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ARTICLE



Fishing in Gaza: Between Cultural Endurance and Everyday Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the fishery sector and the lives of the fisherfolk of the Gaza Strip before the genocide, examining their rich culture and organization, as well as the barriers they faced in maintaining their livelihoods and their ways of life. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the al-Shati refugee camp of Gaza City between 2019 and 2021, the author demonstrates that for decades before the genocide, fisherfolk's struggle to remain at sea and maintain their lifestyles and traditions constituted a form of everyday resistance against Israeli oppression—a variation of *sumud*. The firsthand accounts of fishermen and women not only provide insights into a topic that has hitherto received little scholarly attention, but also contribute to documenting and preserving Palestinian lifestyles and traditions on the brink of erasure.

KEYWORDS

sumud; Gaza; fisherfolk;
culture; ethnography

ISRAEL'S GENOCIDAL ASSAULT ON GAZA SINCE OCTOBER 7, 2023, has been devastating for fisherfolk in the besieged enclave. At the time of writing, less than 10 percent of boats and fishery assets remain,¹ and nearly all the fisherfolk and their families I interviewed during my fieldwork have been displaced or killed. In the ongoing genocide, fishing has become a way to fight Israel's forced starvation, and as a consequence it has resulted in the death of many who have gone out to sea to find a meal. While the genocide will be researched for years to come, this article examines fisheries and the livelihoods of Palestinian fisherfolk in the Gaza Strip before 2023, amid intense blockade and repeated cycles of Israeli violence.²

For centuries, fishing was a main source of food for the Palestinians of Gaza, as well as a mainstay of Gaza's economy through employment, trade, and export. Whereas the economic importance of the fishery sector was proportionately greater in the past—especially in the 1970s and 1980s when the catch was high and population levels relatively low—the importance of fishing to Gaza and to Palestinian life there grew more visible in the 1990s with Israel's increasing restrictions on fisherfolk's access to their sea. These restrictions posed direct threats to fisherfolk's way of life, their livelihoods, and their very survival by their sea. In this article, I argue that the lived experiences of Gaza's fisher community before the genocide must be seen as a form of everyday Palestinian resistance against Israel's repeated assaults on their sea and their way of life. Through their insistence on continuing to practice their centuries-old traditions amid stifling blockade and life-threatening conditions, they practiced *sumud* while giving dignified meaning to their lives.³ While scholars have explored the Palestinian connection to the land as one of the main characteristics of *sumud*, this article demonstrates that the link to the sea is a variation of *sumud* practices among Palestinians.

Gaza has been under Israeli occupation since 1967 and under a complete land, sea, and air blockade since 2007, isolating it from the rest of colonized Palestine and the world. Throughout my fieldwork in the Gaza Strip in the summers of 2019 and 2021, I conducted interviews and focus group discussions with fishing communities in al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza City, as well as with the al-Tawfiq Fishermen Cooperative Association and NGOs working directly with Gaza's fisherfolk.⁴ This article builds on this research during which I also observed and participated in fisherfolk's daily work activities, and in NGO projects designed to assist fisherfolk, including the return of boats confiscated by Israel and their subsequent repair. While the research that informs this article predates the genocide, the rich testimonies of fisherfolk, and the documentation of centuries worth of traditions within Gaza's fishing community, hold great significance for recording and preserving the cultural practices, lifestyles, and lived experiences of Palestinians in Gaza from erasure amid Israel's ongoing brutality today.

The Origin and Composition of Gaza's Fishing Community

While returning home after a day of conducting interviews in the northern Gaza Strip, the driver took Beach Road, as it is locally known, going south from Gaza City along the shore. With the sea on my right, I rolled down the window. The food stalls that lined the corniche in Gaza City faded away and soon, the corniche ended too. Though just sand and beach now, every few moments, I saw small wooden fishing boats on the shore—a reminder that fishing is practiced from north to south and that it is an integral part of life in Gaza. The coastal enclave's moderate climate and location on the southern end of the eastern Mediterranean make the sea at Gaza suitable for active fishing throughout the year.

For centuries, Gaza has served as a gateway between Asia and Africa; a main trading center, fishing has always been a key commercial activity, even if on a smaller scale relative to other ports in Palestine like Acre, Haifa, and Jaffa. The next day, I walked toward the Gaza seaport at the western end of Gaza City. Several restaurants and eateries were spread along the road leading to the port. A recently built white mosque surrounded by well-kept gardens attracted my eye and served as the entry point to the Gaza seaport. In the center of a roundabout at the entrance to the port a memorial was erected to commemorate members of the 2010 Freedom Flotilla whom Israel had killed at sea.⁵

Once inside the port, which took the shape of a bay, many small artisanal fishing boats lined the shore. There were a few larger trawlers in between. The beach served as a workshop site where nets and other gear awaited repair. I saw that some of the fishers were engaged in fiberglass repairs or painting with materials provided by donor agencies. There were several benches and coffee vendor stalls on the pavement, which served as an outdoor recreational space for the numerous Gazans who had very few other places to go.

The port had become a space for both fishing and entertainment. On the left side of the entrance were several wharf facilities where fishers could store their equipment and belongings, and where men sat on the ground repairing nets by hand. In between the storage rooms there were some tables and chairs; and in the summer, mattresses were placed in the shade. The port was also a meeting space for both the active and retired fishers who came to have a coffee and chat about days long gone.

The establishment of a modern seaport at Gaza was initially agreed upon in the Oslo Accords in 1993.⁶ While construction did indeed start in the late 1990s, it was halted at an early stage due to a lack of construction materials. What was constructed was partially

destroyed by the Israeli army in September and October 2000 when the second intifada erupted. After Israel's so-called disengagement from Gaza in 2005, construction was planned to restart, though this never materialized due to the ensuing Israeli siege and blockade. For nearly two decades therefore, Gaza's port could not support any economic development process. This was made worse by the breakwater on the coast, which although important for protection during storms, contributed to sand accumulation on opposite sides of the harbor, adding more barriers to construction.⁷

Although development projects on the port were halted, they did influence the fishing sector. An unpublished report in 2010 highlighted some of these advantages for fisherfolk: easier access to high waters meant more days fishing; there were no costs for towing and pulling the boats to the landing; the lifespan of the boats that were previously subjected to wear and tear by the pulling and towing was extended; and port services were made more readily available.⁸ These improvements in Gaza's main port also meant that it received the largest share of fish caught and brought to land in the entire besieged enclave. The report estimated this to be around 70–80 percent of overall fish production in the Gaza Strip, with approximately 50 percent of the fisherfolk, including large boat owners, working and landing at this port, as the other ports remained underdeveloped and shore based.⁹

The Gaza port was thus the main center of fishing activity in the Gaza Strip, and the main auction and trading point for fresh fish in Palestine. It also served both the Gaza City fishing community and the fishing community in northern Gaza. As a result, the Gaza City port was a good location to observe the fish trading process, which started as soon as the boats returned and offloaded their catch in plastic and wooden boxes. The catch was then loaded onto mule-drawn carts or non-refrigerated cars and taken to the wholesale market, located in very close proximity to the offload area. It was at this wholesale market that the auction process began and where, according to Ottoman law, *dhallals* (auctioneers) were recruited by the municipality on an annual basis.¹⁰ After the wholesale process was completed, merchants transported fish to smaller local markets across the Gaza Strip to sell to consumers, including seafood restaurants, or to Israeli buyers if export was permitted.

The revenues of auctioneers came from two main sources: First, as intermediaries, auctioneers took 3 percent from the buyer and 4 percent from the seller for each transaction. Second, as traders, auctioneers bought and sold for their account, making profit from the spread between buying and selling.¹¹ Furthermore, since its foundation in 1994, the Palestinian Authority did not tax the fisherfolk's catch; instead, the *dhallal* paid for the rent of the market hall. This way, the municipality benefitted from the fishing sector. This method applied throughout Gaza and thus, income depended on the quantity of fish and the results of the tender.

Although these processes remained largely unchanged before the genocide, the value of the fishery sector in the Gaza Strip was reduced considerably over the course of two decades. Data compiled by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in 2020 indicate that the fishery sector in Gaza contributed approximately 0.04 percent to the Palestinian GDP.¹² Nonetheless, the sector was of notable importance as it served as a source of employment. Prior to October 7, 2023, 110,000 people in Gaza, including fishers, retailers, exporters, owners of seafood restaurants, input suppliers, researchers, and transporters, relied on the fishery sector.¹³ According to unpublished data from the Department of Fisheries in the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture, in 2021, there were 4,054 registered fishers across the Gaza Strip's five governorates.¹⁴

The fisherfolk themselves also created menial jobs, such as net repair and fish scaling. Rashad al-Hissi was seventy-six years old when I interviewed him about his job, which was created as a result of damaged and lost boats.¹⁵ His launch (small purse seiner) was destroyed at sea in April 2017 when an Israeli naval ship trampled over it in the al-Sudaniya region. The fisher on board the boat, Mohammed al-Hissi, was killed in the attack and his remains have not been found. Rashad al-Hissi and his family lost their source of income and were forced to look for other means of work. With limited literacy and no other skill set, Rashad al-Hissi started repairing nets and connecting them to larger ones and then renting them out to fishers who either had their nets confiscated at sea or needed repair. He and his family could thus guarantee a small income.

Fisherfolk shared that around twelve extended fisher families trace their origins to the Gaza City area. They were thus not registered as refugees in 1948 and had been living along the shore in Gaza practicing fishing as a livelihood for many generations. During the Nakba, many Palestinians from the coastal regions north of Gaza, including Hamama, al-Jura, al-Majdal, Isdud, and along the al-'Auja River estuary in Jaffa,¹⁶ were displaced to Gaza and registered with UNRWA as refugees—their descendants remain refugees to this day. Groups of fishers and their families thus joined the existing fisher community in Gaza where they started anew. This large and instant influx of refugees had both positive and negative consequences for the fishery sector in Gaza. The most important disadvantage is that a large number of boats and fishers were squeezed into a relatively small area, reducing productivity, whereas the upside was that the new fisherfolk brought with them practices, expertise, and heritages that added to the richness of the fishing profession throughout the Gaza Strip.

Older fishers in Gaza described how many of these fisherfolk communities from across coastal Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean—as far away as Beirut and western Egypt—were well connected before the Nakba, a common characteristic of littoral communities that transcends nation-state borders.¹⁷ The Gaza fishing community has thus always been close. I was told several times by different fishers that they are a tight-knit community, even though they originate from different places—whether the coast of Gaza itself, other parts of coastal Palestine, or the small group of fishers who do not originate from fishing families but have taken up fishing or fishing-related jobs.

Despite this diversity, many of the fishers I interviewed indicated that they do not differentiate between the refugees and non-refugees among them; they said they do not use the distinction at all. The fishers explained that the political and maritime circumstances, as well as the difficulty of the profession and its associated risks, strengthened their bonds. Moreover, they added, the fact that fishing as a profession is not easily accessible to outsiders makes the community rely on each other. This is also reflected in social relations like marriage. Among Gaza's fisherfolk, marriage within the fisher community is more important than within the refugee or non-refugee communities. One of the women I spoke to confided that she has a refugee background, but that her husband comes from a fisher family originally from Gaza. She stated that although there are refugees and non-refugees, all fisherfolk belong to the same class and share the same identity as fisherfolk.

The specific fishing culture of Gaza is also reflected in numerous proverbs and songs that feature obscure words and sounds unfamiliar to anyone outside the community. However, according to the fisherfolk, these songs serve as a means of communication between the fishers and the *rayyes* (the captain). For example, when they push the boat, the *rayyes* sings the

following rhythmic words that have no meaning but serve as instructions to the workers to push the boat toward the shore:

Rayyes: Yes (Ya Layyes)

Workers: Hey Hey!

Rayyes: Ya Layyes

Workers: Hey Hey!

Rayyes: Hala Lisa

Workers: Hey!

Fishers explained that there are various other reasons why they sing, including to ward off fear at sea, put their trust in God, express longing for their wives at home, call for a good catch, praise a good catch, and more. The time of day and season can also be presented in the songs, such as when referring to utter darkness (absence of the moon) and the difficulties in identifying good spots for fishing. A fisher informed me that there is even a song that merges the non-refugee with the refugee, serving as an indication of the longstanding connectedness and collaboration among all fisherfolk.

The Ups and Downs of Life by the Sea

The fishers I interviewed explained that they lived well until the early 2000s. Before the siege, they said, they belonged to the privileged groups in Palestinian society; they owned their buildings, wedded off their children in luxury, replaced their boats with new motorized ones, and invested in the fish trade through the al-Tawfiq Fishermen Cooperative Association.¹⁸ To learn more about the good old days, I spoke with Halima, a sixty-six-year-old woman and one of the very few female fish traders in Gaza. On a morning in July 2019, I walked down a narrow alley of al-Shati refugee camp that led to her house. From the way it was squeezed in between structures, her house appeared to have been constructed without proper planning. It was small on the ground floor but then towered five floors high. Men were seated at the entrance of the house. One of them was Halima's husband. He said: "Welcome, the boss is inside waiting for you."

As I entered deeper into the house, I immediately noticed how full it was with people, young and old, all laughing and excited for my arrival. It was hot and humid, and it was clear the few windows did not let in much light or air during the long power cuts. I was offered a chair, cold juice, and biscuits, and invited to sit next to Halima, who started the conversation:

I have been involved in the fishing business nearly my whole life. I was born a refugee in al-Shati refugee camp, but my father was a fisherman. Our house was right next to the beach, but it was destroyed and my parents moved to al-'Arish [Egypt] as a result. I married Abu Riyala, whose father had married two wives, and when he died, I found myself also taking care of his little ones. Then I became pregnant myself [in 1971] and I went on to have ten children, seven boys and three girls. My husband was a shore worker and day laborer. I used to go to the beach every day to help out, which was quite uncommon at the time, but I would help by taking the fish and selling it at the local market. We used to make good money, and with the money we bought fresh vegetables and fruits that would feed our family.

By the mid-1970s, we used our savings to buy our first non-motorized boat, a *floka*. As we were few, we bought it together with our neighbors, the al-Amouda family, and life was good. When the children began school, we sold the sailboat and became day laborers at the shore for a while. But still, life was good at that time and we had sufficient savings to buy a motorized boat, a *hasaka*. This was only the beginning of our family fleet, which consisted of eight boats for our seven sons. Although we obtained a total of eight boats, we would not catch as much fish as before in Port Said and al-ʿArish. That was before 1995, when we used to sail there and there was a lot of fish. Gaza’s waters are too shallow for deep fishing. Also, back in the day, there were fewer *maggia* [large vessel owners]. Nowadays, we have about a hundred and fifty in the Gaza harbor alone and this puts a lot of pressure on the fishers to fish in the same space. Actually, we notice it with everything, this increase in population. For example, the house we built was initially an asbestos-roofed, single-brick house, which was common at the time. Over time, we had to extend it so many times, it now consists of five floors, as five of my sons are living here with their families. So now, we are fifty-four people, thirty-four of whom are children, all in one house!

But back to my story about the boats. So, we used to have eight in our family fleet but three of them fell into disrepair after suffering attacks at sea. Just now, in July, they were returned to us but they are in desperate need of repair for which we don’t have the funds. Really, the times are tough nowadays and even our family, which had been doing so well, has been having a hard time. Just today, the seventeen fishers in the family came back with a catch and I can show you what they brought.

Halima walked over to the fridge, which had been without electricity for the duration of my visit, and pulled out some baskets with fish. The fish were tiny. She said: “Not fish-worthy, in other countries maybe even illegal to catch.” I asked what she did with such tiny fish and she continued her story: “I plan to make a sardine *kufta* from it. Have you ever eaten that? No, not meat *kufta*, fish *kufta*—sardine *kufta* to be precise!” I watched her open and debone a tiny sardine in less than three seconds while she continued to explain the recipe in full:

I will cut onion, garlic, parsley, mint, and basil, and add spices of coriander, cumin, dill seeds, black pepper, and salt, and then knead the deboned sardines with a bit of potato so they can brown in the oven. I will add tahini sauce to give it a distinct flavor and then we will eat it together with home-baked bread. Each floor will have its own share delivered to their house as downstairs is too small for fifty-four people to eat! Of course, everyone has to help in the cooking! I think you should stay and eat with us so you can learn how to make it from scratch! The small sardines were the bycatch of the seventeen men who went fishing. It is more profitable to take that home than to try and sell it. According to tradition, we share the catch of the boat equally. And actually, they did not have a bad day as they nearly made a \$1,000, but we had \$700 outstanding and the fuel alone cost \$350. So, we still fell short of our target.

Halima’s son then joined and said: “A decent day would be if we have a catch of \$700 because that means that we would each make 30 NIS [\$8]. Of course, this is relative as we were once known to be the Saudis of the Gaza Strip when we earned up to 200 NIS a day! That is one of the reasons we never looked for or learned other trades and jobs. The sea has always provided for us!”

Fisherfolk’s lives and lifeways are defined by the sea, and for fisherfolk of Gaza, access to the sea has been a particularly defining experience. As they told me, the sea had been “open” until 1994, when the fishing area off the coast of Gaza was first limited to three maritime zones—K, L, and M—as per the terms of the 1994–95 Oslo Interim Agreement.¹⁹ Zones K and M served as buffer areas where fishing was restricted, while Zone L, extending twenty miles offshore, was designated for fishing.²⁰ Following the second intifada, however, Israeli

authorities limited Gaza fishers' access to the sea to twelve nautical miles. And following the imposition of the full blockade on Gaza, the permitted fishing area was reduced to just three nautical miles in 2008,²¹ in contravention of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which allows for twelve nautical miles for coastal regions.²²

At other times, particularly during Israeli military assaults, Israel either entirely banned fishing or further restricted access to three nautical miles as a form of collective punishment.²³ Indeed, between 2007 and 2023, the total blockade from the air, land, and sea affected the fisherfolk disproportionately: it restricted access to the sea, the source of their livelihood; it forbade the entry of material to repair fishing equipment; and it banned the export of fresh fish or fish products. Therefore, even before the genocide, oppressive restrictions devastated Gaza's fishing communities' livelihoods and ways of life.²⁴

Halima chronicled changes in the lives of Gaza's fisherfolk. As she explained, fishing methods have differed over time and in the absence of boats, fishers used to employ traditional methods such as net fishing by taking their nets out to sea to later pull them back in manually. This was followed by the use of manual boats like rowboats and sailboats, which would take them farther north and south, and was only replaced by motorized boats from the mid-1960s onward. Several of the older fishers I interviewed indicated that their lives used to be simple but tough. They would go out to fish and not return home for weeks on end. Those days, the sea appeared to them to be uncontrolled by specific authorities and the fish were abundant, both because Israel's occupation was relatively less oppressive and because non-motorized fishing resulted in lower catches. For these fishers, those were the good old days when they could maintain a natural balance between catch demand and fish reproduction rate. But, as Halima indicated, the rising numbers of both fishers and *maggia* put pressure on fish production, which combined with the worsening political and economic reality since the 1990s, has resulted in low and irregular catches.

Other interviewees shed light on the organization and functioning of the fishing community with regard to ownership, asset-sharing, and social protection—all of which were affected by changing conditions. Like Halima, the other families I visited made it quite clear that there was no individual boat ownership; instead, the fishing business was a family business in which the father and brothers were partners in one or more boats, and the property was registered in the name of the father and brothers—or at least one of them. Most often, it was registered in the eldest brother's name and then made its way down to the youngest, unless they were bought out. Although it was registered in a specific name, the boat was known to belong to all members of the family. Indeed, fishing was not a commercial business in Gaza; it was not run by companies but by families themselves, and therefore, ownership was distributed among family members.

In other words, the percentage of ownership varied based on the number of boats and the share of ownership for each boat, and this was reflected in the earnings. This made it susceptible to change and affected social organization and rules. Zakaria Bakr, head of the Fishermen's Committees in Gaza, elaborated:

For launches, their material value is divided into twenty-four shares, so you can find partners sharing a boat, for example brothers or cousins. The percentage of shares differs from one partner to another. For example, one fisherman has twelve shares, another one four, and another one eight. However, if the boat is solely for siblings who work with the father, shares are equal like within inheritance laws.²⁵ Half of the income of the boat goes to the owner and the other half to

the workers, and the skilled workers are distinguished by a reward from the boat's share and what remains is distributed according to shares. A fisher can buy shares in a boat, but that is very difficult, especially if the majority of the boat owners are siblings. It is thus possible for the fisher and his siblings to run a full boat alone or with a partner.

However, the blockade has put a lot of pressure on the boats. Previously, when a fisher's sons grew up, he would buy or build them a new boat. Today, it is no longer possible to buy or manufacture one due to the blockade and lack of materials. As a result, the sons of a father, along with his own sibling(s) and his children, have to share the same boat. This adds a lot of financial pressure on one boat. For example, fifteen cousins might all be working the same boat and have to share the income from the catch, which means a very small share, low income, and increasing difficulties.

A 2020 World Bank report explained that large owners tended to have different types of fishing vessels—a trawler, *shanshula* (big purse seiner), or small motorized boat (*hasaka*)—while small owners typically had only *hasakas*.²⁶ By owning different types, large vessel owners could diversify their risks better, resulting in more sustained income over time—an important social protection measure. Fishers thus often depended on each other in the absence of formal social security or other social protection schemes. Neither the official institutions nor the trade union had a system in place to support them financially, as when access to the sea was closed. The report further argued that owning different boats facilitated the existence of an informal social protection mechanism—in challenging times, the income was shared.²⁷ This also meant that the responsibility was placed on the fisherfolk themselves.

The fisherfolk elaborated that there were unwritten and informal laws among them within these mechanisms, either by mutual agreement or a customary law that ensured that fishers benefitted from some form of protection. These laws and agreements also applied when out at sea. For example, whenever a boat out at sea was damaged, the nearby boats were required by custom to tow it to shore for free. If the towboat had insufficient fuel, fuel was taken from the damaged boat. There was also a custom called *al-nakhwa*, whereby if a boat broke down, a fisher got lost, or anything happened to a fisher, a large fleet of boats carried out the search at no cost.

These mechanisms did not rely solely on the ownership of different boats but rather on the solidarity structures developed within the fishing community. Importantly, the protection agreements emerged because fishers did not earn daily wages or monthly incomes; their income was derived from the catch and landings. This means that after paying the cost of fuel and any other expenses related to the fishing trip, the remaining amount was split: half to the boat owner and half distributed equally among the boat workers. After, a fisher who performed well during the fishing trip could get a tip (*ikramiya*). The tip could amount to a quarter, half, or full share, which was taken from the amount to be paid to the boat owner. This provided an incentive for the fishers to work proactively and professionally throughout the trip.

In most cases, the loan from which the fishers could benefit was also deducted from the boat owner's share, and if the catch was large, it would not be deducted completely, especially if the worker was loyal and committed. This rule applied to all boat workers, whether a member of the family or an outside worker. However, following the blockade, this mechanism came under pressure, as boat owners were often in as much financial need as boat workers.

In the years before the blockade, according to the custom of boat owners, a social protection scheme was in place that provided for the construction of housing for the fishers. This was

mutually beneficial for both the boat worker and the boat owner, since the boat owner would advance the costs and the boat workers would pay back proportionately from each earning. Weddings were organized in a similar manner; boat owners would advance and the boat workers would be able to pay back proportionately over time. This protection scheme remained valid for as long as the boat worker remained committed to the boat owner. Before the blockade, the social protection scheme even covered workers' inability to work as a result of a work-related incident, in which case the boat owner would pay the full earnings until they returned to work.

Although the siege dramatically affected fisherfolk's lives, these informal laws remained applicable until the genocide. However, they grew to become based on the income ratio, which deteriorated sharply in the years leading up to 2023, impacting these forms of social security. This was exacerbated by the absence of any formal laws or social protection schemes in the fishery sector, or a fund to ward off risks. And with 93 percent of fisherfolk relying on fishing as their sole source of income, and only 7 percent indicating they have another job, this social protection mechanism was critical.²⁸

Taking into consideration the decreased share for each person on the boat and the reduced fishing zones, poverty levels among Gaza's fisherfolk skyrocketed since the blockade was imposed. The average fisher earned approximately 543 NIS per month (about \$136) in 2009, which was insufficient to maintain a family consisting of approximately 5.6 people—the average family size in Gaza according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.²⁹ As a result, 82 percent of Gaza households benefited from food provided by international NGOs.³⁰ Between 2009 and 2019, the blockade remained in place, “leading to soaring unemployment and poverty rates, and a heavy reliance on international humanitarian aid.”³¹ Therefore, in the years leading up to the genocide, the situation of Gaza's fisherfolk was dire, with poverty standing at 95 percent in 2017.³²

Supported by their own social protection mechanisms and sustained by the belief that fishing is a way of life that they will never give up, Gaza's fisherfolk lived off the sea for centuries. Over the course of the last two decades, however, socioeconomic, political, and financial strains brought on by ongoing siege, occupation, and blockade resulted in the fisherfolk family businesses becoming nearly obsolete. Nonetheless, the majority of fishers remained committed to the businesses, as there were very few other employment options for this mainly single-skilled community, especially in the midst of such high unemployment. Indeed, despite average to high literacy rates among the community, the fishers operated first and foremost in the fisheries sector.³³ That said, the worsening reality of their situation drove some of the families I interviewed to invest in the education of their younger sons so they could gain alternative skills and find employment in other sectors. Gaza's fisherfolk continually showed determination in the face of unrelenting hardship.

Sumud and Gaza's Fisherfolk

Madleen's eyes lit up when she spoke to me about how the sea runs through her veins, how she had been helping her father fish ever since she was a little girl. I was lucky to meet twenty-four-year-old Madleen, the only fisherwoman in Gaza, who had caught the attention of several media outlets.³⁴ When she opened the door of her in-laws' house—she had recently married a fisherman—I saw a young, strong, and determined woman at the doorstep who welcomed

me in. The house was simple and coffee and tea were abundant, while other relatives showed a mutual interest in my visit. Madleen and I took a seat on the sofa and started off with some small talk about daily life, including the day's grocery shopping, which they did with aid vouchers to purchase the ingredients to prepare small pizzas for my visit. Madleen added cheekily that the refrigerator was not working and that it stood there as a display model. Perishable items would need to be consumed shortly after purchase, including the refrigerated drink they had bought for me.

She then proceeded to tell me about the sea and fishing in an outspoken and determined manner that demonstrated her and her family's long-standing involvement in the trade:

I descend from a fisher's family from Hamama, but my family was forced to flee to Gaza in 1948. My father used to tell me how he fared as far as Egypt and Cyprus. When he fell ill, it was only natural for me to take over the trade and become the breadwinner, as I had been actively involved since I was a little girl, both at the shore and sea. So, I took over my father's boat when I was thirteen and I became the first fisherwoman in Gaza, in an otherwise traditional trade. However, the community had known me since I was very young and even provided me with support. It was the outsiders working in the fishery sector who had more problems with a woman fishing at sea.

Initially, I used a rowboat and I struggled. I would have a small catch, which I would sell daily, and a few fish I would put aside for our dinner. The life of fishers is hard. We mostly leave [for the sea] at 4 p.m. and do not return until the following day whether rain or shine, high waves or bad tides. Every day is a commitment to the sea and I take all responsibilities in my stride.

As our conversation progressed, I perceived in her voice a sense of resignation about life in a fishing community. She told me she was used to giving interviews; as the only fisherwoman in the Gaza Strip, international media love to spotlight gender in conservative societies. But, she said, they do not describe the wider picture of the fisherfolk's struggle. It was then I understood that what I initially took as resignation was a sense of determination—under Israeli occupation, being a fisherwoman is no different from being a fisherman. Madleen suffered the same oppression as her male counterparts and argued that both fisherwomen and men wage the same battle for livelihood, survival, and existence. After all, she said, fisherfolk are all pawns in the same political game and must withstand the same challenges: “The blockade, the lack of repair materials, the lack of trade, and the increasing costs have resulted in severe hardship for the fisher community. We are in a situation where no money is available. The blockade has eroded our resolve; and our livelihoods at times have become a burden as there is no solution in sight. It is unclear how this will end, but our dignity and commitment to the fishing trade keep us alive.”

During our interview, Madleen was seven months pregnant and worried about what life would bring for her baby. She explained:

Nowadays, being a fisher means poverty—deep poverty. The whole world knows the work of a fisher, but here in Gaza it is something else altogether. We grow up at sea and the sea runs through our veins. It hurts us not to be able to live our lives and use our abilities to fish, to practice our traditions and way of life. We are now struggling for a living, dependent on aid initiatives that are inadequate and often unsustainable, and many families have accumulated debt with no option to repay. I have also tried to start different livelihoods such as running a tourist boat, but it is not sustainable as the fuel costs are too high. Nevertheless, I am still proud to be from a fisher family, going back generations, but our future is uncertain and I cannot help but worry what the future holds for my children.

Toward the end of our chat, we walked around the house and she showed me her newly furnished room and the baby space she had carefully prepared. I also noticed some awards. She explained that she finished *tawjihi* (high school exit exam) and went on to obtain a certificate in secretarial skills and administration. She added that she did not have the physical certificate as they were unable to pay the remaining \$100 to obtain it. Yet, she was determined and defiant that she did not need the certificate. As a fisherwoman, the sea was her destiny.

The steadfastness and determination of Palestinian fisherfolk is a form of *sumud*.³⁵ The term *sumud* is closely associated with rootedness to the land and therefore, more often linked to the fellahin defending their land. As Ted Swedenburg elaborates, “The figure of the Palestinian peasant has become the epitome of what it means to be *samid*, to stay put, anchored to the earth with stubborn determination. Palestinians fight colonization by stressing their rootedness in and love for the soil.”³⁶ I argue that Gaza’s fisherfolk, like different groups in Palestinian society practicing everyday acts of resistance and steadfastness,³⁷ show that *sumud* applies equally to the sea and its fishers. Indeed, as Lena Meari argues, *sumud* does not have a fixed meaning and incarnates a multiplicity of significations and practices.³⁸ It is my contention that Gaza’s fisherfolk have been practicing *sumud* at sea in a similar manner as Palestinian farmers and others have done in protection of their land.

Palestinian peasant engagement and mobilization in various forms of land-based resistance are often traced to the early twentieth century, in particular, to the 1936–39 Great Revolt.³⁹ Though there is no evidence of Palestinian fisherfolk participating in the revolt, it is arguable that they were relatively uninvolved throughout given the importance of land to the uprising.⁴⁰ Indeed, it was the fellahin who bore the brunt of British and Zionist land appropriation schemes at the time, and this was only exacerbated following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and its subsequent military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank in 1967, throughout which generations of Palestinian farmers have been violently dispossessed of their lands.

The experience of fisherfolk in Gaza with Israel’s occupation has been marked by increasing limitations on access to the sea. As the fisherfolk themselves explained, the change from fishing in relatively open and safe waters before 1994 to being chased and targeted by Israeli occupation forces in increasingly limited spaces at sea since, put them directly in the line of fire and made them frontline defenders of Palestinian territorial waters. These territorial waters have thus become part of the discourse of defending the land. As a result, since the Oslo Accords, Palestinian fisherfolk have been increasingly portrayed as national defenders and icons of the struggle. However, the first instance of collective action and mobilization of the fishing community occurred in the early 1980s—not at sea, but on land, when Israeli forces tried to impose taxes on the fisherfolk for trading fish with Israel. According to Ragib al-Hissi, head of al-Tawfiq Fishermen Cooperative Association at the time, he and senior fishers decided to continue fishing at sea, but rather than sell the catch, they deposited it on the beach as a declaration of a strike. Though Israeli forces suppressed the strike, it was a viable form of action among fisherfolk against Israel’s attempts to interfere in the fishery sector.

According to the fisherfolk, their collective action increased as the challenges they faced intensified—namely, the more Israeli forces interfered with their sea and with their markets and trade. The unity and cohesion in the tight-knit fishing community also facilitated this collective action, including during the first intifada when fishers played an important role in defying Israeli curfews. That is, in the early days of the uprising, Israeli occupation forces

imposed a curfew on Palestinians across camps in Gaza, but not on the sea. Unlike their counterparts in the camps who were stuck at home and unable to work, the fishers were able to continue fishing, and they used part of their earnings to buy goods and distribute them within the camps. This form of resistance was in significant ways part of collective Palestinian *sumud*.

With the 2007 blockade, Israel's arbitrary restrictions and full closures of the sea jeopardized the livelihoods of Palestinian fisherfolk. While all Palestinians in Gaza suffered from the blockade, the impact it had on the fishing community—pushing them into poverty while continuing to put their lives at risk when out at sea to defend the water and their fishing traditions—has drawn increased attention to their role in Gaza society as defenders of their livelihood and their sea. As Bakr put it:

We go out to sea whenever we can, and it is always a risk and a struggle to fish. Just being in the water means you can be a target, but we resist and we find coping strategies to keep our livelihoods alive. Maybe they are not thriving, but everyone knows that fishing is here to stay. We will never give up our livelihoods. We have received support from different actors to carry out repairs and to fight court battles to get our confiscated boats back. But where and when possible, we also support each other; asset sharing has become an important coping strategy and although it does not feed us, it keeps the trade alive. There are also people among us who lost their boats and had to look for different work, but they remain in the fishery sector. They find other types of work so they stay connected and rooted to their livelihood, to the sea.

On the one hand, Bakr emphasized the fight that the fishers put up on a daily basis to protect their livelihoods. On the other, he showed that against all odds fisherfolk adapted and created coping strategies to ease external pressures until better times returned.

When I visited the port in Gaza City, I witnessed the destruction inflicted by Israel, including damaged boats and equipment. Boats were unable to go out and the sea was closed off, yet there was still a sense of life among the fishers. Maybe it was the fishers having coffee together, socializing around a pile of nets up for repair, talking about needed equipment to make the boats run again, and providing updates on the latest court cases about the return of confiscated boats; or maybe it was the way in which they treated the boats that were under repair—with care and respect, they fixed what was damaged and made the boats seaworthy again. Although they knew that their work could be undone the next time they set out to sea and came under Israeli attack, the boats in repair were as valuable as those in good condition and deserved their full attention and artistry—all boats were the pride of the family.

This refusal to give in, this determination to not just get back out on their boats, but to do so with dignity for their own lives, livelihoods, and traditions, was fisherfolk's practice of *sumud* in Gaza. To face the occupiers at sea when they were targeted by bullets, sprayed with wastewater, or chased by naval ships for carrying out and preserving their livelihoods, these were—and continue to be amid genocide—acts of everyday resistance. As Gaza is being erased, it is critical to document and honor these traditions and practices.

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Endnotes

1. Based on information shared with the author by Zakaria Bakr, head of Fishermen's Committees in Gaza, on May 31, 2025. Bakr elaborated on the impact of the genocide on the fishery sector in Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, *The War on Food Production: Fishing*, June 24, 2025, <https://gisha.org/en/the-war-on-food-production-fishing> and "Gaza/Fishermen," UNifeed, June 22, 2025, <https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d341/d3415801>. For more information, see UN Protection Cluster–Occupied Palestinian Territory, *Building to Starvation: Attacks on Fishing in Gaza and Implications for Livelihoods and Protection*, May 2025, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/building-to-starvation-systematic-attacks-on-fishing-in-gaza-and-implications-for-livelihoods-and-protection-may-2025/>.
2. For over 25 years, I visited the Gaza Strip for personal and professional reasons. I was able to enter Gaza following the 2007 siege via Rafah (near the Egyptian border) when I was added onto my husband's Palestinian ID card. This afforded me a unique position in Gaza; I was able to work for several civil society organizations and spend significant time with my husband's family. As both an insider and outsider, I was thus privileged while conducting my fieldwork. I conducted all interviews in Arabic and translated them myself.
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8. Abdelnassar Madi, *The Reality of Fishing and Fishermen in the Gaza Strip: The Right to Life Project* [in Arabic] (Unpublished, 2010), 17. Used with permission.
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10. Madi, *Reality of Fishing*, 23.
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