatly their positions in Gaza city.

Sir Archibald's plan for the second assault on the city was that bombardment would come from the sea from the south-west, and the land attack would follow from the south and south-east. A land force, strengthened by a unit from the Indian army, came up the coast as far as Shaikh Ajloun – a coastal village a few miles to the south of the city – today almost an outer suburb. But the Allied force 'lacked the artillery for a direct frontal assault,'[10] and could make no further progress under the heavy defensive artillery barrage from the Turks. Once again, the lines of graves in the British cemetery in Gaza (as well as the small cemetery in Deir el-Balah) testify to the military failure. The headstones show that scores of young men were killed on 19 April 1917. Many of the graves carry no name, describing the person buried there simply as 'A Soldier of the Great War – Known unto God'.

After the two military fiascos, Sir Archibald was replaced by General Sir Edmund Allenby. Two defeats in the battle for Gaza had not deterred the British government. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George 'wanted Jerusalem "as a Christmas present for the British nation".'[11]

Aside from being a more astute military commander than his predecessor, General Allenby had the advantage that the Turkish supply lines were being increasingly stretched. Because of the succession of battles in and around Gaza, for example, the local population had had little opportunity to work the land and harvest crops – or to attend to cattle. This all contributed to a food shortage both among the military and the civilian population.

The Ottoman force were also at a psychological disadvantage in their relationship with the Arab communities among whom they were deployed. By this time, Sharif Hussain's Arab Revolt was under way and Arab forces were helping the Allies harass the Turks in a number of positions. The British had done their best to take advantage of the propaganda benefit of Sharif Hussain's revolt in trying to win over the Arabs in Turkish-occupied land. The result was that the Ottomans were receiving less than full cooperation from the Arabs of Palestine and Syria who were looking to a day when Turkish rule would end.

Under the command of General Allenby the attacking force was well organised and larger than that defending the city. Allenby had under his command seven infantry and three cavalry divisions, giving him a superiority over the Turks of two-to-one in the former and eight-to-one in the latter.

During the long build-up to the third battle for Gaza, Allied troops found time heavy on their hands. A senior British civilian official noted that 'the army had been encamped for five months in this uninteresting stretch of sand country, and it was exceedingly difficult to find any form of recreation beyond riding about in very featureless scenery.' But not all members of the unit were bored. 'The only people who were really happy were a small group of skilled ornithologists who occupied their spare time by increasing considerably the world's knowledge of migratory birds.' Gaza, it turned out, was a crossroads for birds as much as for conquering armies. 'Fate had dumped them down in the very best spot for studying the big annual migration at the right time, and they made the most excellent use of this exceptional opportunity.'[12]

The bird watchers had an ally in their commander-in-chief. 'Lord Allenby', a correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle* of London noted, 'stationed a Yorkshire sergeant at a watering place which migratory birds frequented and whenever a new species arrived the commander-in-chief would forget the cares of the campaign and slip off to the pond to see the bird for himself.'[13]

Most of these long days were taken up in getting men and equipment into place for the next stage in the military campaign. The Turks, too, had been using the time to prepare for the

expected assault from the Allies, as a correspondent for *The Times* reported. 'In the six months between the second battle and the opening of General Allenby's offensive they [the Turks] had constructed formidable defences on the Gaza-Beersheba front. Strategic railways were built, the garrison of southern Palestine was largely reinforced and provided with powerful artillery; the air service was enlarged and rendered very efficient. In all these measures the Turks had the active help of the Germans, who were concerned for the prosecution of their own interests in the Near East.' Gaza city, the correspondent wrote, 'had been made into a strong modern fortress, heavily entrenched and wired, offering every facility for protracted defence.'[14]

The correspondent of *The Times* pointed out, too, that the Turks had the advantage of terrain – their land was fertile and they had good water supplies. The Allies, on the other hand, were mainly occupying desert.

The front line of the Allied force extended some 35 kilometres from the coast south of Gaza, following roughly the line of the Wadi Ghazzah, eastward. At his headquarters at Kilab, just south of Khan Younis, General Allenby worked on his strategy for capturing Gaza. Writing to General Sir William Robertson, of Eastern Command, three months before the assault on the Turks began, General Allenby was indicating that he would not be copying General Murray's tactics in launching a frontal attack from the south. There the Turks were well dug in with lines and lines of trenches. 'I think from what I have so far seen that the Turks expect us to renew our attacks on Gaza. They probably think we shall cling to the coastline. If we make our attack there it will probably be costly . . . To make the best use of the mounted troops and our mobility it will most likely be preferable to strike further east.'[15]

General Allenby had in mind to attack Beersheba ahead of Gaza; but he was still keen to give the impression to the Turks that he would be going to Gaza first. As he wrote to General Robertson towards the end of July 1917, 'my policy is to encourage the belief that my attack will come against Gaza. Lately we have carried out one or two successful raids on the front of Gaza and others are contemplated.'[16]

In August, General Allenby, in another communication to

General Robertson, neatly summed up his strategy for defeating the Turks: 'Success depends on surprise and speed, speed depends on transport and water.'[17] Aside from the element of surprise, General Allenby wanted early control of Beersheba because it was an important source of water. His army (both men and horses) was consuming 400,000 gallons of water a day.[18]

On October 31 1917, the town of Beersheba fell to the Allies. The attack had involved one of the last great cavalry charges in British military history. General Allenby dismissed the battle for Beersheba as 'a smart little battle, achieved by careful preparation and good staff work.'[19]

The Allied army then concentrated its attack on Gaza. On the night of 1-2 November, Allenby's army broke through the Turkish line between the coast and the city. The next morning he wrote to his wife, Mabel: 'This morning at 3 o'clock I attacked the south-west part of the Gaza defences. We took them on a flank of some 6,000 yards and a depth of some 1,000-1,500 yards. We now overlook Gaza and my left is on the sea coast north-east of the town. The navy cooperated with fire from the sea; and shot well. We've taken some 300 prisoners and some machine-guns so far.'[20]

In the days that followed the Allies closed in on Gaza. On 6 November, in another letter to his wife, General Allenby wrote: 'We've had a successful day. We attacked the left of the Turkish positions, from north of Beersheba and have rolled them as far as Sharia. The Turks fought well but have been badly defeated . . . Gaza was not attacked; but I should not be surprised if this affected seriously their defenders. I am putting a lot of shell into them and the Navy are still pounding them effectively. There was a sky with mist this morning; which cleared at 8 o'clock. It was in our favour as it veiled our start and the day has been bright and cool. I have no details, yet, of the battle, and don't know what our casualties and captives may be.'[21]

The pounding of Gaza had the desired effect. A correspondent of *The Times* reported that the evacuation of the city had been completed during the night of 6 November, 'and though a certain amount of movement on the roads north of Gaza was observed by our airmen and fired on by our heavy artillery there was nothing indicating a general retirement. By this prompt retreat

General von Kressenstein avoided a battle, for another attack on Gaza was the natural sequel to the Sharia battle, and an attack had been ordered for the night of November 6th-7th.'[22]

On the morning of 7 November, the Allies encountered minimal Turkish resistance around Gaza. British army patrols cautiously approached the city along the coast and 'found the enemy gone . . . and the old capital of the Philistines, before which the British had been held up for nine months, was now won.'[23]

In a letter home, General Allenby summed up the day's achievement: 'Dear Mabel, The Turks have had an awful hammering. We attacked Gaza early this morning; and got it almost without opposition.' The letter ends with the comment, 'No rain here; but the weather is perfect for campaigning and now we have captured all the water supplies we need.'[24]

Gaza itself paid a high price for the weeks of fighting. Local historians say the bombardments during those battles did more than anything else in recent times to destroy what was left of the historical and architectural heritage of the city. The roof of the Grand Mosque had been destroyed and its minaret was no more than a jagged stump. The 'English' Hospital – set up by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the 1880s and 90s – was 'almost totally destroyed'.[25]

Three eye-witness accounts of Gaza in the immediate aftermath of the battles paint a terrible picture of destruction. A correspondent of *The Times* of London wrote that 'houses were ruthlessly plundered for the furnishings of dug-outs and the linings of trenches. Our troops found sand-bags made of rich silks. And on evacuating Gaza the Turks did what further damage they could – in particular choking all the wells. When the British entered the town through the orchards, palm trees and cactus which formed a deep fringe of green around it, there was disappointment that such a famous place presented so poor an appearance. But there was evidence of former greatness in the marble used to beautify modern buildings – columns and slabs taken from ancient temples and churches. Relics, too, of the Crusades were found. The west end of the town, an intricate maze of narrow dirty streets, was promptly dubbed "Belgravia" by the soldiers, all of whom seemed to make a point of climbing

Ali Muntar ("the watch tower") which, according to tradition, Samson carried the gates of the city.'[26]

A more emotional response to the destruction of Gaza is found in an article by a certain Reverend Father Waggett which was published by *The Church Times* in London. He began the article by summarising the importance of Gaza throughout history, first as a centre for pagan worship, then as one of the earliest outposts of Christianity and finally as a city revered for being the burying place for a forebear of the Prophet Muhammad. 'It is a story,' Father Waggett wrote, 'of worldly splendour and religious heroism, very difficult to stage in imagination in what Gaza now is or has lately been. Before the war it would have been seen as a modest stone-and-mud-built town with Mosques and Churches and market and 40,000 inhabitants . . . After the battles of this war Gaza was a very lamentable spectacle. The Great Mosque was used by the Turks as a dump for small-arms ammunition, and consequently in the bombardment the whole place was terribly injured by a Turkish explosion . . . It's a scene of very sad desolation . . . It was mainly due to the removal by the defenders of the roofs to provide wood for trenches and duckboards and other military works.'[27]

General Allenby visited Gaza on 9 November 1917. He, too, was shocked by the way that the Turks had scavenged for wood. Gaza, he wrote to his wife, 'is badly knocked about; besides the effects of our shells, the Turks took all the wood out of the town. Wide gardens of fig trees, olives and such like, [still] spread all around it; but many fine old olives have been cut down for railway engine fuel. There is an old and a new town, but I had no time to explore either . . . Tomorrow is likely to be a critical day. If the Turks can't stop us tomorrow, they are done.'[28]

In the tradition over the centuries of army commanders capturing Gaza, General Allenby did not stay in the city, but pressed on, arriving triumphantly in Jerusalem a month later. Gaza, as ever, was a crossroad city that needed to be taken; but was not a prize in itself.

But Gaza was henceforth, for the next 30 years, under British occupation. In the early days a certain Major W D Kenny of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers was appointed military governor of Gaza and 'the clearing of wells and the sanitation of the town was

taken in hand. The extension of the main railway line from Egypt, which then ended at Deir al-Balah, some 10 miles south of Gaza, was begun almost at once – one of the most urgent problems facing the Expeditionary Force, as the area of operations extended north was that of transport.'[29]

There were also the injured to be attended to, and the dead to be buried in the British Military Cemetery in Gaza. The total there rose to more than 3,000 – with around 700 more in Deir el-Balah. Allied servicemen, brought in from field ambulance stations, continued to be buried there until March 1919.

Bishop MacInnes, who was in Palestine during the First World War, reflected on the human cost of the successful military campaign against the Ottoman army by relating it to the concomitant construction of the railway. 'It should never be forgotten that the building of this railway, first by Sir Archibald Murray and then by Lord Allenby, in their campaigns of 1915-1917, was at the cost of more than 10,000 British soldiers' lives – an average of twenty-seven lives every kilometre.'[30]

When Allenby's army had marched on, the people of Gaza started to return to the city and began picking up the pieces of their lives. Father Waggett, observing Gaza several months after the defeat of the Turks, wrote that 'her famous orchards have suffered, but her plentiful, rather brackish, wells will soon be in working order. Some of the streets of stone-walled shops have been put in order and trade goes on busily and grows. But anyone who sees Gaza even now after the very remarkable improvement and the return of about 10,000 people to the city must see how great the need will be for a long time yet of fostering care if Gaza is to recover its former prosperity. And it ought of course go far beyond that in a new and renovated Palestine. But here, as everywhere, the hope is in the security and regular work of the inhabitants, not in favour and gifts.'[31]

Another person to see Gaza about this time was Ronald Storrs, who passed through the city on his way from Cairo to Jerusalem where he was to take up the position of Military Governor. In his diary he, too, commented on the scale of the destruction of Gaza. But he was also struck by the beauty of the winter landscape. 'The country undulating, the sand at this time of year covered with a faint green growth . . . Riotous hedges

and lots of cactus; sand roads, far better at any rate than those through the Euphrates desert and covered for miles with wire netting, giving a surface and appearance of tarring. General effect . . . European and, with the sea in the background, Flemish dune or low Sussex.'[32]

The process of rebuilding Gaza was slow. Three years after the battles for the city it was still in a devastated condition. 'The town of Gaza suffered probably more from military action during the war than any other town in this theatre of operations,' wrote the British High Commissioner in Palestine at the time, Sir Herbert Samuel, in a despatch to the Foreign Office in London. 'Almost all its buildings have been destroyed and its present appearance is comparable only to that of the devastated areas in France and Belgium.' Sir Herbert asked the Foreign Office if any funds could be made available to help restore the city so that its original inhabitants could return. He emphasised the city's importance before the war. 'It was of considerable commercial importance being the natural emporium of the rich grain districts lying south and east of it [before the war Gaza was a major supplier of barley for the brewing industry in Britain]. The original population has now dwindled to something like one third of its number, and in the present ruinous condition of the town there is little to attract the remainder of its inhabitants to return or fresh population to settle there . . . I trust that some means may be devised by which His Majesty's Government may be instrumental in helping to restore the prosperity of a town whose past history bears eloquent testimony to its potentialities.'[33]

Sir Herbert also expressed the view that the provision of aid from Britain could make the idea of British rule in Palestine more popular. In reality, though, the chances of the British being truly popular in Palestine had evaporated even before their rule began. This was because of a promise made by the government in London to the Jews that it would support the idea of a Jewish homeland being established in Palestine.

Gaza, it is true, was set for a rare period of security from outside attack; but the seeds had also been sown for further bloodshed, leading – before the century had ended – to yet another period of military occupation.

Notes

[1] Taken from the introduction to the official list of names of soldiers buried in the British War Cemetery in Gaza city.
[2] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
[3] MacInnes, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[6] Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, London, 1986, p. 499.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 499.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 499.
[9] T E Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, London, 1935, p. 329.
[10] Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 500.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 500.
[12] Major C S Jarvis, *Desert and Delta*, London, 1938, p. 22.
[13] *Daily Chronicle*, 10/9/17.
[14] *The Times, History and Encyclopedia of the War*, part 187, volume 15, March 19 1918, p. 145 ff.
[15] Papers of William Robertson, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London, July 1917. Reference: 1/32/62. Quoted with the permission of the Trustees of the Centre.
[16] *Ibid.*, reference: 1/32/64.
[17] *Ibid.*, reference: 1/32/69.
[18] Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 501.
[19] The Letters of General Allenby to his wife Mabel, 1917. The Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London. Reference: 1/8/16. Quoted with the permission of the Trustees of the Centre.
[20] *Ibid.*, reference: 1/8/17/
[21] *Ibid.*, reference: 1/8/19.
[22] *The Times, loc. cit.*
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Liddell Hart Archive, cit. op. Allenby Letter, reference: 1/8/20.
[25] MacInnes, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[26] *The Times, op. cit.*
[27] PRO 371 3413.
[28] Liddell Hart Archive, *op.cit.*, Allenby Letters. Reference: 1/8/22.
[29] *The Times, op. cit.*
[30] MacInnes, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
[31] PRO 371 3413.
[32] Ronald Storrs, *Orientations*, London, 1939. p. 285.
[33] PRO 371 5287.

CHAPTER 11

The British Road to Disaster

Few buildings remaining in Gaza evoke echoes of the days of the period of British rule in Palestine after the First World War. It is appropriate or unfortunate, depending on one's perspective, that the single prominent structure from this period has become an infamous landmark: Gaza military prison. This is a stark and sharply angled child's-drawing of a building lying between the centre of the city and the sea. It is similar in style – having been designed by the same architect – to several others built by the British across Palestine. Such is the enduring structure of the prison that it continued after the end of the mandate period to serve the Egyptians when they administered Gaza. The Israelis, as the next occupying force in the territory, also found plenty of use for the prison; and now the Palestinian authorities are locking their prisoners in the same building. The people of Gaza associate the building most closely with the years of oppressive Israeli occupation and are both bewildered and angered by the insensitivity of the Palestinian authorities' decision to go on using the building in the same way.

The end of the First World War saw Britain and France in control of the former territories of the Ottoman empire in the eastern Mediterranean. The Arabs might have thought that a promise had been made by Britain to grant them independence in these lands in return for having received their help in defeating

the Turks. But Britain did not feel obliged to fulfil its commitment, abiding instead by an amended version of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916-17. As the Arab lands were carved up between the two European powers, Palestine was assigned to Britain. This was merely a formality; since the fall of Gaza and General Sir Edmund Allenby's sweep northwards, Palestine had been under British military control, its inhabitants governed by military rule from Jerusalem.

The future of the east Mediterranean region was one of the subjects of discussion at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. With Feisal, the son of Sharif Hussain of Mecca, making an impassioned plea for Arab independence, President Woodrow Wilson of the United States gave his backing to the idea of an international commission of inquiry to establish what the citizens of Palestine and Syria wanted. Britain and France, with their own interests in mind, were unenthusiastic. When a two-man American commission visited the region and reported that there was overwhelming opposition to the idea of foreign mandates, the governments in London and France ignored the findings. In May 1920, a meeting of the Supreme Council of the League of Nations declared that Syria was being divided into two French mandates, Syria and Lebanon; and Palestine was being assigned to the British. On 3 November 1920, military rule in Palestine was ended, and the territory became a British mandate under the first High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel (a Jew who had been a member of the British government).

In the earliest years of British rule, the authorities in Palestine made only minor changes to the legal and administrative structures inherited from the Ottomans. But in 1922 the Palestine Order in Council served as an organic law, providing the basis for executive rule and legislation, with the high commissioner the representative of the British government.

The legal system 'perpetuated the coexistence of civil and religious courts. The civil courts followed Ottoman decrees, along with orders published by the mandatory in Palestine and British common law and equity law, in so far as these filled gaps in Ottoman legal practice and did not conflict with local conditions. The religious courts recognized the judicial privileges awarded to religious denominations in Ottoman times, in

matters of personal status; but the mandatory granted parallel authority, in several cases, to the civil courts.'[1]

In the years during which Britain held the mandate for Palestine (until 1948) Gaza became embroiled, along with all other areas, in the three-way tussle between the British authorities, the Palestinians and the Jews. Jewish immigration to Palestine had started in the early part of the century; but by the end of the First World War the total had reached only about 56,000, compared with the Arab population of 700,000. The problem for the British authorities was that they had made a commitment to the Jews in November 1917 (while the Sharif of Mecca's Arab Revolt was under way) to establish in Palestine 'a National Home for the Jewish people'. This promise was made by the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, and has been known ever since as the Balfour Declaration. The root of the problem facing Britain, though, was the fact the Declaration also promised that nothing would be done 'which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.' In other words, the British had made two self-contradictory promises. From the first day of British mandatory rule Hebrew was declared to be one of the three official languages along with English and Arabic. The whole period is overshadowed by the unsuccessful attempts by the authorities in Jerusalem to reconcile the two irreconcilable promises made to the Arabs and the Jews.

On the daily practical level Sir Herbert Samuel established a government in Jerusalem which included members of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities. He also set up an advisory council made up of members from the three communities, 'which he hoped would lead ultimately to a partly elected legislative council for a joint community. But the Arabs, who fundamentally rejected both the mandate and the Balfour Declaration, boycotted the elections and demanded a national government.'[2]

Palestine as a whole was divided into three districts, each under a District Commissioner – Jerusalem, the north and the south. Gaza, the largest city in Palestine with an exclusively Arab population, was a district capital. Religious matters were in the hands of a Supreme Islamic Council which was established in

1922 under the Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Hussaini. Al-Hajj al-Sa'id Shawa was the first representative from Gaza. Each town, including Gaza, had its own mayor, while the elected village representative was the *mukhtar*. Shuhadah Qudaih is a former *mukhtar* from Khuza'a, a quiet and orderly village in the south-eastern corner of the Gaza Strip. During the British mandate period he worked with the British administration, as well as being *mukhtar* (1944-48). The chief British administrator, he says, had his office in Gaza city, and passed on instructions and regulations through his representative in Khan Younis. Shuhadah Qudaih recalls that there were no particular problems in day-to-day relations with the British because they generally stayed away from villages and towns. 'There was no police station in this village. We were aware of the British running the administration of Palestine. But their soldiers weren't employed around the Gaza Strip in the way that the Israelis were. Mostly we just were aware of the British presence without directly feeling it.' However, Mr Qudaih, like most other Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere accuses the British of failure to stop the Jewish immigrants putting down roots in the land. 'The British were helping the Jews to take the land from Palestinians, to steal the land. And we believe the British were helping Palestinian collaborators to buy land and sell it to the Jews. That's why in the end we were angry and why fighting broke out.'[3]

Internal security during the mandate days was in the hands of the Palestine Police – a mixed Arab and Jewish force with British officers. The headquarters for the British officers and for the civilian administrators was the building close to the Grand Mosque which is today al-Zahra' girls' secondary school. This had also been used as a police garrison by the Ottomans, and was said to have been the building where Napoleon stayed during his brief visit to Gaza in the late 18th century.

The biggest difficulty faced by the people of Gaza was the task of rebuilding their city and their lives after the destruction of the First World War. Only slowly did the population return, and in the absence of major financial investment on the part of the mandate authorities, Gaza's role in the economic life of Palestine was modest. But its position close to the Egyptian border meant that it was still a crossroads which travellers in and out of

Palestine had to pass. For many Britons and other foreigners, Gaza represented the first glimpse of Palestine. Charis Waddy arrived from Australia in 1919 as a small child; her father had been a chaplain during the First World War and had reached Jerusalem in 1917 with General Allenby's army. After the war her father stayed on as a teacher at St George's School. Two years later his family joined him. 'We came by train from Port Said,' Miss Waddy said, 'and my first impression was waking up in that train when it stopped at Gaza. There was the most extraordinary growling outside the window. It was a camel.'[4] Today taxis and trucks line up alongside the main north-south highway near the centre of Gaza city where the railway station once stood.

The railway, with the trade it brought in passengers and goods, was an important source of income for Gaza. The standard of passenger accommodation on the rail service was impressive, in the view of an American newspaper correspondent who travelled on the route from Egypt, through Gaza, to Jerusalem in 1925. When he boarded the train at Kantara, he wrote, he was pleasantly surprised. 'I was prepared to be uncomfortable on a long night's journey, as I had been in Europe where the sleeping cars have a lot to learn from the dear old USA. But here I found the very finest sleeping car, better than anything I had seen in the whole of Europe.'[5]

Gaza during the mandate years was, once again in its history, primarily a frontier town. Its remote location on the edge of the desert, combined with the fact that neither the city nor the area round about contained sites sacred to the Jews, meant that Jewish immigrants were not eager to acquire land there, as they were in many other areas of Palestine. But Gaza was inextricably linked by both blood ties and sentiment to the Palestinian issue; and the anger at what was regarded as Britain's connivance with the Jews in the gradual creation of a Jewish state in Palestine was displayed as clearly on the streets of Gaza as on any city under British rule. The people of Gaza, indeed, had a reputation of being (along with the inhabitants of Nablus) among those Palestinians mostly violently opposed both to the policies of the British mandate authorities and to the aims of the Zionist movement. Centuries of foreign occupation had bred in the spirit

of the people of Gaza a hatred of occupation. This would be seen most clearly of all during the time of Israeli rule in the territory in the last quarter of the century.

The first anti-British riots broke out after the failure of Sir Herbert Samuel's attempt to set up a legislative council – a move which led to the publication of a White Paper in Britain (the first of several during the mandate period). This stated that a balance would be maintained between the Arab and Jewish communities. 'However, the Arabs were convinced by this that the true intention [of the British] was to wait until the Jews in Palestine had grown sufficiently in numbers and power to become dominant, and they continued to demand an immediate national government, citing the promises made to the Arabs during the war.'[6]

Throughout the 1920s, the Jews continued to acquire property and land. In 1929, Britain allowed the creation of an expanded Jewish Agency, with half the members 'recruited from Zionist sympathizers outside Palestine. The Zionists acquired a new sense of confidence.'[7] The move resulted in widespread riots across Palestine. Members of the Jewish community in Hebron were killed by angry crowds. According to one Palestinian historian, the people of Gaza 'rose up against the Jewish community who were forced to flee the city under the cover of darkness. The Jews had been living in Gaza peacefully and safely before the emergence of the Zionist movement. Some of them had been watchmakers, dentists, millers and fishermen. During the riots, too, a group of youths surged over to the British military airfield to the east of Gaza, and the British forces had difficulty in blocking them . . . The reaction of the mandate authorities to the troubles in Gaza was to arrest and torture many Arabs. Three were executed. At the same time, Jewish settlers in southern Palestine were given arms.'[8]

An example of how the people of Gaza were becoming radicalised both by events in Palestine and by the rise of Arab nationalism throughout the region can be seen in the choice of a new name for one of the main streets in the city. Since Ottoman times the main thoroughfare heading from the city to the sea had been called Jemal Pasha Street. In the closing weeks of 1931, during the time when Fahmi Bey al-Hussaini was mayor, it was

proposed that the street should be given the name of a Libyan nationalist hero, Umar al-Mukhtar, who had been captured and hanged by the Italians in September of that year. The proposal was accepted by the people of Gaza and the name was retained, despite strong protests from the Italian Consul in Jerusalem, passed on to the Gaza municipality by the British authorities. The street is still called after Umar al-Mukhtar.

During the first half of the 1930s Jewish immigration into Palestine increased. There was a realisation, too, among the Arabs that the Zionists were smuggling arms into Palestine with the clear intention of fighting, if necessary, to create a Jewish state. In 1936, political parties banded together to form an Arab Higher Committee led by the Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Hussaini. On 20 April 1936 the committee called for a general strike by Arabs throughout Palestine. The response was immediate and solid. Tala'at Ibrahim, now in his late seventies, was a teenager in Gaza in 1936. Speaking quietly and slowly he recalled the days of the general strike. 'It was a very big event. Everybody here was involved, from all sections of society. The British tried to break the strike. They arrested lots of people – the organisers. But they failed, because the strike went on for six months.'[9] Telephone lines were torn down to impede the communications of the British authorities, and a lengthy curfew was imposed on the city when two British soldiers were shot dead. At other times large number of Gazans were arrested after anti-British and anti-Zionist demonstrations in the city. The houses of a number of families, from whom alleged ringleaders or perpetrators of violence came, were blown up.

The strike ended, after 176 days, on 13 October 1936; but the violence against the British continued, in Gaza as elsewhere. Army and police patrols were attacked, explosives set off under cars and telephone lines ripped down. The railway line through Gaza was also frequently the target of attacks, and rail services from Egypt to Palestine – a vital lifeline for the British – were frequently interrupted. 'Palestine was in turmoil,' recalled Sir Gawain Bell, who arrived by train from Egypt in 1938 to take up a government posting. 'We crossed into Palestine, and from there on all the way up to Haifa it was slow progress. The telegraph lines were down and the posts were lying on the ground.'[10]

The British did their best to catch those carrying out the attacks – but were not successful. From the minarets of mosques in Gaza city and in the towns and villages round about, warnings were broadcast when British patrols were approaching – a tactic also used to good effect in the violent rebellion in the 80s and 90s against Israeli rule. While the effectiveness of mass arrests may have been limited, the numbers of Arabs in detention grew so fast that the need arose for the construction of the military prison.

The Arab rebellion had been given new impetus in 1937 by the publication of a report by Lord Peel which 'concluded that Britain's obligations to Arabs and Jews were irreconcilable and that the mandate was unworkable. It therefore for the first time recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The Zionists' response was ambivalent . . . The Arabs, on the other hand, were unanimously outraged . . . and their rebellion intensified, in spite of the heavy use of force and the outlawing of the Arab Higher Committee.'[11]

In 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War the Arab rebellion faded away with the arrival of large numbers of British troops in Palestine. At the same time another British White Paper recommended that the number of new Jewish immigrants to Palestine should be restricted to 75,000 over the following five years. Within ten years, the White Paper said, a Palestine state should be set up – with, the implication was, an Arab majority. But this attempt to mollify the Arabs failed – while the Jews, predictably, were enraged.

During the Second World War Gaza was occupied by British and Australian forces. Palestine did not become part of the theatre of conflict as it had done during the First World War – despite some air raids on Haifa. Gaza remained quiet. But preparations had been made, just in case. Sir Gawain Bell, who was running the Palestine Police Camel Gendarmerie at Beersheba, remembered that when 'Italy came into the war it was evident that we would have to do something. The likelihood was that there would be air raids on Palestine from Italy, and at that period the Australian troops had not yet taken over responsibility for security in Gaza. I went to Gaza to discuss the matter with Rushdi Bey Shawa, the mayor, and other people.

We formed a "security council". There were no air raid precautions of any sort in Gaza, no sirens and no means of informing the people if we heard that hostile enemy aircraft were approaching. So we decided that if we heard that enemy aircraft were coming, the *muezzins* should go up to the minarets and cry out with a loud voice that enemy aircraft were quite close and everyone should take precautions. We also decided that to reinforce this and make it appear that it was a matter of some importance the *Ramadan* gun should be fired; and for this purpose we ordered fifty pounds of black powder. But there was never a raid on Gaza.'[12]

Tala'at Ibrahim recalled life in Gaza during the Second World War. He said he hadn't felt oppressed by the presence of the Allied troops. Mr Ibrahim remembered 'the dresses [traditional kilts] of the Scottish soldiers', as well as seeing lots of Australian troops. 'Because there were so many foreign troops here we felt that there was a war going on, but it was not happening here in Gaza. At that period, Gaza city was confined to the Shuja'iya and Zaitoun area. The area from Palestine Square to the sea was like a jungle, with sand and trees. It was so dense and wild that it was dangerous to go at night to the sea.'

Majid al-Hussaini was a boy in Gaza in the post Second World War years. He remembers that Palestine Square was the centre of Gaza, with Umar al-Mukhtar street the only major thoroughfare. During the British mandate his father had a job transporting meat and other food from Gaza to Sarafand. As far as the general impressions of British rule are concerned, Mr Hussaini – like many others – sets his memories against the experience of living under the more recent Israeli occupation. As far as he can remember, and going on what his elders said, the Palestinians did not feel that the British were occupiers in the sense that the Israelis were in later decades. 'For one thing, the British tended to keep their soldiers in their camps, except at times of trouble. We had complete freedom to come and go. You could make a living as best you could. It was not really an occupation, it didn't feel that way – it was more a case of protective custody.'[13]

Mr Hussaini said that in the pre-1948 days the mass of people 'didn't care much about politics. They didn't question why things

were happening as much as they did later on. And, anyway, the British limited the amount of education the people could get. It was a different matter for the very rich who could afford to go to private schools or to go abroad. For the mass of the population, the British limited education to the seventh grade.' I asked Mr Husseini why he thought the British wanted to restrict the Palestinians in this way. 'I think they hoped to stay in Palestine for ever and didn't want the Palestinian self-awareness to develop too much. The British had made the Jews a promise many decades earlier in the Balfour Declaration, and they needed to keep us down to enable them to fulfil the promise.'

Like the overwhelming majority of Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere, any thoughts Mr Husseini has about the presence of the British during the mandate era – regardless of whether those sentiments were positive or not – are overwhelmed by hostility felt towards the British government for its decision to pull out of Palestine in 1948, thus allowing the creation of Israel. 'Britain did not leave Palestine until they saw that Israel was able to settle the country. We can never forget that.'

In the early 1940s the British faced pressures from a number of directions. For a start, tens of thousands of Jews who had fled from the atrocities being committed by the Nazis in Europe were homeless and wanted to get to Palestine. Attempts to restrict immigration were bitterly denounced by the United States and others in the international community. At the same time the Jewish underground groups were becoming stronger and targeting British troops and police, while continuing to encourage the expansion of Jewish control on land and property.

In August 1947 a United Nations commission recommended the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Under this scheme, the Jewish state would have acquired 55 per cent of Arab Palestine, even though the Jews were still a minority (680,000 against 1.3 million Arabs). Under this scheme, Gaza would have been part of the Jewish state. The Arabs rejected the plan and the mufti of Jerusalem proclaimed a *jihad* or holy war against the Jewish settlers in Palestine. In September Britain announced that it would be relinquishing its mandate the following year; and in November the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the partition plan.

As the day approached when Britain was to pull out of Palestine the violence intensified still further, reaching the level of civil war. The Jewish underground groups adopted a policy of forcing as many Arab Palestinians as possible out of their homes, or causing them to flee in terror. The massacre of 250 Palestinians in the village of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem in April 1948 did more than anything else to terrorise the Arabs.

The end of the British mandate came on 14 May 1948; on the same day David Ben Gurion proclaimed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The next day the Egyptian army followed the route taken by military men from that country for three millennia and passed through Gaza to the north. The aim, in coordination with other Arab armies, was to defeat the new Jewish state and raise the Arab flag over Palestine. But the result was summed up in one Arabic word *nakba* – disaster. Not only were the Arab armies defeated, but hundreds of thousands of Palestinians joined those who had already fled their homes. Many came to the Gaza area – signalling the start of a new era in the life of the city and its surroundings.

The refugees have never forgotten and will never forget their last moments in their home towns and villages. Ali Hassan Ali had lived with his family in the village of Karatya, east of Ashqelon. The villagers, he says, were able to hold out for eleven days. Only when the Israelis started to come into the village did they flee, leaving themselves no time to collect together any of their clothes or possessions. 'Everyone scattered – into the countryside, into other villages. Some were killed, some were injured. We tried to get into Falluja where the Egyptian army was in control. But unfortunately they thought we were Israeli agents or something and fired to stop us getting in. So we headed west on foot towards Ashqelon. My family got split up at this point, but we eventually came together again at the village of Herbya.'[14]

Ali Hassan Ali and his mother, father and brother spent two months in Herbya, wondering what was happening and what they should do. After two months, they went on foot to Gaza. They settled in a small empty building, two metres by three metres, with no window. 'Back home we had had chickens, sheep, goats. We weren't rich, but by comparison with the way

we ended up, we had been living like kings. We stayed in that building in Gaza which was unfit for chickens to live in for six years. My father and his second wife died in it.'

The family were then given a tent in the Shat'i (Beach) refugee camp. 'The weather that winter was so severe that one night the wind took the tents from where they were pitched and blew them way down the coast. From that terrible winter I'm still suffering in my eyes and in my kidneys.' Finally, after six months in Beach camp the family were moved into a unit in Jebaliya where they have been ever since. 'I have become in a sense a temporary Gaza citizen; but I want to go home. I don't always want to be an object to be moved around. It's a matter both of land and dignity.'

Hassan Muhammad Dabbour is the owner of a textiles shop in the town of Khan Younis. His father had a similar business in Ashqelon, and he was a kitchen worker for the British and Australian armies. In 1948 the area where his family lived came under attack. 'My father refused to move, and we stayed for about eighteen days. Then we left home and took shelter on the beach. We hoped the fighting would stop and we would be able to go home. We decided to go back and have a look; but we found that only a handful of Arabs were left, and the Egyptian army positions were empty. So we realised we couldn't stay.'

The Dabbour family took what possessions they could carry and headed for a nearby village. There, for five Palestinian pounds, they bought a camel and headed south to Gaza. They spent one night in a mosque in Gaza city, and after searching in vain for a home, they headed further south to Khan Younis. Here they found the Egyptian army distributing tents. They lived in a tent near the centre of the town.

'After ten days the Quakers came and helped us, bringing blankets and other things we needed – and cigarettes.' The family put the materials they had been able to bring with them from Ashqelon in front of a deserted shop, and gradually started the long process of trying to build up a business from nothing in a new era. Mr Dabbour is still in that shop today, selling textiles as his father used to do.

Mousa Saba was living with his family in Beersheba when fighting broke out in 1948 – he was aged 19 at the time. 'The

Jewish fighters surrounded the town, shelled it and occupied it the next day. All Arabs that remained were sent out. There was no chance to stay. But they Jews kept back 200-300 men – they kept them in a mosque which has since been turned into a museum and made them work every day. Eventually one of them led a protest, and in the end they too were sent out. So none of us was allowed to stay.'[15]

The Saba family 'put as much furniture as we could, plus our clothing, into a truck and headed for Gaza. Others set off by foot to the east in the direction of Hebrón. My father was originally from Gaza, so he had family. We moved in with them. But most people were living in tents distributed by the Red Cross and the Quakers.'

The chaotic circumstances of 1948 left the Palestinians little time to ponder over the course of events – beginning with the Balfour Declaration – which had led up to the establishment of the state of Israel. But in later years they have had plenty of opportunity to analyze the events of the century; and for better or worse the inhabitants of Gaza and all other Palestinians continue to lay the blame for their disastrous fate at the feet of the former mandate power.

The aftermath of the disaster opened another chapter of outside rule in Gaza. Once again, as had been the case so often over the centuries, Egypt was the power in the land.

Notes

[1] Jacob M Landau, part of *Handbooks to the Modern World – The Middle East*, edited by Michael Adams, London, 1988, p. 396.
[2] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
[3] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[4] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[5] *Boston Globe*, 1 November 1925.
[6] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[8] Ibrahim Khalil Sakkik, *Ghazzah 'Abr al-Ta'rikh*, Gaza, 1982, p. 114.
[9] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[10] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[11] Mansfield, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
[12] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[13] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[14] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[15] Interviewed by the author, 1994.

CHAPTER 12

Egyptian Rule and the First Israeli Occupation

Ali Hassan Ali sits for hours each day outside the tiny shelter provided for him and his family by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the Jebaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Young men come and sit with him from time to time to help him pass the empty hours. Ali Hassan Ali, now nearly sixty years of age, is waiting – as he has been each day since 1948 – for a sign that he can go back to his village of Karatya (inside Israel).

Ali Hassan Ali talks a lot about the past. 'It is vital that we keep our memories of our land and our villages, so that we can pass them on to our children. We must always believe that one day we will go home. Our children must believe that as well.'

Most of Ali Hassan Ali's memories of his early days in Gaza when he and his family arrived on foot are of hardship and poverty. Mousa Saba, another refugee from 1948, also said that his overwhelming memory of Gaza at that time was of 'poverty, great poverty. All the people had were the things they had been able to bring with them in the rush of leaving their towns and villages. And most of the people arriving in Gaza were poor to start with. Ninety per cent of them were from small villages in the Gaza area or from further north around Jaffa – agricultural areas. They were peasants, they had been working on their land. They had nothing in the way of possessions or savings. They had

to depend on rations and handouts from the Quakers to survive.'

As part of armistice arrangements worked out by a UN mediator in February 1949 (following the humiliating defeat of the Arabs in the war with Israel which began in May 1948 and continued until the opening of the following year), the Gaza Strip had been assigned to Egyptian administration; but the government in Cairo was in no position to provide food and accommodation for the 200,000 homeless and destitute people seeking shelter there.

UNRWA was created by a resolution passed in the United Nations General Assembly in December 1949, and the agency began operations on 1 May 1950. The idea was that its function would be only temporary, with the prospect at the time that some refugees would soon be allowed back to their homes and that others would be absorbed by neighbouring Arab countries. The new body replaced an earlier *ad hoc* agency, the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees. This had been set up in November 1948, but it had had no staff and work 'was done at its request on a voluntary basis by the Red Cross, several religious societies, and the American Friends Service Committee [the Quakers].'[1]

As UNRWA was getting established in the Middle East, living conditions throughout the Gaza Strip were appalling. Tala'at Ibrahim spoke of the big change in atmosphere, with the Gaza region suddenly cut off from the rest of Palestine. 'It was a very difficult period. Gaza is very small and thousands and thousands of people took refuge here. To begin with there was no choice but to make them temporary homes wherever we could. So they settled in schools and in mosques – in private houses and in any buildings where there was room. Only gradually was the United Nations able to make arrangements for temporary accommodation. And they're still living in it all these years and decades later. The refugee problem changed Gaza. But we became accustomed to it. It's reality.'

In the winter of 1950, Sir Ronald Storrs, who had been the first British Military Governor of Jerusalem after it had been captured from the Turks by General Allenby's army in 1917, made several public appeals, written and broadcast, in Britain for clothing to be donated to UNRWA through the Red Cross. In one pamphlet he quoted an account written by a UN official who

had visited the Middle East to highlight the appalling suffering of the homeless Palestinians. 'We went to see the refugees – thousands of men and women exposing their suffering in a mood of utter despair beneath a grey winter sky. Children by the hundred, most of them half-naked – shoeless, shivering – conveyed the depths of their misery in gestures that were more eloquent than words. The parents showed us the camp, they showed us the holes in the ground – deep, like wells – where the children were living in total darkness, piled one on top of the other on the icy rock.' Early in January 1951, in a radio broadcast, Sir Ronald reminded listeners of how 'about a million outcasts – three quarters of the then Arab population of Palestine – (nearly half a million of them children – 48,000 under 12 months old) fled from their homes of more than 1,000 years,' with some 200,000 refugees finding themselves in 'the so-called Gaza Strip where only 80,000 Arabs lived formerly.'[2]

The plight of the Palestinian refugees in Gaza was clearly desperate. But that of the 80,000 indigenous Gazans was also appalling. As Sir Ronald Storrs's radio appeal was being broadcast, the UNRWA Chief District Officer in Gaza, D C Stephen, was sending to his superior in Beirut a graphic description of the suffering of inhabitants of Gaza. Apart from the sudden strain on the severely limited resources of the area, many farmers had lost the use of land which lay under Israeli control. In a great many cases the inhabitants of Gaza, ironically, ended up being worse off by far than the refugees. 'The increasingly desperate plight of the Gaza residents,' Mr Stephen wrote, 'cannot continue to be ignored, but must be attended to in the nearest future if the women and children are to survive the winter. Daily appeals made by groups of these people to various local bodies receive the identical neutral response of: "We can do nothing for you." The orderly, but dull and listless manner in which they make their appeals best indicate their own realization of the hopelessness of their situation. As they do not demand money, but simply food for their children, the request should conceivably gain the sympathy of any humanitarian body. However they are not considered as refugees because they have not lost their homes in addition to their livelihoods. Before declaring a person not to be a refugee the particular

circumstances should be judged, and those existing in Gaza are possibly unequalled anywhere. A unique situation prevails here, incomparable to that in other areas, which becomes apparent only after sojourning in Gaza.'

Mr Stephen pointed out that 'before this tragedy occurred, these people led a day-to-day existence, entirely depending on agricultural work which, though seasonal, was sufficient to grant them a fair livelihood according to standards generally accepted in the Middle East. This did not, however, enable them to accumulate any savings for such an emergency as now exists . . . They are of a proud race and it is as degrading to them as it would be for us to be in their present position. The vast majority of them do not understand much else of their plight except that they have been divorced from their own simple livelihood. The setting of the present boundary by the "Powers that be" means that the people of Gaza have completely lost their only means of existence.'

Mr Stephen warned, that unless urgent action was taken, starvation would result. 'UNICEF,' he wrote, 'is contributing milk which we are distributing to Gaza children and to certain categories of women, with a promise of a small quantity of cheese to come in about two months time. How can a people exist on milk and promises.'[3]

On the basis of the above report, the UNRWA Chief Medical Officer, Dr Jerome Peterson, was dispatched to Gaza. He sent back a report which, in the words of one of his superiors, showed that 'the non-refugees are in a very bad way.' The report does, indeed, make grim reading. In the homes in poor districts of Gaza city visited by Dr Peterson, 'overcrowding was evident, with four to 10 people said to be living in a room no larger than 12 feet by 12 feet. Only one family admitted to earning any money, and that was a woman who cleans wool and earns 8 piastres for 10 days' work. The children are said to spend most of their time begging around the town, or collecting manure for use as fuel. Practically all these people claimed that their only diet was bread, occasionally with red pepper and salt for flavouring. They denied having had meat for years, and no fruits, vegetables or even onions for a long time . . . It was claimed that food was obtained either by begging or by sale of possessions, and indeed

the houses were extremely bare. The last of the possessions to be sold would be the doors and windows. In one instance a man had sold the timber from the roof of one room and the family had moved into the other room.'

Visiting shops, Dr Peterson noticed that 'commodities such as flour, pulses, rice, sardines and a few vegetables were there. The shopkeepers, however, said their sales were to the refugees and not to the locals.'

Dr Peterson made the following summary of his findings in Gaza city: 'The appearance of the locals in their homes from a medical point of view was more or less that of a low grade chronic malnutrition. There is no evidence as yet of deaths from starvation, but these people in their homes looked gaunt and thin and of poor colour. The children under two years of age were particularly poorly.'[4]

The question of who should help the non-refugees of Gaza became an international political issue. The British government, for one, believed that it was the responsibility of Egypt, as the occupying and administering power in Gaza, to care for its inhabitants, not that of UNRWA. A British Foreign Office telegram sent to the UN in New York in January 1951 said 'we do not (repeat not) consider that the Agency should, at least at this stage, offer to meet the cost of relief, even on a temporary basis. In our view, the Agency should be immediately authorized to make an emergency loan (repeat loan) of food supplies. They should insist on repayment in cash or kind by the Egyptian government, and no (repeat no) hope of finance either from the Agency itself or from other sources should be held out. We agree . . . that relief should be administered by the Egyptian authorities.'

The Foreign Office was also not prepared to support the idea that the inhabitants of Gaza should qualify as refugees. Replying to a suggestion to this effect coming from the British embassy in Cairo, the Foreign Office said on 3 February 1951, that UNRWA was 'already desperately short of funds and could only finance the Gaza programme at the expense of the refugees. The inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are still living in their own homes and are not refugees. As we see it, their present plight is probably due more to their being cut off from the hinterland than to the

presence of the refugees who are being cared for by the Agency. In fact there is some evidence that the inhabitants benefit indirectly from the refugees and the Agency supplies which the latter receive.'[5]

While the suffering both of refugees and the local population continued to be the subject of political wrangling, Egypt was establishing administrative control over the Gaza Strip. But before this came about Gaza was the centre of a brief attempt to establish a Palestinian government. The move came about in large part to counter the efforts of King Abdullah of Transjordan to use the Arab Legion to make himself master of Arab Palestine in the aftermath of the 1948 war with Israel. The king was arguing, too, that Transjordanians rather than members of the Palestinian Arab Higher Committee supported by the Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Hussaini (who was in exile), should represent the Palestinians in the Arab League.

On 22 September 1948 (in a lull in the war between Israel and its Arab neighbours) the Arab Higher Council, based in Gaza, issued a communiqué announcing the formation of a Palestine government. The announcement stated that 'the inhabitants of Palestine, by virtue of their natural right to self-determination and in accordance with the resolutions of the Arab League, have decided to declare Palestine in its entirety . . . as an independent state under a government known as the All-Palestine Government which is based on democratic principles.' When the Mufti of Jerusalem 'who had been living in Cairo, the most recent stop in his eleven-year exile, defied the Egyptian authorities and turned up in Gaza, he was welcomed by local inhabitants in a display of great excitement and jubilation . . . During the first week of its life in Gaza, the All-Palestine Government revived the Holy War Army, the Mufti's irregular forces which had played a major part during the unofficial phase of the Palestine war, and began to mobilize with the declared aim of liberating Palestine.'[6]

But the new government could not convert rhetoric into action. For a start it had no money and 'even in the small enclave around the town of Gaza its writ ran only by the grace of the Egyptian authorities. Taking advantage of the new government's dependence on them for funds and protection, the Egyptian

paymasters manipulated it to undermine Abdullah's claim to represent the Palestinians in the Arab League and in international forums. Ostensibly the embryo for an independent Palestinian state, the new government, from the moment of its inception, was thus reduced to the unhappy role of a shuttlecock in the ongoing power struggle between Cairo and Amman.' Within a few months, the new government had evaporated – as had the prospect of Gaza at that time becoming the centre of Palestinian political power.

One factor that helped to kill off the new government was the resumption of fighting between Egypt and Israel, and the ultimate defeat of the Egyptians. The outcome of the war had a significant effect on the fate of Egypt – and, by extension, on Gaza – in the 1950s. This was because of the presence of one army officer, Gemal 'Abd al-Nasser, later to become president of Egypt.

In 1948 Gemal 'Abd al-Nasser had travelled by train to Gaza (on the line put down by the British during their battles with the Turks in 1917) on his way to the front as part of the army sent to confront the new state of Israel. Towards the end of the fighting, Nasser's unit found itself cut off by the Israelis from the rest of the army in the town of Falluja (north of Gaza). The Falluja pocket held out bravely for several weeks until a negotiated end to the siege was agreed. Falluja was swapped for the village of Beit Hanoun (on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip today) which was under Israeli control. As part of the armistice agreement, 'the Falluja garrison was allowed to march out with the honours of war, carrying its arms and with its colours flying, in recognition of brave resistance.'[7]

The Egyptian troops passed through Gaza on their way back home, and crowds turned out to greet them as heroes. Majid al-Hussaini remembers being taken out of school to stand by the roadside to cheer the convoy as it passed down the main highway towards Rafah and the Egyptian border. 'I was a 10-year old boy,' he says, 'and I stood near the police station in Gaza city to wave. They were in military lorries – each officer with his troops and their guns. I remember in particular seeing Nasser.'

Gaza, for Nasser and the other officers with him represented on that day a crossroads of a particular kind. Their experience

in the war with Israel had shown up the inadequacies of military planning and preparation. For example, when Nasser's unit had arrived first in Gaza by train on the way to the front, 'no provisions were made for any hot meals for the troops' and Nasser himself was given money 'to buy local cheese and olives for the rations.'[8] The young officers decided, on the basis of what they had witnessed in that war – high level corruption as well as incompetence – that the British-supported monarchy in Egypt had to be overthrown. So their passage through Gaza represented the first step on the road to revolution in Egypt.

While the officers were planning their anti-royalist coup, Gaza's strategic location was causing it to be the subject of secret speculation and debate thousands of miles away – in London. The British government was considering whether it might be able to use the Gaza Strip as a military base. Foreign Office documents of February 1951, marked 'Top Secret', discuss the possibility of the Strip being used as 'the location for a striking force' to defend the Suez Canal. Correspondence between Cairo and London centred on whether or not Britain had the legal right to station troops there, given that 'the status of the Gaza Strip is somewhat obscure.'[9] In the end, the plan came to nothing – but it showed that Gaza's traditional strategic importance continued to be recognised in the middle of the 20th century, despite all the upheavals which had been taking place on its territory. (Gaza, incidentally, had been linked to another scheme relating to the Suez Canal in the 1940s. A British writer visiting Palestine at the time noted that 'if British control of the Suez Canal is lost, there is already talk of an alternative canal across Palestinian territory from Gaza to Aqaba.'[10] Had that scheme come to fruition, Gaza's role as a crossroad would have been assured for many more decades.)

The revolution in Egypt in 1952 which overthrew the monarchy and spelt the beginning of the end of British influence in the country also led to a greater concentration of Egyptian effort in developing the Gaza Strip. For the people of Gaza certain aspects of life under Egyptian administration changed for the better – when compared with the era under British rule. In the view of Tala'at Ibrahim, 'the best change at this time was the way in which the Egyptians started to interest people in

education. The British had discouraged the Palestinians from pursuing education beyond a fairly basic level. With the Egyptians in control we suddenly had the opportunity of sending young people to study in Cairo and elsewhere. And they opened schools here in Gaza.' Majid al-Hussaini also noticed this change. 'The schools which the Egyptians set up were open to everyone. This meant that proper education was available to all – not just to the rich as had been the case under the British. That meant that in a few years we were producing our own engineers, doctors, lawyers, and so on. It opened up all aspects of life for the first time. We appeared on the map, you could say, and became better educated than we had been at any time under the British. It was an era when we developed self-confidence and there was a sense of the possibility, at least, of self-fulfilment.'

Mousa Saba, a refugee of 1948 from Beersheba who runs the YMCA in Gaza, agreed that 'Egypt played a very important role in education. The Egyptians encouraged people to go and study at university; and they paid for it all. They gave students a monthly grant of 6 Egyptians Pounds to cover their expenses – and out of that some of them were able to send money home. Later the grant was raised to 10 pounds.'

Amin Dabbour, taking a wider view of the Egyptian era, says that the Palestinians of Gaza had no choice but to adjust their horizons to the new post-1948 reality, 'When the Palestinians lost the land, they had to change the way in which they invested their money and energy. So instead of investing all this in the land, they invested it in the education of their young people – to make them doctors or whatever. I am one of sixteen children. My father was an agricultural worker. Yet he gave everything to ensure that his sons and daughters would get the best education. And I'm doing the same for my own children.'[11]

One of the secondary schools founded in Gaza by the Egyptians soon after they took over the administration of the area was the Princess Firyal school for girls. After the revolution in Egypt its name was changed to remove the association with the overthrown royal family to al-Zahra'. The school occupies the large, solid building of the Mamluk period in the centre of Gaza city which was used by British police and administrators. It is also the building where Napoleon is said to have stayed during his

brief stop in Gaza. Today the school has 1,200 pupils who attend either morning or afternoon classes.

The era of Egyptian administration saw other changes in Gaza. Money was put into the development of the city centre. Majid al-Shawa remembers the Egyptian deputy governor of Gaza, General Khaffaja, announcing plans in 1949 or 1950 for the opening of two of the boulevards which still form major east-west arteries serving the city today, Thalaathini and Wahda streets. 'I remember,' Majid Shawa said, 'the general informing people of the plans, and offering owners of land where the roads would go compensation either in land or in money.'[12]

Given the fact that Gazans, who are Palestinians, were being administered by Egyptians, I wondered whether the era was thought of as another period of foreign occupation. 'The Egyptians did not feel like occupiers or conquerors,' Mr Hussaini said. 'There were sometimes differences with the government in Cairo, and with the intelligence services. But you have to keep a distinction between governments and people. Between the two peoples there were no problems. There was intermarriage. It was as if we were part of the same country. And Egypt opened up its borders for us; no one was forbidden to cross; and this was our only free window on to the world outside.' (During the time of Egyptian administrative control, the people of Gaza were issued with laissez-passer documents – but not passports. Many Gazans still travel on these today. Some years after the Israeli occupation began, Jordan agreed to a request from the mayor, Rashad Shawa, to issue passports to inhabitants of Gaza; but these passports are valid only for two years, although renewable.)

Shuhada Qudaih, *mukhtar* of the village of Khuza'a, retained his title when Egypt took over the administration of the Gaza Strip, maintaining similar relations with the new authorities as he had done with the past. But there was a difference. 'When I compare the Egyptians with the British, I have to say that I prefer the Egyptians because at least they were Arabs. And under them, despite all the traumas and all the difficulties caused by 1948 – the terrible suffering of the refugees – things did start to get better. The Egyptians opened up possibilities for Gazans that had not existed before. For example, they took around 3,000 teachers from Gaza and found jobs for them in Egypt and

elsewhere – in the Gulf and other places.'

Another big development during the Egyptian period was the beginning of the military conflict with Israel which led eventually to full-scale wars, as well as to frequent cross-border clashes. These were sparked off by *fedayeen* (guerrilla commando) raids from the Gaza Strip into Israel which increased as Egypt's relations with Western states deteriorated and Cairo started developing close ties with East bloc countries. The cross-border raids prompted ruthless retaliation from the Jewish state, and involved Gaza closely in the Palestinians' military struggle against Israel which lasted into the 1990s.

In February 1955 President Nasser made a brief visit to Gaza to assure the population that all possible would be done to defend the territory from Israeli reprisal attacks. He met notables in the Zahra' school. While demanding better protection for the territory, Gazan dignitaries presented President Nasser with a map of Palestine with black around the edges. The Egyptian leader promised not to remain silent in the face of Israeli aggression, adding that he had given orders for aggression to be answered in kind.

But on 28 February an event occurred which changed the scale and nature of the confrontation between the Arabs and Israel on that front. The Israelis launched a night raid on Gaza city, attacking an Egyptian army position at the railway station. Fourteen Egyptian soldiers and one civilian were killed. At the same time, further south, the Israelis ambushed a military truck with Egyptian officers and Palestinian volunteers on board. Twenty-two Arabs were killed in that attack. Eight Israelis were killed and nine were wounded in the fighting – the most serious incident since the armistice of 1949. It represented a signal from Israel that it would pursue thereafter a policy of adopting attack as the best form of defence.

In the aftermath of the Israeli raids there were large anti-Egyptian demonstrations in Gaza. Slogans read: 'If you want to save us, arm us.' Mousa Saba took part in the demonstrations organised by two underground groups, the Communists and the Muslim Brotherhood. 'We denounced the Nasser regime, the United Nations, the West, everyone. The Egyptian authorities responded by detaining all the political leaders.'

But the government in Cairo did take notice. Yasser Arafat, who had led a student demonstration in the Egyptian capital was given permission by the Egyptian authorities to go to Gaza to draw up a report on arming the Palestinians. Two days after the raid had taken place the military leadership in Cairo decided to reinforce Gaza with ten battalions of National Guards, for which Palestinians were recruited under Egyptian officers. A *fedayeen* battalion was also set up, with a number of men who had been imprisoned for illegal infiltration across the border being brought out of jail to join it. The battalion, which ended up with 700 trained men, carried out hit-and-run raids against Israel.[13]

The Israeli raid at the end of February led, then, to a sharp escalation in cross-border incidents. Mousa Saba remembers the Israelis during this period launching a mortar attack on the centre of Gaza city 'hitting the area from the Palestine Bank in the centre down to the market areas to the west. All the ministry areas were hit. Many people were killed and injured. The attack came from outside the Gaza Strip to the east.'

In August 1955 Israeli forces attacked and occupied an Egyptian army post near the armistice line, five miles east of Gaza city. Three Egyptian troops were killed. In response the Egyptians sent *fedayeen* on a number of raids into Israel, killing eleven people. Later the same month the Israelis attacked the police fort at Khan Younis and other Egyptian positions, killing – according to Egyptian figures – 36 soldiers, policemen and civilians.[14]

The following year, after President Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal Company and the Suez crisis was reaching its climax, Egypt strengthened further its military presence in the Gaza Strip and Sinai region. The main concentration near Gaza city was at Rafah – with only about 5,000 troops, mostly Palestinian or National Guards, deployed north of there.[15]

President Nasser and his advisers were unaware of the secret plot hatched by Britain, France and Israel, under which the Israelis would seek a confrontation with the Egyptians in the canal zone in order to give the British the excuse they wanted to invade Egypt. All the Egyptian leadership knew was that on 29 October, as the diplomatic crisis with Britain over the canal issue was reaching its climax, their forces came under attack at the

Mitla Pass, about 40 miles south of the southern end of the Suez Canal. As the fighting spread, on the evening of 31 October President Nasser 'ordered a general withdrawal of all Egyptian forces from Sinai. The forces in the Gaza Strip were told to surrender at a suitable moment to avoid casualties to the large civilian population there. In the event, part of the Gaza Strip garrison, the Palestinian brigade at Khan Younis, refused to surrender and was overwhelmed by an Israeli attack with tanks and aircraft.'[16] Israeli troops spread out over the Gaza Strip, and by the evening of 2 November, the whole area was under occupation.

Gaza's fate then became entangled with the Suez crisis. On 5 November British and French paratroops landed at Port Said and Port Fouad at the northern end of the Suez canal. At the same time the two Western powers were roundly condemned by the international community. Britain could ignore most of the hostile comment – but it had to take notice of strong criticism from the United States; and by 22 December the Anglo-French force had been pulled out of Egypt.

In January 1957, the Israelis withdrew from most of the land they occupied, allowing a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to take up positions in their wake. But Israel still held on to Gaza. The Israelis wanted assurances that the strip would not return to Egyptian control, but would come under the umbrella of the UNEF. When the Israelis finally withdrew from Gaza on 7 March 1957, UNEF troops took over. But the move led to 'demonstrations by the local Arab population and by the refugees demanding the return of the Egyptians. UNEF troops had to use tear-gas and fire over the heads of the crowds.'[17] President Nasser responded to the popular mood in Gaza by appointing an Administrative Governor and other officials to the strip. To the anger of the Israelis, the UN force withdrew, leaving the Gaza Strip once again under Egyptian administrative control. But the Egyptian army did not return, and UN troops patrolled the Gaza-Israel border.

In 1958, the Egyptians allowed the creation of an executive council in Gaza, together with a legislative council, the members of which were indirectly elected. They were allowed to stand on the ticket of the Arab Socialist Union, the only party allowed in

Egypt. The council was chaired by Dr Haidar Abd al-Shafei, and while it had limited powers, it gave the notables of Gaza experience in political organisation which was useful in later years when opposition to Israeli occupation began to take shape.

While Gaza's links with Egypt remained strong in the 1960s, the people of the region could not erase the memory of the events of 1956-57 – their first experience of living under Israeli military occupation. Gazans – inhabitants and refugees – were dazed by the experience; but it toughened them at the same time and gave them a realistic view of what support they could expect from the Arab world. Gazans had been forced to suffer the indignity of living under the guns of the nation which had set up a state on their land; and they had seen the Egyptian army wasting no time in surrendering as the Israelis advanced. No other Arab state made a move to help them. This seemed, correctly as it turned out, to be an ominous sign for the future. Exactly ten years after Israel had pulled its army out of Gaza in the wake of the Suez crisis, the Strip was once again coming under Israeli occupation – this time for a lot longer than four months.

Notes

[1] Milton Viorst, *Reaching for the Olive Branch – UNRWA and Peace in the Middle East*, Washington, 1989, p. 34.
[2] PRO 371 91406.
[3] PRO 371 91406.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Avi Shlaim, 'The Rise and Fall of the All-Palestine Government in Gaza', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, California, autumn 1990, p. 42.
[7] Robert Stephens, *Nasser – A Political Biography*, London, 1971, p. 82.
[8] Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
[9] PRO 371 90163.
[10] Bernard Newman, *Middle Eastern Journey*, London, 1947, p. 155,
[11] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[12] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[13] Keith Kyle, *Suez*, London, 1991, p 64.
[14] Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 231.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 243.

CHAPTER 13

Arab Defeat and Israeli Occupation

'For a few months after the 1967 defeat we were traumatised, we were in shock.' The words of a Gaza school administrator, Mahmoud Ashour,[1] nearly 30 years after the event, might have been spoken by any of the inhabitants of the territory who lived through that period – the most traumatic in the recent history of Gaza.

The occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, after the 1967 Middle East War, represented the end of an era in the Arab world. The late 1950s and 1960s had been dominated by the statements and actions of President Nasser of Egypt. It was a period when the Egyptian leader put the Arabs firmly on the map, giving them self-esteem after decades of European domination.

But for most of this period President Nasser was not greatly concerned with the Arab-Israeli problem or with the plight of the Palestinian refugees. The Egyptian leader was eager to establish his country as the key player in efforts to foster secular, pan-Arab nationalism. In 1958, for example, a union was proclaimed between Egypt and Syria. The new state was called the United Arab Republic, with President Nasser its first leader. Until the early 1960s 'it seemed that Nasser had done nothing concrete to help the Palestinians regain their lost lands. Nasser had concentrated on his Philosophy of Revolution, on making Cairo

the capital of the Arab world and, failing that, the centre of Black Africa. This was his personal mission. Initially it might have seemed to him that Arab unity under Cairo was essential before anything could be done about Israel. Nasser did his best to ensure that the Palestinian refugees in Gaza were comfortable, but deliberately avoided conflict with Israel and tried to see that other Arab countries did the same.'[2]

The refugee camps in Gaza were part of the scenery by this stage, and UNRWA was involved in its vital role as organiser of welfare and education programmes. While Egypt, too, was helping the inhabitants of Gaza in education and other spheres of life, the economy of the region was stagnating. A large percentage of the population was without work and depended on UNRWA for food and other essentials. The Way of the Sea, the ancient coastal highway that for centuries had brought traders as well as invading armies to Gaza, was blocked to the north. For the Palestinians of Gaza – refugees and inhabitants alike – there was a growing sense of being abandoned to their miserable fate. Not only had the world at large apparently forgotten about them, but the Arab world, too, seemed to be indifferent to them. Young Palestinians leaders began to think that they would have to take matters into their own hands rather than wait for joint Arab action to help them.

The Palestinians were heartened in the first half of the 1960s when Arab attention was directed once again on to the struggle against Israel. In January 1964 Arab leaders met in Cairo to discuss the diversion by Israel of the waters of the River Jordan from the Sea of Galilee. At this meeting recognition was given to the importance of the Palestine question, but no action was proposed. So the Palestinians began the process which has continued into the 1990s of taking action themselves to achieve their goal of self-determination. In May 1964, a Palestine National Congress met in Jerusalem under the chairmanship of Ahmad al-Shuqairi. A National Charter was drawn up, and there were calls for the creation of a liberation organisation to train fighters for the struggle against Israel.

In September the same year, Arab leaders held another summit – in Alexandria. It was agreed that a Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) should be set up, along with a Palestine


GAZA 1967
THE FINAL
OCCUPATION
LEBANON
SYRIA
GOLAN
HEIGHTS
Sea of
Galilee
Haifa
Nazareth
River Jordan
Nablus
JORDAN
Tel Aviv
Jaffa
WEST
BANK
Amman
Jerusalem
Hebron
Dead
Sea
Gaza City
Khan Younis
Rafah
GAZA
STRIP
Beersheba
ISRAEL
EGYPT
Israeli occupied territory
Gulf of Aqaba

Liberation Army (PLA). 'The new organisations were to have their headquarters in the Gaza Strip. They were to be financed from contributions through the Arab League from several Arab states.'[3] The government in exile was to have its headquarters in Gaza. Thus the city and the surrounding area was, from the very first, the focus of the organised political and armed struggle of the Palestinians against Israel. But the development of Palestinian institutions in Gaza were carefully monitored by Egypt. The Egyptian government 'allowed Palestinians to set up affiliated trade, women's, and military units in the Strip. But autonomous movements such as Fatah [the group led by Yasser Arafat which became dominant within the PLO], the Communists, and the Muslim Brotherhood continued to be harassed.'[4]

In its early years, with the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) still deployed along the Egypt/Gaza border with Israel, the PLO carried out most of its operations against Israel from bases inside Syria and Jordan. In November 1966, the Israelis responded to a landmine attack on a military vehicle in which three soldiers were killed by carrying out a brutal retaliatory raid against Jordan. An army brigade with tanks, artillery and aircraft attacked 'the Jordanian village of Sammu near Hebron and virtually razed it to the ground.'[5] The stage was being set for much more serious fighting that would deeply affect Gaza.

The aftermath of the Sammu raid, in which 18 Jordanian troops were killed and 125 houses were destroyed, was a period of anger and recrimination in the Arab world. Jordan criticised Egypt and other Arab countries for failing to support it; in particular, it accused President Nasser of shrinking from confrontation with Israel by hiding behind the UNEF presence.

In the early months of 1967, stung by these taunts, President Nasser's oratory became increasingly bellicose, and he promised the Arab people that victory over Israel, when the moment came, was assured. Tension rose throughout the Middle East. On 13 May 1967 the Soviet Union confirmed Egyptian and Syrian intelligence reports that Israel was preparing for an imminent attack on Syria. Three days later President Nasser asked the UNEF to withdraw some units on the border between Sinai and Israel – but not the units in Gaza or Sharm al-Shaikh.

But the UNEF said that if some units were to pulled out, they would all have to go. The Egyptian leader, in the warlike atmosphere of the day to which he himself had greatly contributed, had no choice but to agree. The Egyptian army began deploying in areas vacated by the UN force. But time was running out, and Gaza was effectively at the mercy of its giant and powerful enemy to the north.

The danger of war was growing fast; and the Arab people, hanging on every word spoken by President Nasser, were confident of victory. On 25 May the Egyptian leader declared that the Straits of Tiran (the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba) were closed to Israeli shipping. War was then inevitable. On 30 May, Egypt and Jordan patched up their dispute and signed a defence pact. But when war broke out on 5 June, the Arabs immediately faced disaster. All 17 air bases in Egypt were attacked by the Israelis and within hours 309 of the Egyptian Air Force's total fleet of 340 planes had been destroyed. Without air cover, the Egyptian army found itself in a hopeless position.

The main thrust of the first Israeli army offensive was towards Rafah, 'the hinge between the Gaza Strip and Egypt proper . . . By the end of the first day the Israelis had almost destroyed the Egyptian Seventh Division in the Rafah area. They had cut off the Gaza Strip and captured the key supply base and road and rail junction of El-Arish.'[6]

There was bitter fighting on the outskirts of Gaza, but ultimately the inhabitants of the city and of the surrounding towns and villages were left to their fate as Egyptian troops either were killed, surrendered or fled. Ismail Qudaih, now a lawyer in Khan Younis, was a twelve-year-old schoolboy in Khuza'a village southeast of the town in 1967. 'I remember seeing the Israeli army coming eastwards towards Gaza. There was a huge number of tanks and other vehicles because I remember there was a lot of dust from them. People in the village were rushing around getting things together and getting ready to run like they did in 1948. Also, unfortunately, I saw the Egyptian soldiers taking off their boots and uniforms and escaping with the civilians – instead of fighting.' Ismail Qudaih said that a few young men in the village who had arms wanted to stay and fight. But the others dissuaded them, saying they would have no

chance of inflicting damage or surviving, fighting tanks with pistols.

Ismail Qudaih remembers rushing away with his family towards nearby orchards. 'We hid among the fruit trees for about a week, then we went back to our homes. Everything there was the same – the Israeli army had only passed through the village, nothing else.'

Khuza'a escaped lightly. Elsewhere in Gaza Palestinians have grim memories of the start of the Israeli occupation. Majid al-Hussaini, a resident of Gaza city, says the Israelis 'behaved like a wild animal which hasn't eaten for two or three years. They took everything and didn't leave a thing. It was as though they wanted to destroy the Palestinian people – to wipe us off the map. Such action builds hatred on both sides.'

Hassan Muhammad Dabbour was in his textiles shop in the centre of Khan Younis on June 1967. 'I heard a lot of noise. I opened my door and saw tanks flying Iraqi flags coming down the street. I was standing just here outside my shop watching them. I thought that as they were Iraqis I would get some water and cigarettes for them. But as the tanks got closer I realised that in fact they were Israeli. So I hurriedly locked the shop and walked away fast. I'd got about twenty metres when firing started. The Egyptians had their tanks near the centre of the town – and when they, too, realised that the approaching vehicles were Israeli, a battle started. But the Israelis defeated them and what were left of them headed back towards Egypt.'

Amin Dabbour, whose family lived in the Jabaliya refugee camp, remembers everyone being ordered by the Israelis to assemble around the Abu Rashid pool – a stagnant pond which doubled both as an open sewer and a play area for children of the refugees. 'We stood there for about fourteen hours while they checked our identity, and so on. They were also searching our houses. And they pointed guns at us from over the buildings around the pool as we stood there. They tried to frighten and intimidate us. They wanted us to tell them where our weapons were and so on.'

The Israelis, in the days and weeks that followed, started assembling the machinery of occupation, appointing a military governor. The security of the region was also tightened with the

setting up of road blocks, military camps with watchtowers, and street patrols. Amin Dabbour noticed that the Israelis had destroyed the statue of the Unknown Soldier which had been put up jointly by the Palestinians and the Egyptians a few years before and had stood on a plinth outside the Legislative Council building in Gaza. 'I remember it, because for the previous two years I had marched by it as part of a Boy Scout group – the march was to celebrate the end of the Israeli occupation of Gaza after the Suez crisis of 1956. Now the statue had gone and we were under occupation once more.'

It took the Palestinians of Gaza several months to start recovering from the shock of losing their links with the Arab world. The Way of the Sea was now effectively blocked to the south as well as the north. Gradually, as the Israeli forces established tighter and tighter control over the Gaza Strip, the people began to organise resistance to the occupation. Organisation was difficult to achieve because, even under the Egyptians, the scope for political activity had been narrow. According to one assessment, 'when Israel occupied the Strip in June 1967, civic institutions were still weak, dominated by the landowning elite, and carefully circumscribed by Egypt. Nonetheless, the Strip was heavily armed. PLA units and underground groups had light arms and rudimentary military training. Within months they turned to guerrilla tactics against Israeli control. Guerrillas hid in orange groves and congested quarters of the towns and camps. They lobbed grenades at Israeli military vehicles, burned buses . . . and attacked the banks, post offices, and markets that symbolized a return to normal life in the Strip.'[7]

Mahmoud Ashour remembers that the first act committed by resistance fighters was against a train on the railway – the one that once ran from Kantara to Jerusalem, passing through Gaza. 'Immediately,' he said, 'the Israelis imposed a curfew and arrested dozens of people and took them to a school for interrogation.' A short time later there was an attack on an Israeli military vehicle.

Most of the attacks on the Israelis were carried out in Gaza and the main towns where the perpetrators could escape into narrow and crowded streets and alleyways. Growing up during this

period in the village of Khuza'a, Ismail Qudaih was not as acutely aware as his contemporaries in the towns of the daily effects of occupation. But, like every Palestinian in Gaza, he has memories of people being detained and arrested. He said he first became aware of the full implications of the occupation while taking part in a demonstration in 1970 to mark the death of President Nasser of Egypt. 'Three times on that day the Israelis tried to catch me, but I managed to escape. Then once when I was at school the army came in and started beating pupils – they beat me on the leg. That evening they came to our home and searched. By then I knew what occupation meant.'

Popular anger towards Israel soon began to grow in the aftermath of the occupation. But popular resistance did not begin for another 20 years. Also, with the PLO hierarchy far away in Jordan – and after the conflict there in 1970, in Lebanon – there was little in the way of broad based political and military leadership in Gaza at this time. 'Palestinian nationalism, though germinating for some decades under Arab rule, had not yet passed into an aggressive stage. Although the military administration in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip had to contend with some *fedayeen* who identified with the PLO, popular support for them was still thin. For a decade or so, until the rightward shift in the majority in the Knesset, Israelis and Palestinians lived in sullen and generally calm coexistence.'[8]

The *fedayeen*, members of Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), drew their support from the refugee camps where 'Israeli soldiers patrolled during the day but at night the guerrillas ruled.'[9] When the civilian population took action to express their anger at the Israeli occupation it usually came in the form of civil disobedience. 'Students demonstrated and struck on national days, teachers protested against changes in the curriculum and soldiers' violation of school grounds, and lawyers boycotted the military courts.'[10]

This early spell of anti-Israeli violence and civil disobedience, a precursor of the full-scale uprising which began in 1987, caused concern within the Israeli government. In January 1971 the occupation authorities dismissed the mayor and councillors of Gaza city, and in the spring the head of the Israeli army's Southern Command, Major General Ariel Sharon, personally

organised a ruthless campaign, using overwhelming force, to eliminate the organised Palestinian resistance to the occupation. 'The military arrested dozens of activist professionals and detained some 12,000 relatives of wanted guerrillas. Sharon's forces placed the refugee camps under lengthy curfews during which the army searched houses, smashed belongings, and forcibly removed thousands of residents. Roads bulldozed through the camps broke up the rabbit-warren of alleys and facilitated military control. After last-ditch gun battles in mid-1971, Sharon broke the resistance movement. The guerrillas lost their sanctuaries, ran out of arms and ammunition, and the last PFLP commanders were killed.'[11]

The 1970s thereafter was a period of relative calm in Gaza. Businessmen in Gaza were keen to exploit the new markets in Israel, and when the position of mayor was restored by the Israeli authorities, a prominent local establishment figure, Rashad Shawa, filled the post with public backing. His appointment marked the start of the last period in Gaza's history in which leading families of the old landowning social order dominated the territory. Rashad Shawa, through his Benevolent Society, was able to extend charity and thereby win patronage and control. A close relative 'headed the Palestine Bank – the only non-Israeli bank – and other members of the municipal council owned light industries and land. The traditional social order was based on family influence, education, wealth, and patron-client relations. That order seemed legitimate and natural to the elite.'[12] Only at the end of the 1980s was the old order forced to accept a role for a younger generation who had become impatient at their elders' acceptance, albeit reluctant, of Israeli occupation.

At the start of the 1970s, then, the Israelis felt themselves in the comfortable position, thanks to the work of General Sharon's army, of having 'cowed the refugee camps. Given the relatively low level of political organisation and sophistication among the residents at that time, the failure of the violent revolt led to apathy and despair. Residents were terrified of the consequences of opposing the occupying power and concentrated on basic survival.'[13]

The struggle to survive led to a considerable amount of contact between the people of Gaza and the Israelis because after 1967 workers from the Strip were allowed to travel each day to Tel Aviv and other cities to look for work. While the jobs available to them were invariably at the bottom end of the market – as labourers on building sites, as fruit pickers and so on – the chance to find work at least reduced the dependency of refugees and others on United Nations or charity hand-outs. About half the labour force in Gaza started to find work in Israel and the Israeli shekel, alongside the Jordanian dinar, became the common currency in the Strip.

The economy of Gaza became tied to Israel in other ways. Palestinians paid taxes of various kinds to Israel. Most imported goods and produce came from or via the Jewish state; while goods and produce from Gaza had to find markets in Israel or else be handled by Israeli agents if they were to be exported further. Gaza lacked the easy access to Jordan that the West Bank enjoyed. Even today Gazan exports have to travel via Israel.

The people of Gaza also came into frequent contact with Israelis in administrative matters – in such trivial day-to-day tasks as applying for a driving licence, an identity card, or a laissez-passer to travel abroad.

A third physical way in which Palestinians came into contact with Israelis was through the presence of Jewish settlements on Arab land occupied in 1967 – in Gaza as well as in the West Bank. Even though the land of the Gaza Strip does not have the same religious significance for Jews as that of the West Bank (with the ancient tribes of Israel never having succeeded in capturing the coastal plain from the Philistines) colonies of Jewish families were settled there – with one third of the territory confiscated for their use. Their presence in the vicinity of Arab towns, village and refugee camps – often on rich agricultural land with good water resources – contributed greatly to the sullen anger felt towards Israel by the Palestinian community.

As the Gazans adjusted to life under occupation in the 1970s there was a feeling of isolation. Not only that, there was a realisation that the inability of the Palestinian leadership to have a voice in the territory meant that Gaza could easily become

hostage to plans hatched by other Arab leaders or outside powers. There was alarm expressed in Gaza at the beginning of the decade, for example, when the United States Secretary of State, William Rogers, in 1970, put forward a plan aimed at breaking the deadlock in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Under the scheme the status of Gaza was left open to negotiation – and the Gazans realised right away that they would not be party to those discussions. Towards the end of the decade a momentous event in the Middle East – the visit of President Sadat of Egypt to Jerusalem in 1977 – saw the leading state in the Arab world (and Gaza's former protector) taking the first step towards a peace treaty with Israel. Refugees in Gaza were left in despair. They saw the chances of Arab states supporting their demand to be allowed back to their homes receding fast. Furthermore, the people of Gaza noticed once again that outside powers – in this case Egypt and Israel – had decided on how their fate should be settled. Under the Camp David accord Egypt and Israel agreed that Gaza and the West Bank should be the subject of talks leading eventually to autonomy in the two regions. The people of Gaza had not been consulted over the matter.

So, at the beginning of the 1980s the need for Palestinians to take action themselves to control their fate was felt even more acutely than it had been in the 60s.

According to Ismail Qudaih, 'from the 1980s onwards we started to organise parties again and the momentum began to build up. The number of people in prison increased substantially. Suddenly, everyone seemed to have a member of his family in prison. It was all building towards something, though we didn't know what.'

A new and largely unknown factor in Gaza at this time was the Islamic movement. In the early 1970s , in a move to weaken the influence of the secularly-minded PLO and the communists, the Israelis had allowed several Islamic organisations to establish themselves in the Gaza Strip. Since the 7th century the overwhelming majority of the population of Gaza had been Muslim and these organisations, the Islamic Charitable League, and the Islamic Society, enjoyed immediate success. While the organisations concentrated on charitable work they also carried out religious instruction and, with support and inspiration from

the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, advocated the idea of a pan-Islamic revival in the Middle East to defeat Israel. At the same time they denounced the ideals of Palestinian nationalism.

The Israeli tactic of divide and rule enjoyed early success: in January 1980, a group of 500 people marched from a mosque in Gaza city to attack the Red Crescent Society. They also destroyed shops and restaurants selling alcoholic drinks, and set fire to cinemas. The Israeli army did nothing to restrain the crowd.

While tension between secular and Islamic groups continued for some years, popular enthusiasm for the latter was diminished by the support they enjoyed from Israel and by their anti-nationalist stance. As the 1980s progressed, however, the Islamic groups gradually adopted ideals of Palestinian nationalism without losing any of their religious zeal. This trend, springing out of the charitable groups in Gaza encouraged originally by the Israelis, spawned Islamic Jihad and Hamas – two radical Islamic groups which later played leading roles in the struggle against Israeli occupation.

A major change in public attitudes in Gaza towards the Israeli occupation came in November 1981 – a month after the assassination of President Sadat by Islamic fundamentalists. A strike was called in Gaza to protest against new taxes levied by the Israeli military government and against new administrative restrictions. 'This time, urban professionals rather than refugees led the movement. Doctors, dentists, veterinarians, pharmacists, lawyers, and engineers struck for two weeks . . . Merchants and the Gaza municipality supported the strike. The effort indicated the emergence of a self-conscious group of middle-class intelligentsia, whose professional concerns merged with nationalism in the strike.'[14] The Israelis carried out many arrests and imposed heavy fines. The strike, in essence, failed in its objectives. But it 'coincided with the introduction of the Israeli civil administration, designed to provide a facade of non-military rule. Palestinians viewed the change as a step toward absorbing the territories into Israel.' The municipality in Gaza, like those in the West Bank, refused to cooperate with the new body. As a result, in July 1982, Rashad Shawa was removed from the post of mayor.

The Israeli decision to take over the municipality in Gaza and dismiss the old guard meant that the traditional elite of the city were out of power. The middle class professionals, in their strike of November 1981, had shown that anti-Israeli feelings were building up fast and were beginning to surface in public. But neither the traditional elite, nor the middle class was able to provide the leadership necessary to mobilise the people of Gaza as a whole – to convert pockets of simmering anger into a united movement to oppose the Israeli occupation. That leadership came from an unexpected quarter – from the generation of young men born under occupation, the *shabaab* as they were called. They were shackled neither by respect for their elders nor for the traditional Gazan elite. They were not intimidated, either, by the Israeli army. So it was the *shabaab* who led the way into the battle against the last occupation of Gaza.

Notes

[1] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[2] Ritchie Ovendale, *The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Wars*, London, 1984, p. 170.
[3] Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 451.
[4] Ann M Lesch, 'Prelude to the Uprising in the Gaza Strip', published in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, California, autumn 1990, p. 3.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 463.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 495-496.
[7] Lesch, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[8] Viorst, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
[9] Lesch, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[14] Lesch, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

CHAPTER 14

Intifada – 'A Mass Expression of Outrage'

The Mahbouh family – about forty of them, men, women and children – had assembled their possessions in a half-finished building close to the Jabaliya refugee camp and were preparing a meal. The children were playing around the outside of the building while some of the men sat on the roof watching the activity of Israeli soldiers at the family house which stood on a slight hill several hundred metres away. The family were whiling away the time waiting for the Israeli army to blow up their house. The Mahbouhs were being punished collectively because of the alleged activity of one of the brothers. He had been accused of killing an Israeli soldier. He was never caught, but for weeks the Israeli army harassed the family, believing that they were hiding him. On one occasion the whole family was put into an army truck and told they were being deported to Lebanon. For hours they were driven around, only to be deposited eventually back home. In the end, it turned out that the brother had fled the country. But the army decided that the family still merited punishment.

What was striking, observing the family in the hours before the house was demolished, was the sense of calm resignation. The men were smiling as they told me the family's story. 'The Israelis', one of them said, 'think that by blowing up our house they will break our determination. They think that we are like

them, that if we lose something we will get upset. But for us it is of no great importance. Allah teaches us that we must be patient. Patience is part of our faith.'[1]

The incident involving the Mahbouh family's house occurred in 1989, more than a year after the *intifada* – the uprising – against Israeli occupation had begun in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. It showed how, for many Palestinians – especially in the Gaza Strip – the belief in Islam had become an integral part of the popular struggle. It showed too how the population as a whole, across the span of generations, had passed what could be called the fear threshold. The contempt and hatred of the Israeli occupiers felt by Palestinians, led by the younger generation but followed soon by their elders, was now matched by fearlessness.

There is general agreement on when and where the *intifada* began – 8 December 1987 at the Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. The PLO and Fatah had worked hard during the previous years towards such an event. What is harder to determine, though, is when the people of Gaza overcame their fear sufficiently to begin the revolution.

Raji Sourani, a lawyer in Gaza, has described the *intifada* as 'a mass expression of that feeling of outrage against the Israeli occupation by those who were directly suffering beneath it.'[2] Ending the occupation, which began in 1967, was clearly the primary aim of the 'mass expression' of feeling. But the uprising produced an explosion of anger which had been building up in Gaza for at least two decades before Israel occupied the territory. The people of Gaza have clear memories of events just before and just after May 1948 – when destitute and heartbroken families straggled into the city having been driven out of their homes by the Israeli army. This was the period when an UNRWA doctor had described the citizens of Gaza as looking 'gaunt and thin and of poor colour' – having the appearance of 'a low grade chronic malnutrition'. The Gazans remember the Israeli reprisal raids on their towns and villages in the 1950s leading to the brief occupation in 1956-57, to be followed ten years later by the catastrophic disaster of the Arab-Israeli war.

These experiences in turn compounded the collective experience of a people who had earlier been living under British and Ottoman rule.

There should have been no surprise, therefore that the *intifada* began in Gaza and was joined with such venom. The people of Gaza felt fearless and reckless: after all they had been through, there was nothing to lose.

While the explosion began on a particular day in December 1987, the spirit of fearlessness among young Gazans had started to develop several years earlier. Gaza was not a place one went for a relaxed excursion. A tourist guide book to Israel researched in 1985 warned that 'the threat of unrest [in Gaza] makes visits inadvisable.'[3]

The first signs of serious trouble had appeared in April 1982 after a Jewish militant had attacked Muslim worshippers outside al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Students at the Islamic University in Gaza (which had opened in 1978) held a demonstration, and there were similar protests at mosques in the city. The Israeli army beat up some of the protesters (female as well as male) and shot into one of the mosques, killing a youth and wounding other worshippers. Thereafter during the 1980s there were sporadic clashes – mainly involving Palestinian students and the Israeli army. In December 1986 the occupation authorities ordered the arrest of the leader of Shabiba, the youth wing of Fatah. His deportation the following month led to a large protest demonstration at the main mosque in Khan Younis. Israeli troops opened fire, killing one person and wounding others.

Another significant event that contributed indirectly to the start of the *intifada* was a spectacular escape from prison in Gaza in May 1987 of six members of Islamic Jihad, the radical Islamic group which was attracting more and more attention in the Strip. In August one of the escapees shot dead at close range the commander of the Israeli military police. He was sitting in an army jeep at the time, stuck in traffic in the centre of Gaza city close to the Mosque. In reaction to the killing the Israeli authorities sealed off the Strip for three days, preventing people getting to work and blocking trade – a method of collective punishment that has been employed frequently, and for much longer periods, ever since.

Despite the continued pattern of army searches and mass arrests, the Israelis could not intimidate the people of Gaza. Throughout August and September, 'violent attacks continued:

a firebomb thrown at an Israeli vehicle in the Gaza market; a nighttime attack on an Israeli soldier near Jabaliya camp; remote control bombs in Gaza town. Each attack led to lengthy curfews and house-to-house searches.'[4]

In this period there were also a number of incidents involving Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip. Their cars were frequently stoned as they drove to and from their homes; and on occasions the settlers vented their anger by beating Palestinians with clubs and gun butts, and smashing their property.

While the violence in the Gaza Strip was continuing, two unrelated events away from the territory contributed to the determination felt by Palestinians there. Towards the end of November 1987 a Palestinian gunman attached himself to a power glider and flew through Israel's sophisticated border defence system into northern Galilee. The presence of the unidentified object crossing the border was noted and all settlements in northern Israel were put on alert. Despite this, the gunman landed and made his way to an army base. When he opened fire, the guard on duty ran away. The soldiers inside were watching television and were caught unprepared. The gunman killed six soldiers before being killed himself. Palestinians in Gaza saw in this incident evidence that Israel, the all-powerful occupying power, was not invincible in the face of a determined attack.

If the hang-gliding incident gave the Gazans courage, events in the Jordanian capital, Amman, in the opening days of December fuelled their anger. An Arab summit was being held there; and to the fury of the people of Gaza, the question of the Palestinians living under occupation was ignored. Furthermore, the PLO Chairman, Yasser Arafat, had been snubbed by King Hussain on arrival in Amman, and Egypt, in isolation after signing a peace treaty with Israel, was again represented in the summit. Not for the first time since the creation of Israel, the Palestinians of Gaza felt abandoned by the Arab world. As in the past, they came to the conclusion that they would have to take matters into their own hands.

These outside developments formed the backcloth for the violent events that sparked off the uprising. An Israeli settler was stabbed to death in the centre of Gaza city on 6 December. Two days later an Israeli army tank-transporting lorry ploughed into

a line of vehicles in the Strip. Four Palestinians were killed. The Israelis described the incident as an accident; but in the Gaza Strip it was seen as a deliberate act of retaliation for the murder of the settler. In the evening, when the funerals were held in the Jabaliya camp for the four dead men, mass anger overflowed. Mourners swarmed through the camp attacking Israeli positions. Soldiers fired live ammunition, killing a twenty-four-year-old man. That single bullet, it can be said, started the *intifada*.

Within hours, violence spread throughout the Gaza Strip. Israeli soldiers and their positions were attacked fearlessly by Palestinians throwing stones and fire-bombs. Curfews were imposed; but after a few days, when the violence had spread to the occupied West Bank, the Israelis realised that what they had on their hands was not another isolated period of serious unrest but a popular revolution. With the young men, the *shabaab*, leading the way, Gazans of all ages and backgrounds joined the struggle.

Ismail Qudaih worked as a lawyer in Khan Younis during the *intifada*, monitoring, recording and following up the many incidents which took place. He was impressed by the degree to which the whole of Gazan society became involved. 'All sections of the community played a part – this was not just the work of a minority of activists. In the early months, it was a 100 per cent success; everyone obeyed the orders of the leadership to strike or to boycott Israeli goods or whatever. And when someone was killed or was injured – as happened all the time – then the whole of Gaza considered it like a death in the family.'[5] In the first six weeks of the uprising 27 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army and more than 200 were injured. The many years of underground work by Fatah and other Palestinian organisations finally began to bear results.

As a news correspondent in those days it was astonishing to see young and old women coming out of houses to join the men in street protests or supporting them in one way or another. On one occasion, from inside the Shifa hospital in Gaza city, I watched a crowd of young men who were pelting an Israeli army unit with stones. The soldiers were trying to get inside to arrest some of the Palestinians who had been injured in clashes earlier in the morning. Girls and women had formed a human chain to keep the *shabaab* at the front line, the faces of the young men masked

by *keffiyehs*, supplied with small rocks and pieces of jagged masonry. As tear-gas was fired into the hospital older women provided raw onion to help ease the stinging pain.

Arriving in the Gaza Strip at the Erez checkpoint in the opening weeks of the uprising was to step into a dangerous world of chaos and mayhem. The road south (the ancient Way of the Sea) was strewn with smouldering car tyres and debris of various kinds. Often, looking over to the right towards the sea, thick black smoke from burning tyres was rising from the Jabaliya refugee camp or from Beach camp. I recall one day in 1988 standing by the Dallour petrol station, just south of Gaza city where the road from the city joins the highway heading south. The scene was medieval – swirling smoke from dozens of burning tyres obliterating the sun. For a few moments that day, as on many others, the Israelis had lost control. The main road was blocked by rocks and burning tyres; and many of the side roads were blocked in a similar way. Palestinian flags, which were banned by the Israelis in those days, hung from telegraph wires. The *shabaab* controlled the streets. Finally, Israeli vehicles with bulldozer blades came through the smoke to try to reopen the road; youths with their faces half covered with *keffiyehs* appeared from alleys and doorways as the vehicle ran a gauntlet of stones, bottles and fire bombs. The response was a series of thumps and more puffs of smoke as tear gas grenades were fired. And the air became a choking cocktail of the fumes of urban warfare. On that occasion the blood of the *shabaab* was boiling and they were ready to set upon any vehicle that did not have the recognisable white Gaza plates. The only way our car, which had blue West Bank plates, could get out of the Strip that day was by securing the services of one of the youths who sat on the bonnet of the car and gave us safe passage through the stone-throwers.

Even though Fatah and other underground groups had worked hard for many years outside the occupied territory to organise resistance to the Israeli presence, the sudden eruption of the violence and spirit of defiance in Gaza came as a shock to the Israelis and the rest of the world. While the uprising started as a spontaneous reaction to decades of frustration and anger, a local leadership emerged – bringing together secular and religious groups in a unified command. This operated in little cells within

different districts of towns or different areas of refugee camps, later using clandestinely printed leaflets to sprad information. The cells also helped families in need; during lengthy curfews they organised, surreptitiously by cover of darkness, the provision and distribution of food. All the while, attacks on the increasingly nervous Israeli army continued. 'I remember the Israelis were so nervous at night,' a resident of the Jabaliya camp told me, 'that they would shoot at anything that moved. Each morning we would find cats and dogs that had been killed.' One particular area of the camp, 'B' block, was notorious for the ambushes carried out on the occupying troops and became known locally by both Palestinians and Israelis as Vietnam.

The initial fire of the uprising became less intense after the first year for another reason: the majority of the population of Gaza was extremely poor, and 46 per cent of the workforce (85,000 people) depended on finding work inside Israel in order to feed their families. For purely practical reasons, whatever their inner thoughts and emotions, Gazans needed periods of calm in order to earn money. While Ismail Qudaih was working as a lawyer in Khan Younis during the *intifada*, one of his elderly relatives, Shuhadah Qudaih, was watching developments from the village of Khuza'a. 'In many ways things here were much like in the towns. Israelis would come in as they did there, applying the same heavy-handed policy, smashing houses and arresting people on the basis of rumours. The other difficulty was making a living. Since 1967, when the Israelis took much of our land, a lot of young people had no choice but to go to Israel each day in search of work. And with all the curfews and closures of the crossings during the *intifada* period this was not easy.'

Severe disruption to education was another price the people of Gaza paid for their determination to end Israeli rule. Inam Mahmoud, headmistress of al-Zahra' secondary school for girls in Gaza city, said that she and her staff 'were more like guards than teachers much of the time, trying to stop the Israeli army from coming into the school and trying to keep them away from our pupils. The students were getting involved in activity away from the school. But as far as I was concerned, school itself was a sacred place for learning. Because of this, many of the students and teachers used to come to school even on strike days, even

when they had to walk through streets full of trouble to get there. Education is so important. I would say to them: the Israelis are still learning today – so we must learn as well.'

But there were enormous pressures on the schoolchildren. 'Pupils would go home and go to sleep. Then in the middle of the night. Bang, bang, bang. Soldiers were coming into the house. "We want your brother. Where is he?" Students would come to school shaken because their brother had been taken away in the night. I had one student whose two brothers were killed. I just encouraged her to go on studying. But there was always this psychological pressure. Then during the classes there would be disturbances and shooting outside. It was very difficult to carry on classes under those circumstances, but I insisted that we should. We were determined that the Israelis should not destroy the school or destroy education.'[6]

While Mrs Mahmoud said her pupils responded to her appeals to separate political activity from school attendance, she said her pupils were frequently provoked. 'Israeli troops would grab youths as the girls were coming into school and hope to incite them to get involved in the trouble.'

The task of helping the 460,000 registered Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip during the *intifada* – as at all other times since its creation in the early 1950s – fell to UNRWA. The uprising presented new challenges and new strains, putting both staff and resources under unprecedented stress. The UNRWA spokesman in Gaza, Isa al-Qarra, says the biggest practical difficulty came from the frequent imposition of curfews by the Israeli occupying authorities, combined with the constant clashes between the army and the Palestinian civilian population. 'UNRWA had to cope with the changing circumstances by expanding its mission and carrying out emergency health and welfare programmes. For example, health care centres had to be open around the clock to deal with casualties coming in during the night. And we had to establish special physiotherapy units to cope with *intifada*-related injuries.'[7]

Statistics involving humans in scenes of conflict can seem cold and impersonal; they camouflage the experiences and emotions of the individual. But UNRWA casualty statistics on their own give a strong indication of the impact of the *intifada* on a small

corner of the occupied territories. In the Gaza Strip between 1987 and 1993 at least 500 people were killed, and 50,000 injured. (Not all the deaths were caused by the Israeli army. The start of the uprising was a signal for the hunting down and killing of dozens of Palestinians who were alleged to have collaborated with the Israeli intelligence services. Despite appeals from the leadership inside and outside the territories, these inter-Palestinian killings continued.)

Other hospitals and clinics, aside from those operated by UNRWA, were also busy around the clock during the *intifada* treating the injured after clashes with the Israelis. The Ahli Arab Hospital (the successor of the British Church Missionary Society hospital set up at the end of the last century) in Gaza city treated 13,000 cases during that period. Records show that one third of those were aged fifteen or less – indicating the degree to which young people – sometimes very young – took the lead in the uprising against the Israelis. According to Samira Farah, one of the senior administrators at the hospital, 'the majority of the injuries were caused by live, plastic or rubber bullets.' Plastic bullets (small pointed pellets, up to 1.5 centimetres in length) were frequently fired at demonstrators. Despite their size they could inflict serious injuries (fractures, bleeding or internal wounds) or, in some cases, fatal ones. 'I remember,' Samira Farah said, 'a fouteen-year-old girl being brought in with two plastic bullet injuries, one each side of the chest, and she died.'[8]

Rubber bullets used by the Israeli army are heavy metal ball-bearings more than 1.5 centimetres in diameter, covered with rubber. During the *intifada* there were many cases in Gaza of these bullets becoming impacted in human bodies. Some children died when hit on the skull with them, and there were many cases of people damaging (and losing) eyes as a result of being hit in the face by rubber bullets.

Injuries and fatalities were also caused by the irresponsible use of teargas. Israeli soldiers and police were often seen by Gazans and by foreign observers firing teargas canisters into dense crowds and into buildings. The instructions on the side of the canisters point out the dangers of the gas being used in this way. There is a clearly worded and explicit warning on the MK II 560-CS 150 Yard Long Range Projectile (manufactured in

Pennsylvania in the USA) used by the Israeli security forces: 'Must not be fired directly at persons as death or injury may result. FOR OUTDOOR USE ONLY.' Staff at the Ahli hospital say that misuse of teargas resulted in many pregnancies being aborted, in burns and in serious respiratory problems.

Dealing with emergencies under circumstances of great stress was hard enough. But the job of medical staff was made more difficult by the restrictions frequently placed on freedom of movement within Gaza and between the territory and the outside. During periods of prolonged curfew, for example, staff had difficulty getting to work. Medicines, which had to be brought in through Israel, frequently were in short supply when the crossing points between the two territories was closed. And routine maintenance work often could not be carried out because of shortage of parts.

More serious than all this, was the fact that there were sometimes problems getting serious cases out of Gaza for specialist treatment in Israel or in a better-equipped hospital in Jerusalem. 'Transferring seriously injured patients in this atmosphere,' Samira Farah said, 'and trying to get permission from all the various authorities and so on, was very stressful.'

Sometimes the Israelis came into the hospital 'saying they were chasing someone who they'd seen throwing stones or something. They'd come charging in and we'd run behind trying to stop them, asking what they wanted. They would just ignore us. But we had some foreign members of staff – from America and Europe – and they were a great help to us on such occasions.'

Stress affected every Palestinian in Gaza during the *intifada*. 'I never felt any kind of security,' said Laila, a mother of four from Gaza city. 'I was worried when my children were out of my sight – wondering what might be happening to them at school or on their way there or back. And when they were here I was worrying, too. Worrying that soldiers would come. Sometimes they'd beat their way in at three or four in the morning and make my sons come out and paint over the slogans on the walls, or put out a fire, or take down a Palestinian flag. At three in the morning.'

Curfews became a part of daily life. 'When the Israelis imposed curfews,' Laila said, 'they were punishing the whole

Palestinian community. It was like keeping us in a big prison. We would have to be ready all the time, trying to keep basic food in supply in case. Which was all right for us – but what about those with no jobs and no money?'[9]

But Laila is convinced that the Israeli tactics back-fired. 'Prisoners do not come out of prison loving their captors. That's one thing. Secondly, the new generation born under occupation like my sons simply reject all that has happened to us up to now. They have much more courage than we had – and they are prepared to fight fearlessly to get their freedom. And that's what they did in the *intifada*.'

Pictures of violent confrontation, particularly in the early months of the uprising, appeared on television screens and newspapers all around the world. This was the period in which Gaza became a household word, synonymous with violence and squalor. Gaza's image in the world had not been brilliant before the *intifada*. Those people in the West who knew the name probably associated it more with a novel by Aldous Huxley (*Eyeless in Gaza*) than with the place in the late 20th century. The common perception of Gaza prior to this had been of a remote and largely forgotten outpost of Egypt, and before that a southern and not particularly significant part of British and Ottoman controlled Palestine.

Gaza's moment centre stage (albeit for reasons that did nothing to revive memories of its rich history) was relatively brief. As the protests and the Israeli response continued month after month, events in the occupied territories were no longer guaranteed front page treatment. But the violence continued, becoming almost as routine as the outside reaction to it. The human rights organisation, Middle East Watch, in a report published in 1990 catalogued, in a list of killings carried out by the Israeli army, that of a youth, Khalid al-Atawneh. The killing in May 1989, the report said, 'attracted no more than one paragraph in the newspapers the following day and got no subsequent publicity. It appears to be a rather ordinary case – a killing that occurred during clashes between youths and soldiers in the tense Jabaliya refugee camp, during which 12 other Palestinians were injured, according to camp residents, and five soldiers were slightly wounded by stones, according to the IDF

[Israel Defence Force].'[10]

The circumstances of the incident were typical of many. According to an UNRWA employee in Jabaliya a van carrying soldiers in civilian clothes drove into the camp. Residents thought they were settlers and started pelting the van with stones. The soldiers got out and began shooting. Reinforcements were brought in. Troops raided a boy's school in the camp, believing that stones were thrown from there. A youth who was with Khalid al-Atawneh said the two of them had been in an orchard near the school. When they saw a uniformed soldier ten metres away they turned to flee. The soldier opened fire, fatally wounding Khalid al-Atawneh in the chest, and wounding his friend in the back. There was no indication that either youth had been engaged in acts of violence at the time of the shooting.

Such incidents served continually to convert the despair of the people of Gaza that had been gathering since 1948 into determination to end the Israeli occupation. At the Jabaliya camp, where the uprising began, Ali Hassan Ali, reflected on what the *intifada* achieved. 'Even though it was difficult, I prefer the *intifada* period to any other since 1948 because I feel that there was a strong sense of hope and purpose – through the use of stones against guns. Israeli bullets did not distinguish between Christians and Muslims, secular and religious, men and women, or even adults and children. There was national unity like never before. A lot of youths fell in the fighting. That was the price we paid.'

The *intifada* continued, with occasional outbursts of sustained protests and mass punishment making the headlines from time to time, up to and beyond the opening of the Middle East peace process in Madrid in October 1991. The uprising in the occupied territory was credited as having been a major factor in bringing about the change of atmosphere that made the start of the process possible. Few Palestinians in Gaza believed that the process itself would end the occupation. Even when it emerged that the PLO and Israel had been holding secret talks leading to an agreement on limited self-rule in Gaza, there was still widespread scepticism.

The international community hailed the agreement signed on 4 May 1994 in Cairo by Mr Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister,

Yitzhak Rabin, as a triumph. Gaza was headline news once more as television cameras recorded the departure of Israeli troops from the centre of Gaza city in the early hours of 18 May. 'Israeli troops leave Gaza', the headlines around the world said. But the people of Gaza were not fooled. The troops had left Jabaliya and other refugee camps, just as they had left Gaza city and other population centres. But Israeli settlements and Israeli troops remained in place in large areas of the territory. It soon became clear that the 'mass expression of outrage' would not die away until the last Israeli settler and soldier had left the Strip.

Notes

[1] Interviewed by the author, 1990.
[2] *Ibid.*, 1994.
[3] *Fodor's Israel 1986*, London, p 158.
[4] Lesch, *op. cit.*, p 16.
[5] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[6] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[7] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[8] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[9] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[10] 'The Israeli Army and the Intifada – Policies that contribute to the killings', *Middle East Watch*, New York, August 1990, p. 200.

CHAPTER 15

The End of the Wilderness Years?

'The history of Gaza entered a new phase on 18 May 1994, at about 2.00 a.m., as the last Israeli troops left military headquarters in the centre of Gaza city.' The speaker was a Gaza lawyer, Raji Sourani, addressing a seminar in the city in September of the same year called to study human rights in the Strip following the establishment of a Palestinian self-rule authority. Discussing what shape this new phase in the life of Gaza will eventually take has been the preoccupation of Gazans since May 1994. Few definite answers have emerged; and many questions still hang in the air.

Most inhabitants of Gaza agree that the Israeli withdrawal from the city on 18 May was a momentous occasion. To the west of the city, overlooking public gardens and the plinth where the statue to the Unknown Soldier once stood is the former legislative council building established by the Egyptians in the late 1950s. It has the look of a small-scale parliament building with wide steps leading up to the main door, and a domed roof. The Israeli military governor took it over after the 1967 occupation. Despite its modest appearance, the council building has represented authority in Gaza for several decades. 'We watched the Israelis pull out from various places in Gaza early in 1994,' one Palestinian said. 'But only when we saw them quit this building did we really believe that they were going properly.'

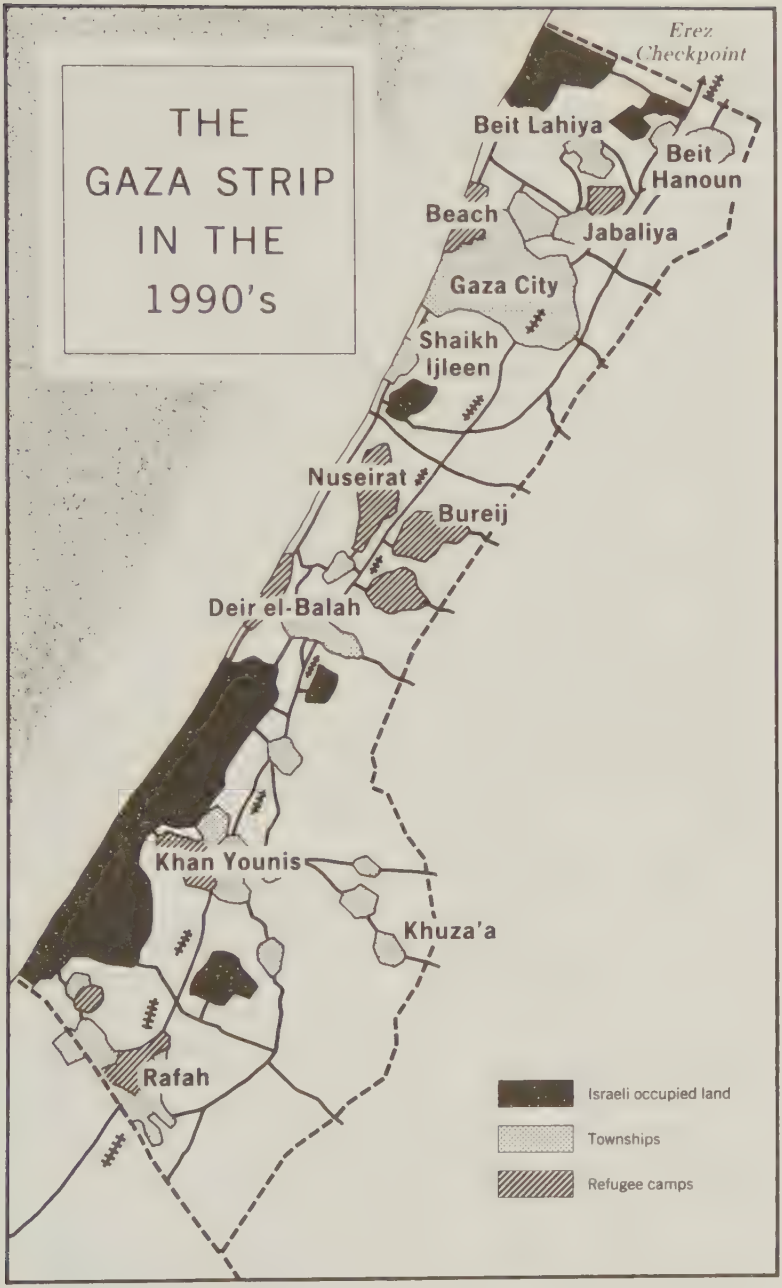
Given the history and symbolic importance of the building it was appropriate that Yasser Arafat, on his return to Gaza in July 1994, should have made his first public speech from that spot, his words frequently drowned by cheering from the vast crowd in front of it and by the celebratory firing of thousands of rounds of bullets into the air.

The people of Gaza who greeted Yasser Arafat that day recognised that the Middle East peace process of the early 1990s, despite the initial misgivings expressed by many, had brought the Strip a step towards its eventual aim of being re-attached to those parts of Palestine outside the borders of Israel – the West Bank and east Jerusalem. The arrival of the PLO leader, the international symbol of the Palestinians' struggle for independence, seemed to herald a better future at last.

The people of Gaza were hungry for signs that life might be about to approve and devoured the crumbs of hope they found. Since 1948, the land of Palestine had changed considerably. The state of Israel had enjoyed international recognition and seemingly unlimited and unquestioning support from the West. But for Gaza, these had been wilderness years. Its traditional role as a strategic crossroads on the Middle Eastern map had diminished. Modern methods of warfare and communication made the emphasis on the control of the land access between Africa and the Levant less vital. Gaza would no longer be doomed, in the words of an historian describing how the territory was for so many centuries, to be 'the land bridge and meeting place and battlefield of great Empires'. Gaza in the 1990s felt unwanted, even by its closest Arab neighbours.

Modern transport and production methods had also changed radically trading patterns in the Middle East. Gaza was no longer a thriving commercial centre as it had been for many centuries. But again, in July 1994 there were crumbs of hope; Gaza was looking forward to playing an important commercial role again as the only outlet to the sea in the new Palestine.

There was a mood of exhilaration. 'There can be no doubt,' Mr Sourani said, 'that after the redeployment of the Israeli military from the population centres there was a dramatic change in the lives of Palestinians in Gaza, simply because those Israeli soldiers were no longer there.'[1] In practical terms this meant 'an end to


THE GAZA STRIP IN THE 1990's
Erez Checkpoint
Beit Lahiya
Beit Hanoun
Beach
Jabaliya
Gaza City
Shaikh Ijleen
Nuseirat
Bureij
Deir el-Balah
Khan Younis
Khuza'a
Rafah
Israeli occupied land
Townships
Refugee camps

the curfew which the people of Gaza had endured for some seven years [since the start of the *intifada*]; the end to the massive military attacks and house demolitions; fewer arrests; and a real reduction in the level of deaths and injuries caused by Israeli soldiers with appalling regularity which we had recorded every month for the previous seven years.'

In short, in Mr Sourani's words, 'Gaza came alive, and was able to express feelings which it had not expressed for two generations.'

The euphoria did not last long. The realisation dawned on the inhabitants of Gaza that while a Palestinian National Authority was being established and Palestinian police had taken the place of Israeli troops on the streets of the towns, some aspects of life had not changed. Most important of all, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from population centres had simply been part of a redeployment of forces within the Strip. The arrangement, furthermore, had been sanctioned by the PLO in agreements signed with Israel. This meant that while the world was blandly talking about the withdrawal of the Israeli army from Gaza, up to 5,000 soldiers were still deployed in the Strip, with another 10,000 engaged in the overall security of the area. The citizens of the Gaza, in other words, still had to pass Israeli military checkpoints on Gazan territory and pass beneath Israeli gun positions, even – at one point in the middle of the territory – on the main Rafah-Jaffa road.

According to Raji Sourani, the redeployment of the army 'involved the consolidation of military camps, and the building of new camps and checkpoints. This involved the confiscation of more Palestinian land or interference in it.' Towards the end of 1994, Mr Sourani counted more than 50 Israeli military installations in the Gaza Strip. Ali Hassan Ali, a resident of the Jebaliya refugee camp since 1948 was baffled, like thousands of other Palestinians, by how the PLO could have signed an agreement which allowed the Israeli military deployment on Gazan soil to continue. 'In this period our future is not clear. Our minds are frozen. We still don't have total independence. Our officers are still operating under Israeli guns. Therefore, to my way of thinking the occupation still exists. The occupation is veiled in something mysterious and strange. We won't feel real

independence until we can match the Israelis at every level – them on one side of the border, us on the other. At the moment I have eaten a piece of bread, but I am still hungry.'

The major purpose of the Israeli military presence in Gaza towards the end of 1994 was to guard Jewish settlements and the roads leading to them. With the Palestinian flag flying without restriction over the whole of Gaza and with Palestinian police in control, the sight of the settlements seemed more anomalous than ever. At the northern edge of the strip the Nissanit settlements looked like slices of suburban Europe or north America placed incongruously in the Arab world – white-painted villas and cottages with sloping tiled roofs in neat rows along the ridge of the dunes and among the sand.

Most striking of all is the Israeli presence in the centre of the strip, at Kfar Darom by the side of the main north-south highway. Behind an earth wall and high wire and barbed-wire fences children wearing *kippas* (the skullcaps which are obligatory for observant Jews) played in the gardens after being brought home by cars bearing Israeli number plates by their mothers. Across the road, under the gaze of Israeli troops in well fortified gun positions, Palestinian children played in their schoolyard. But their parents were not allowed to drive their cars to the school to pick them up – because the Israeli troops would not allow vehicles to stop next to the settlement.

Similarly on the road west towards the coast and the huge Gush Katif settlements, Palestinian drivers still had to pass through Israeli checkpoints.

More than 5,000 Israeli settlers were still living in the Gaza strip in 16 settlements which covered up to 30 per cent of the land. Most Gazans believe that in the end the Israelis will remove the settlements because they do not serve any strategic purpose, and there is no religious significance to the land equivalent to that of the West Bank. More likely, Gazans say, the Israelis will keep a presence in Gaza as a negotiating ploy – hoping to trade the removal of the Jewish presence from this part of Palestinian land for a more valuable concession on the part of the Arabs elsewhere.

Whatever the purpose of the Israeli presence it is unsettling for the people of Gaza; and it seems unthinkable that there will be a

total commitment on the part of the population to a process of peace with Israel while they are still there. Nor does it seem likely that Gazans will commit themselves to any Palestinian national leadership that does not make the removal of the settlements as high a priority as the insistence on the possession of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Majid al-Hussaini, expressing the commonly heard view, was adamant that the Jewish settlements in Gaza will have to go. 'As long as there are settlements, there will be no security in Gaza. They are lying on land which does not belong to them. It is Palestinian land and it is good Palestinian land with good water resources.'

The continued presence of the settlements, as the euphoria of May 1994 receded, was a constant reminder of how the Gaza Strip, after so many years of occupation, was still attached securely to Israel. At the most basic level, Israel controlled access to and from the territory; and it continued to exercise its power to seal off the Gaza Strip as a collective punishment even after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority and the redeployment of the Israeli army.

Towards the end of 1994, promised foreign investment in Gaza was still awaited. The frequent closure of the crossings into Israel and the restrictions placed on the numbers of Palestinians allowed to pass each day were having a serious impact both on the standard of living and on the morale of the inhabitants of Gaza. Before the start of the *intifada* in 1987, some 85,000 Gazan workers (about 45 per cent of the labour force) were employed in Israel. After the Gulf War in 1991 the figure was reduced to 25,000. Since then the number was reduced still further – causing serious hardship in an area where unemployment was running at 60 per cent, the population growing by 40,000 a year and the work force rising at around 6 per cent annually. (It is a sad and ironic comment on the social and economic state of the Gaza Strip that one of the biggest employers – second only to the Palestinian National Authority – is UNRWA, the body charged with looking after Palestinian refugees. UNRWA provides jobs for more than 5,000 people.)

The inextricable link with Israel continues to affect Gaza's ability to trade with the outside world. The passage of goods and services beyond its borders depends on the cooperation and

goodwill of Israel. Until the Gaza economy can be restructured, in Mr Sourani's view, 'the territory will not be able to achieve independence from Israel – to export to foreign markets and to combat rising unemployment.'

Even if the economy is restructured, economic difficulties in Gaza look set to continue because of the pressure on land. Aside from land under Israeli control, the desperate need for housing is eroding fast the remaining fields and orchards. (At the same time, the scramble to construct new houses and apartment blocks is continuing without proper planning and without thought being given to sewerage and other vital services.)

Water remains a serious problem in itself. Under an Israeli Military Order of 1968, 'all water resources are State property' – an order which was not affected by the signing of the PLO-Israel accords. As a result, the Israeli settlements, sited where the best water resources are to be found, are still able to use a disproportionate amount, while water from Gaza is still being pumped into Israel.

Doctors in Gaza have noticed health problems associated with the fast drop in the water table. 'Most of the water is contaminated and contains a high percentage of salt,' said Samira Farah at the Ahli Hospital in Gaza city. 'It is having a bad effect on the people. The incidence of kidney failure is increasing. And often when people drink the water they get viral infections with fever. And laboratory tests show that water is the cause.'

With so many of the difficulties of life under occupation continuing after the redeployment of Israeli forces, Gazans began to take a careful look at the fine print of the agreements signed by the PLO with the former occupiers and found them wanting in many respects. 'If you study carefully the Cairo Accord', a student of history in Gaza said, 'every section is weighted in Israel's favour. For example, it says that "Israelis, including Israeli military forces, may continue to use roads freely within the Gaza Strip." Yet restrictions are applied to Palestinians in Gaza using certain roads where the Israelis have military positions. Sometimes the Israelis cut the main Rafah-Jaffa road.'

Frustration stemming from the continuing economic difficulties, the continued presence of Israeli troops and settlers

in the territory and the failure of the international community to invest in the Strip exploded on occasions into anger in the closing months of 1994. Sporadic attacks were directed at Israeli military positions in the Gaza Strip, and clashes continued between Palestinians and the army. Deaths and injuries were suffered by both communities. Islamic militants from Gaza played the leading part in attacks carried out inside Israel, which culminated in the sealing off of the strip. At the same time Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian National Authority came under increasingly tough pressure from Israel to detain Islamic militants. In developments that depressed the inhabitants of Gaza more than anything else, Palestinian police arrested dozens of their own people. On one bleak Friday in November 1994 the Palestinian security forces opened fire on Islamic protesters after noon prayers, killing thirteen of them.

The emergence from the wilderness years, then, has proven to be difficult and painful. Aside from the problems already mentioned, some major questions still remain unanswered. How will a physical link be established between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank if both are to constitute a Palestinian state? Which Palestinian leader will tell the 340,000 refugees in camps in Gaza, where they and their families have lived in squalor and hardship since 1948, that there is no realistic chance in the foreseeable future of them returning to their homes – and which leader will give the politically explosive order to demolish the camps and settle the refugees? If no order of this kind is given, how much longer will the refugees be expected to put up with the hardships of life? Will the resulting bitterness of the refugees increase support for militant Islamic groups which are bent on the destruction of Israel and are fiercely critical of the compromises with the Jewish state made by the PLO? In which case, will the PLO be able to maintain its authority? And if not, will public pressure in Israel lead to the reoccupation of the Gaza Strip?

There is no easy way of starting to answer these questions and thereby break the circle. What is beyond doubt, though, is that Palestinians will not start to be satisfied until they alone control their destiny. During most of the many centuries of foreign occupation and domination, there has always been a determination to keep alive a spirit of independence, even in the

worst adversity. For much of its history Gaza knew its role – as trading centre or military garrison – and sought at all costs to go on playing it. Over the past century, though, and especially during the wilderness years since 1948, Gaza has been uncertain of its role. It has become an impoverished backwater, a forgotten corner on the map of the Middle East.

The challenge facing Palestinian leaders in the mid-1990s is to reestablish a role for Gaza as part of an independent Palestine. The people of Gaza, in order to accept that they are able to play a part once more in the daily life of Palestine in peace time, after decades of struggling against military occupiers, need to receive a boost to their self-esteem. Conversely, the international community, before committing itself fully to the renaissance of Gaza, needs to be shown that the territory and its people are worthy of respect – that Gaza simply has an image problem. Gazans could start by promoting a better understanding – at home and abroad – of their own astonishingly rich history as a useful first step towards helping to boost self-esteem and win respect.

Changing the image of Gaza may in itself be a difficult process. With successive wars and periods of military occupation causing most of the territory's architectural heritage to be destroyed, there is little physical evidence of its interesting and important past life at the Middle East crossroads to impress the curious visitor. But some interesting buildings have survived; and there is enough in the landscape and the lie of the land to enable one to imbibe a little of the spirit of the history of Gaza – the spirit that has seen its people constantly being a thorn in the side of foreign occupiers, and the spirit that in the mid-1990s would not accept anything short of complete self-determination and independence. It is, perhaps, the spirit of history rather than the physical remains – the great castles and pyramids that other cities boast – that is Gaza's most precious inheritance.

Much of the worst destruction of Gaza's material inheritance was caused by the British and the Ottoman Turks as they fought for control of the city in 1917. After Gaza had fallen a priest, the Reverend Father Waggett, mourned for Gaza. Although he was a foreigner and a Christian in a land dominated by Muslims, he was thinking, surely, with a compassionate and humanist spirit

when he wrote what might stand today both as an epitaph on Gaza's history and a signpost at the crossroads pointing to a more optimistic future.

'Gaza has tragic scars. But it is the scene of ancient victories for progress; and where Samson spoiled the Philistines and Eudoxia raised a church over Marneion, we shall see order and generosity wipe out the memorials of bribery and repression.'[2]

Notes
[1] Interviewed by the author, 1994.
[2] PRO 371 3413.

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Cover: Obverse of Philisto-Arabian silver coin, minted at Gaza (courtesy of the trustees of the British Museum).

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