

## Gaza Strip fisheries

# Under siege

**The fishery of Palestine has deep-rooted traditions, but has developed little, due to various occupations and political upheavals**

Fishing is a profession with a long-standing tradition in the Gaza Strip (Palestine). The Palestinian people have always lived along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. However, after the tragedy of Palestine, which began in 1948, many fishermen communities from Palestinian cities north of Gaza, such as Askalan, Jaffa, Jura and Majdal, were forced to flee southwards and take refuge in the Gaza Strip. Many of these displaced Palestinians had to continue in the only profession they knew best as a means of making a living, thus joining the fishermen population of the Strip. The fisheries sector has always played a major role in the economy of the Gaza Strip, where other economic activities are limited. Furthermore, since the war of 1967, the fishery activities became severely controlled and restricted by the Israelis who occupied the Strip that year.

In 1994, as a result of the Oslo Peace Accord of 1993, the Gaza Strip came under the autonomous rule of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). It is very densely populated, with over one million inhabitants living in an area of 360 sq km—about 2,800 people per sq km, one of the highest population densities in the world.

The coastline of the Gaza Strip, which is located in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea and is Palestine's only outlet to the sea, is 45 km long, of which only about 40 km is permitted for fishing. The Gaza coastline has a straight and sandy shore with no proper fishing harbors. The continental shelf is wide and said to be relatively rich in both pelagic and demersal species. Although the Palestinian fishing zone is up to 20 miles, fishermen are not allowed to fish beyond 12 miles. The constantly present Israeli

gun/patrol boats make the fishing area rather 'elastic'. Sometimes, unfortunate accidents happen and the fishing limits are consequently reduced.

In 1998, the total fish landings were estimated at 3,618 tonnes. Landing figures for the first eight months of 1999 indicate an important increase over the same period of 1998. (During occupation years, landings did not exceed 1,000 tonnes). The species composition in 1998 showed that sardines (*Sardinella aurita*) constituted, by far, the largest quantity in the catch, accounting for 1,779 metric tonnes (mt) or 49 per cent. This was followed by mackerel (*Scomber spp.*), with a total of 337 mt or 9.29 per cent, bongue (*Bobs bobs*), with 162 mt or 4.47 per cent, cuttlefish (*Sepia spp.*), with 114 mt, prawns (*Penaeus spp.*), with 123 mt or 3.39 per cent, and mackerel (*Trachurus spp.*), with 115 mt or 3.18 per cent. Other important species in the 1998 catch, which contributed to less than 3 per cent of the total, included red mullet (*Mullus spp.*), barracuda (*Sphraena spp.*), and Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus*).

Fishing activity along the Gaza Strip is carried out in four main fishing sites, namely, Gaza City, the largest, followed southwards by Dier el Balah, Khan Yunis, and Rafah. In terms of fishing gear used, most catches in 1998 were caught by purse-seines using light attraction equipment. This fishing method landed 2,467 mt (68 per cent), followed by trawling with 969 mt (27 per cent), light fishing 96 mt (2.6 per cent) and gill-net fishing, 91 mt (2.4 per cent).

#### Fleet composition

According to a survey conducted in late 1996, the fishing fleet is made up of a total of 818 fishing units, operated by a population of about 2,700 fishermen.

These units consist of 19 trawlers, built locally for catching shrimp, and a variety of demersal species, 55 purse-seiners, called *shanshulla* boats, made locally for catching sardines, and 431 small boats, or *hasaka*, which form the largest number of fishing units powered by outboard engines. Other fishing units consist of 153 wooden *felukas*, 131 *hasakas* with oars and 29 *tires* for shore fishing with set gill-nets.

The average retail prices for fresh fish differ considerably between Gaza and Israel, a major market for fish from Gaza. For example, a kilogram of grouper (whole) in Gaza would cost around US\$17/kg, while in Israel it could fetch over US\$35/kg. Likewise, for shrimps, in Gaza it would be around US\$20/kg, while in Israel it is about US\$45/kg. *Calamari* (squid) would cost US\$10/kg in Gaza, but in Israel, over US\$20/kg. Sardines, however, would fetch about US\$3-4/kg in Gaza and are not exported to Israel, since there is no demand. Only high-value species are exported. In the past, sardine canneries in Israel had demand for Gaza sardines, but most canneries are now closed.

Cultured sea bream imported from Israel to Gaza fetches around US\$10/kg. Very few fish-processing activities take place in Gaza. Only some species, such as mullet and bream, are salted. The quantity may not exceed 10-15 mt a year. Very limited smoking activities are carried out.

No adequate or precise knowledge is available on resource potential, since no proper comprehensive surveys have been carried out in recent years. During 1999, however, the DANIDA project was allowed to carry out limited and restricted fishing trials in deeper waters. Preliminary results indicated good possibilities for increased catches, new fisheries and the possibility of pelagic resources availability throughout the year, rather than on a seasonal basis.

The post-harvest activities of marketing and distribution of catch, although traditional and out-dated due to limited infrastructure facilities, seem to be adequate for the present needs. Fish is unloaded from the fishing units into wooden and/or plastic boxes and then loaded on carts pulled by mules and brought to a central location. The boxes are lined up along the open street opposite the retail fish market, where 12 fish retail shops are located.

A sole auctioneer dominates the daily auction. He has a unique position in the marketing of fish. He receives a commission of 5 per cent from the producer and 3 per cent from the buyer, that is, 8 per cent in total. He pays to the Gaza municipality an amount of NIS 1,200,000 (approximately US\$300,000) for the whole year and a small amount to the municipalities of the other three minor landing sites. The municipality awards

the fish-auctioning job after an annual competitive bidding, and it has always been the same auctioneer who somehow wins the bidding. This gives him exclusive rights on all fresh fish that enters the fish market in Gaza and he has control over most of the fishermen through the services he provides.

**W**hile the system seems to operate rather well, it is outmoded and goes back to the Ottoman Civil Code of 1870, issued during the period of the Ottoman Empire which ruled Palestine. The British then amended the Code with the Gaza Municipality Law of 1934 during their mandate over Palestine. The PNA is currently preparing new rules and regulations to modernize the system.

As far as fish trade is concerned, compilation of statistics on imports/exports was started only in August 1998 by the Department of Imports, under the Ministry of Economy and Trade of the PNA. Some frozen fish were imported from Uruguay, Argentina, Iceland and Denmark. The quantity of frozen fish imported during September 1998 to February 1999 did not exceed 300mt, valued at NIS 2,000,960 (US\$500,000). Furthermore, imports from Israel for the period August 1998 to March 1999 were estimated at 4,478 mt, at a value of NIS 4,300,000 (US\$1,075,000). The imports constituted species not consumed in Israeli markets due to local dietary practices. It is estimated that about 400 mt of fish not accounted for in Palestinian statistics (about 11 per cent of total Gaza fish landings) were transferred at sea from Palestinian fishermen to Israeli traders.

Generally speaking, the Israeli government gives security as the reason for prohibiting fresh-fish imports into Gaza. Furthermore, the adverse effect on prices of locally caught fish is also another reason cited to ban the import of fresh fish from neighboring countries like Egypt.

The high duties and complicated procedures make it very cumbersome and costly to import a very highly perishable product such as fish to the West Bank to be sold at reasonable and affordable prices. This is coupled with other impediments: very stringent security checks; unavailability of fish inspectors at

the check point outside regular office hours; and permitting such an import only through a remote check point (Al-Oja) along the Egyptian-Palestinian border, rather than the more convenient one at Rafah.

Fishermen's co-operative societies date back to 1972, with the El Ekhlass Fishermen's Co-operative, which was annulled a year later. In 1973, the El Tawfiq Fishermen Co-operative Society was established and is still operational. It has a membership of about 400 fishermen from all over the Gaza Strip. Its income is generated from membership dues, discounted sale of fishing gear and other equipment, sale of petrol, ice and other essential services. A general manager and a board of directors of nine elected members manage it.

The meager services that are available to the fishery seem to be adequate to support the present level of production. Supply of ice is covered by a block ice plant, with a five tonnes per day capacity, built in 1987 with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Japan to the El Tawfiq Fishermen Co-operative Society. A cold store of 20 tonnes capacity is attached to the ice plant. As for fuel, it is readily available. However, petrol for the outboard engines is rather costly, as no subsidy is provided. Concessionary credit facilities are provided by the CARE Project, which operates through the co-operative, with funding from the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and the Arab Bank. The fund, which is now about US\$1 million, is operated on a revolving basis for the repair and maintenance of boats and engines.

The administration of the sector is carried out mainly by the General Directorate of Fisheries in the Ministry of Agriculture. The Directorate is charged with the issuing of licences, develops fishing technology and is responsible for research and training activities. Also, it functions as a counterpart to international aid organizations.

#### International aid

International assistance is provided by two major agencies, which extend highly commendable aid to fisheries in Gaza.

These are DANIDA of Denmark and CARE International. DANIDA provides assistance through a project operating since 1996 with an initial amount of US\$2.8 million. CARE International, with funding support from IDRC, CIDA, IFAD and the Arab Bank, has been executing a fisheries conservation project since 1995.

**P**ort and harbour facilities in Gaza are very limited. The small units are beached with the help of tractors. The larger trawlers are berthed inshore using small boats for access. However, after the PNA took charge of the Strip, work commenced during 1999 to construct a shelter for fishing boats in Gaza city. It is about 300 m from the site of the co-operative, the ice plant and the cold store as well as the retail fish market where the fish is normally auctioned. The shelter is expected to help in having a more organized and efficient fishery. For the longer run, the PNA has now obtained the approval and funding to commence the construction of the main Gaza Harbour. Fisheries facilities will be provided for the sector.

At present, the only market accessible to the fish traders is the Gaza fish market and Israel, where fish is either transferred at sea or through the Gaza/Israeli checkpoint at Beit Hanoun (Eretz). While the present landings, mainly the small pelagics are totally sold in Gaza, demersal species of high value are exported to

Israel, were they fetch higher prices. Only a limited quantity of high-value demersal species is sold locally in Gaza for the high-income consumers as well as hotels and restaurants.

Under the prevailing restrictive conditions imposed by Israel, Palestinian fish consumers are denied supplies, as no fish marketing is allowed or permitted from Gaza to the West Bank and beyond to the Jordan market. Both areas have a high demand for fresh fish. If such access becomes available, Gaza fish traders will have an additional market access just as lucrative as the market in Israel.

These areas could also become an alternative outlet for Gaza fish when the Israelis sometimes abruptly close the borders between Gaza and Israel. Price-wise, high-value demersal species will continue to fetch good prices in Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. As for small pelagics, an alternative market in the West Bank cities would give the chance for a slight increase in prices, which will give fishermen an opportunity for increased incomes, but would keep prices about the same in Gaza.

#### Demand-supply

Increased demand for fish will most likely encourage an increase in supplies. This could be obtained by lifting restrictions to fish in deeper waters beyond the present 12-mile limit imposed on Palestinian

fishermen, as well as to go into international waters. Furthermore, opportunities for better fishery management will open up.

In spite of the already harsh conditions and restrictions imposed by the Israelis even during normal times, Palestinian fisheries are prevented from functioning to at least a fraction of its present capacity. After years of desperation and frustration, the *Intifada 2000* (popular uprising) erupted in late September 2000 to protest Israeli occupation. It calls and demands independence for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the two land areas that will constitute the present-day State of Palestine. As a consequence, the fishery sector is currently at a standstill. The Israelis have enforced additional, and more severe, sanctions on the whole fishing sector as well as the whole population. Israel has waged, besides military warfare, a harsh economic blockade against the Palestinians. All access roads between the cities and towns were closed, thus preventing fishermen from moving to their boats and conducting other essential activities. The Israelis also prevented fishermen from collecting their set gill-nets. The ever-present gun/patrol boats along the Gaza coast blockaded the waterfront, preventing all fishing boats from going to sea. The local market is, therefore, deprived of much-needed food supplies.

Even food aid from foreign countries is prevented from entering through the Egyptian-Palestinian border. Fishing boats that try to venture out are shot at sight. It is also reported that the Israeli settlers, who still occupy some parts of Gaza, have damaged, and/or confiscated, a number of fishing boats and their gear.

In the general economic sanctions, the Israeli government froze all the funds that are due to the PNA from customs duties and value-added taxes, thus preventing the payment of salaries of personnel, including the fisheries personnel of the Directorate of Fisheries. Exports of goods, including fish, to Israel were stopped, as were imports of frozen fish to supplement local supplies. Such activities severely curtail the already low income of fish traders. Imports of petrol, gas and kerosene are restricted, making stocks very low. Cuts in other essential goods, as well as electricity and water, are frequently experienced.

A consequence of the Israeli military warfare and economic sanctions forced the international experts attached to the DANIDA Project to leave Gaza. Furthermore, a proposed fisheries project, assisted by Japan, was put on hold for the same reasons.

#### **Small sector**

The fisheries sector in Gaza is relatively small compared to the fisheries of most of

the Eastern Mediterranean countries, but for the economy of Gaza, which lacks other natural resources and severe shortage of job opportunities, the sector provides a major source of employment and income, as well as a major source of animal protein. The fishery has deep-rooted traditions, but has experienced very little developmental changes, due to various occupations and political upheavals. It is hoped that when the Palestinians ultimately achieve their long-awaited aspirations in establishing their independent State of Palestine, the fisheries sector, alongside other economic components, will finally achieve stability, sustainability and progress.

It is essential for the rehabilitation of the fishery sector to introduce some basic foundations for more solid and sustainable development, such as the continuous upgrading of professionals, administrative personnel and workforce. It requires the introduction of more modern and appropriate infrastructure, as well as more efficient practices. A sound combination of both people and materials, under good economic conditions and political stability, are vital for success in this important sector.

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