



Al Mezan Center for Human Rights

Fact Sheet:

Gaza Victims of Israel's Five-Year Closure of Gaza:

Fishermen

14 June 2012



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Israel's militarily enforced closure of the Gaza Strip is closing its fifth year and Gaza's fishermen continue to suffer at the hands of this brutal, illegal, and inhumane policy. The closure regime's policy includes a naval blockade under which Gaza fishermen are only permitted to fish within a narrow zone limited to three nautical miles. This policy violates international laws requiring an occupying power to ensure the way of life and the rights of occupied peoples are not disrupted. It further violates the Oslo Accords, which stipulate that Gaza fishermen be granted access to a zone of the sea expanding 20 nautical miles from the shore.¹ In 2002, the Israeli military reduced the permitted fishing zone to 12 nautical miles.² In 2006, the fishing zone was reduced to 6 nautical miles.³ Ultimately, after Israel's military incursion of 2009, codenamed "Operation Cast Lead," the Israeli military set in place the policy that is still in force today: the reduction of the Gazan fishing zone to only 3 nautical miles.⁴



Fishermen face live fire directed at them, sabotage and confiscation of their equipment, pursuit as they work by the Israeli navy, and even the possibility of arrest, all enforced arbitrarily and oftentimes before the fishermen have even crossed Israel's unilaterally defined limits to the fishing zone.⁵ Prior to arrest, the Israeli Navy typically forces fishermen to take off their clothes, jump into the sea, and swim toward Israeli vessels for arrest.⁶ This

¹ Fact Sheet, "Documentation Report on: Torture and other Forms of Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment against the Palestinian Population in Gaza Strip by IOF," Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, reporting period 1 May 2009- 30 April 2011 Gaza, published July 2011 (hereinafter "Torture and other Forms of Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment"), p. 12, *available at*: <http://www.mezan.org/upload/12381.pdf>.

² *Id.*

³ "Between a fence and a Hard Place," Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), p 10-11, http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_special_focus_2010_08_19_english.pdf.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Fact Sheet, "Gaza Fishermen: Life with Poverty, Harassment and Suffering," Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 27 December 2010 (hereinafter "Gaza Fishermen"), p. 1, *available at*: <http://www.mezan.org/upload/11209.pdf>.

⁶ Press Release, "Al Mezan Condemns Escalation of Israeli Attacks on Palestinian Fishermen, Calls on International Community to Intervene to End Israeli Abuses and Immediately Lift Siege," Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 30 May 2012 (hereinafter referred to as "Al Mezan Condemns Escalation of Israeli Attacks"), 1, *available at*:

http://www.mezan.org/en/details.php?id=14281&ddname=fisherman&id2=9&id_dept=9&p=center.



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procedure is followed even during the coldest winter months when the low temperature of the water is nearly unbearable and when the fishermen to be arrested are elderly or ill. Fishermen are then blindfolded and handcuffed and finally subjected to intrusive and accusatory interrogation.⁷ Since the beginning of 2010, the Israeli Navy has arrested 66 fishermen, including seven children.⁸ Additionally, the IOF has carried out 113 attacks against fishermen, injuring 11 fishermen, 2 of whom were children.⁹ Further, during May 2012, the Israeli Navy carried out 13 attacks on fishermen, arrested 9, and impounded 4 boats.¹⁰

The Israeli Navy's inquiries can be addressed and their brutal practices can be avoided if they instead initiated communication with the sailors through methods already within their means. However, despite having radios, Gaza fishermen have never been warned by the Israeli navy before they were attacked.¹¹ Instead, the Israeli navy has reportedly interfered with the radio communications of fishermen on hundreds of occasions.¹²

Recently conditions for fishermen have worsened. The escalation of attacks comes in the context of Israel's five-year maritime siege on the Gaza Strip, a policy that prevents Palestinian fishermen from working, even within the Israeli-imposed "fishing zone."¹³ Of late, Israeli forces have begun using a new tactic to intimidate, threaten, damage the boats of, and disrupt the work of Gazan fishermen: direct and unprovoked firing at the engines of the boats in sight, with no justifiable cause.¹⁴

Fishermen represent one of the most impoverished sectors of Gaza society. There are roughly 4,400 fishermen in Gaza, 3,700 of whom are registered with the Palestinian Fishermen's Syndicate.¹⁵ In total, 65,000 people in the Gaza Strip rely on fishing as a means of living.¹⁶ In 2010, poverty among fishermen reached 90%, a dramatic increase from the 2008 50% poverty rate.¹⁷ Because of the restricted three-mile fishing zone, Palestinian fishermen are forced to fish in incredibly shallow waters, limiting their catch to mainly small fish and those most likely to have ingested the contaminants pumped into the sea attributable to the failing

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Fact Sheet, "Israel Abuses of Child Fishers in Gaza: The Need for Protection," Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 31 Dec. 2011 (hereinafter referred to as "Israel Abuses of Child Fishers in Gaza"), p. 1, available at: <http://www.mezan.org/upload/13207.pdf>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ "Al Mezan Condemns Escalation of Israeli Attacks" at 3.

¹¹ "Torture and other Forms of Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment" at p. 13.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ "Al Mezan Condemns Escalation of Israeli Attacks" at 2.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁵ "Torture and other Forms of Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment" at p. 12 (citing "Between a Fence and a Hard Place").

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ "Al Mezan Condemns Escalation of Israeli Attacks" at 2 (citing Press Release, International Committee of the Red Cross, "Gaza closure: not another year!", no. 10/103, 14 June 2010).



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or inadequate sewage treatment facilities.¹⁸ Worse still, many Gaza fishermen are forced across the Egypt-Gaza marine boundaries to fish and they are subjected to the arbitrary reactions of the Israeli naval personnel on watch.¹⁹

Bilal Saeed Baker is 29 years old, has been a fisherman since 1998, and is the breadwinner for his three-member family, which includes his wife and their seven-year-old daughter. At 10:30AM on 14 April 2012, he was 1.5 nautical miles from the shore and the buoy marking the end of the fishing zone was 1500 meters away. He and the fisherman he was working with did not enter the restricted access area. They fished for three hours and then saw an Israeli naval ship approach them. Baker then heard gunshots and he feared for his life. The Israeli naval ship then began circling the fishermen's boat and the fishermen tried to escape. Suddenly, the gunfire stopped and Baker noticed the Israeli ship retreating. Baker then noticed four openings on the surface of his boat's motor. A nearby fisherman then tied Baker's boat to his own and towed Baker's boat to the port. Upon inspection, Baker found that the motor was beyond repair and that he had lost his only means for making a living.

Gaza's [child-fishermen](#) are not immune to these inhumane policies and are often victims of the same brutal treatment that more senior fishermen are subject to. They are subject to the same strip and swim procedures for arrest and are subject to indiscriminate gunfire.

Yasir Mohammad Al Sharaafi is 17-years-old, has been a fisherman since 2009, and helps provide for his eight-member family living in Shati' refugee camp. At around 8:30AM on 29 April 2012, Al Sharaafi and his cousins began fishing. The fisherman sailed 1.5 nautical miles from the shore and saw a buoy marking the end of the fishing zone about 1.5 nautical miles away. They never entered the restricted access area. They were well within the Israeli-designated fishing zone and cast their net to begin fishing. At about 9:30AM, Al Sharaafi and the other fishermen saw an Israeli naval ship quickly approach and begin firing. The fishermen yelled to the Israeli ship that they were going home, and turned on their engine and progressed toward the shore. Then three more Israeli ships approached. The gunfire continued and Al Sharaafi felt the bullets hit the sides of their fishing boat. Al Sharaafi dropped down to duck the bullets but felt pain in his right foot and noticed that it was bleeding. An Israeli soldier yelled from the ship for the fishermen to stop the boat, then he yelled for them to take off their clothes and raise their hands. The fishermen complied. Then the soldier ordered the fishermen to swim toward the Israeli ship and Al Sharaafi immediately complied. The soldiers wrapped his foot, blindfolded him, and handcuffed him. Al Sharaafi was then taken to an Israel prison where he was interrogated and asked about other boats at the Gaza port and other fishermen. Al Sharaafi was forced to pay the amount of 100 NIS and was released at 7:30 that evening.

¹⁸ "Gaza Fishermen" at p. 1.

¹⁹ *Id.*



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Al Mezan condemns Israel's continuous violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in its dealings with Palestinian fishermen. Israel's policy of closure violates Gaza fishermen's rights to life, work, adequate standard of living, safety, and bodily integrity. Al Mezan considers Israel's unilateral definition of a "fishing zone," the ongoing maritime siege, and the prevention of fishing in the areas of the sea most plentiful with fish as the imposition of collective punishment on the population of the Gaza Strip and may amount to a war crime and a crime against humanity. In accordance with the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Al Mezan calls upon the international community to intervene and bring to a swift end to the illegal closure imposed on the Gaza Strip, including the naval blockade, and guarantee to Gaza fishermen their right to work and an adequate standard of living.