

The Tunnels of Gaza

An underground economy and resistance symbol

By [Sara Flounders](#)

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Resistance takes as many forms as life itself dictates.

Life in Gaza could not be more impossible. Its tunnels are a symbol of resistance.

Eighteen months ago, outraged when the Palestinians voted for the militant leadership of Hamas in democratic elections, Israel imposed a total lockdown on the entire population of Gaza.

But the entire people were determined to continue to resist. They found a way to circumvent total starvation.

The Israeli blockade led to a new economic structure, an underground economy. The besieged Palestinians have dug more than 1,000 tunnels under the totally sealed border.

Many thousands of Palestinians are now employed in digging, smuggling or transporting, and reselling essential goods. Smuggling constitutes approximately 90 percent of economic activity in Gaza, Gazan economist Omar Shaban told *The Guardian*. (Oct. 22, 2008)

The tunnels demonstrate the great ingenuity and enormous determination of the entire population and its leadership.

Because millions of Palestinians have been forced into refugee status outside of historic Palestine, large extended families on both sides of the border help arrange the buying and shipping of goods or send funds so family members locked in Gaza can buy essential supplies.

The tunnels connect the Egyptian town of Rafah with the Palestinian refugee camp of the same name inside Gaza. They have become a fantastic, life-sustaining network of corridors dug through sandy soil. Tunnels are typically three-tenths of a mile long, approximately 45 to 50 feet deep. They cost from \$50,000 to \$90,000 and require several months of intense labor to dig.

They pass under the Philadelphi buffer zone—a border strip of land put under Israeli military control by the 1993 Oslo accords.

The Israeli siege of Gaza, followed by 23 days of systematic bombing and invasion, has created massive destruction and scarcity. Food processing plants, chicken farms, grain warehouses, U.N. food stocks, almost all the remaining infrastructure, and 230 small factories were destroyed. Now hundreds of trucks packed with essential supplies from international and humanitarian agencies sit outside the strip, refused entry to Gaza by

Israeli guards. As soon as the Israeli bombing ended, work on the tunnels resumed.

Lara Marlowe reported from Rafah: "From a distance, you'd think it was a horticultural project. Banks of red earth criss-cross the Palestinian side of the no-man's land between Gaza and Egypt. Every 20 or 30 meters, young Palestinian men work under what appear to be greenhouse canopies.

"The tunnels of Rafah—more than one thousand of them—are a major stake in the war between Hamas and Israel. Israel wants the tunnels shut; the Palestinians say they would starve without them, because of Israel's 19-month siege of the Gaza Strip. Despite three weeks of heavy bombing, the majority of the tunnels are open.

"The area has as many holes as a Swiss cheese. 'Sometimes the tunnels intersect,' says a worker. 'We try to avoid it. We go under or over other tunnels. It's like directing train traffic.'

"The smugglers work in jeans, T-shirts and bare feet. 'We shore up the collapsed parts with wood,' Hamdan [a tunnel worker] explains. 'If the Israelis bomb again, we'll use metal next time, and concrete the time after that. As long as there's a siege, the tunnels will keep working.'" (Irish Times, Jan. 26)

Food is towed through on plastic sleighs. Livestock are herded through larger tunnels. Flour, milk, cheese, cigarettes, cooking oil, toothpaste, small generators, computers and kerosene heaters come through the tunnels. Every day, about 300 to 400 gas canisters for cooking come through the lines. On the Egyptian side the trade sustains the ruptured economy while corrupt or sympathetic guards and officers look the other way.

Electricity and fans provide ventilation. Essential supplies of diesel fuel are pumped through the tunnels in hoses and pipes.

Rami Almeghari, editor-in-chief of the Gaza-based Palestinian Information Service and contributor to The Electronic Intifada, has described the organization that goes into digging and maintaining the tunnels. The Hamas-led government in Gaza imposed regulations and restrictions on the tunnel trade to avoid accidents and prevent smuggling of drugs and prohibited substances. "However, the besieged Hamas government cannot guarantee an end to the tunnel trade, unless the Israeli blockade comes to a halt."

Almeghari interviewed one tunnel worker as he loaded cooking oil canisters: "Let Israel besiege us the way it wants, and we bring in what we want. At the end of the day, we will not let anyone repress us."

Xinhua News headlined a Jan. 22 article: "In spite of Israeli offensive, Gaza tunnels are back to work."

"We dug tunnels because we have no other alternative. Israel was imposing a very tough blockade on Gaza Strip and the tunnels were the smartest way to defeat this blockade," Hashem Abu Jazzar, a 23-year-old worker, told Xinhua News.

"As long as Israel is still imposing the siege on Gaza Strip, I don't think that we will stop working in the tunnels, but if all crossings are fully and permanently opened, I believe that working in tunnels will automatically stop," said Abu Jabal, a 45-year-old owner of a tunnel.

Commercial tunnels are used only for food, fuel, medicines and basic necessities. Other totally separate tunnels are operated by resistance groups to bring in small weapons and munitions.

Israel claims it drops 100-ton bombs on the tunnels from F-16 jets to stop Palestinian rockets. But closing off supplies to an entire population or bombing life-sustaining tunnels will not prevent the firing of small rockets.

A population with skills, education, massive unemployment, lots of time and no future will be able to build rockets, mortars, pipe bombs and mines out of the tons of scrap metal and twisted ruins that Israel left behind.

The continued blockade is strictly punitive.

The Israeli military and their Pentagon backers are deeply frustrated. The bombing failed to demoralize the Palestinian people or break their will. It is also clear that the massive bombardment of the Rafah border and the targeting of hundreds of tunnels have failed to close these lifelines of basic supplies.

On Feb. 1, Israel again bombed the border, targeting the tunnels.

What is needed is a broad international campaign to demand an end to U.S.-supported Israeli collective punishment and an end to the intended starvation of an entire population.

The only possibility for peace in the region is through the recognition of the full rights of the Palestinian people to return to all their land. Their sovereignty and economic development must be guaranteed.

The immediate starvation siege must be lifted. The international movement that emerged in solidarity with Gaza must focus world attention on this international war crime.

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Articles by: [Sara Flounders](#)

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