

### **Narratives Under Siege (3): Rafah Fishermen's Syndicate**



Jamal Mohammed Bassalla on one of his fishing boats, in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip.

"I've been a fisherman for thirty six years, ever since I was fifteen years old. My original village, Il Jura, was famous for its fishermen. When my father migrated to Gaza in 1948, he came here by boat."

Jamal Mohammed Bassalla is the spokesman of the Rafah Fisherman's Syndicate in the southern Gaza Strip. The syndicate represents around 450 local fishermen, and its headquarters are on the beach just outside Rafah. This morning, however, Jamal and his crew are sitting under tarpaulin on the beach, drinking tea round a small driftwood fire. Conditions at sea are treacherous, and they're waiting for the weather to improve.

"It takes two or three hours to prepare the boats, but we are on stand-by every day" says Jamal. "We check the nets, the diesel for the boat, batteries, our food supplies, the GPS (Global Positioning System), everything we need in order to work. When the weather improves we're ready almost immediately." In summer Jamal has a crew of eighteen men, and they stay out at sea for up to twenty four hours at a time. But in winter the crew is just six or seven in total. The crews work together for years, and understand each other intimately.

There are around 3,500 professional fishermen working along the forty kilometre coastline of the Gaza Strip. Between them, they economically support almost 40,000 people, including mechanics, fishmongers and thousands of local fishing families. But the Gaza fishing industry has been decimated, especially over the last five years,

because of increasingly punitive Israeli restrictions on how far out to sea the fishermen can sail without being shot or harassed. The Interim Arrangements on the Gaza Strip and West Bank signed between Israel and the PLO in 1994/5 did not conform to international human rights standards, as they restricted the movement of Palestinian civilians, including the right of Gazan fishermen to fish off their own coastline. However, the Interim Arrangements did stipulate that Palestinian fishermen are permitted to fish up to 20 nautical miles from the Gaza coastline.

But Jamal and his colleagues claim that now they cannot fish more than 2.5 kilometres offshore without risking being shot. "If we sail any further out to sea, the Israelis can open fire, destroy our nets and boats, or force us back to shore," he says. "We've suffered these restrictions since 2003, and recently they have started using rockets and helicopters against us as well." The Rafah Syndicate fishermen say the Israeli gunboats are at sea 24 hours a day 7 days a week, so they have no chance of venturing any further offshore.

Israel claims the fishing restrictions are part of an overall security strategy to combat Palestinian gun-smuggling and suicide-bombing. But Khalil Shahin, Director of the Economic and Social Rights Unit at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) points out that Israel has never honoured the Interim Arrangements. "Israel has never permitted Gazan fishermen to fish 20 nautical miles from the shore" he says. "The furthest they have allowed them to fish is 12 nautical miles offshore. That was back in the mid 1990's, when Gazan fishermen were hauling approximately 3,000 tons of fish a year. But productivity has plummeted since 2002, because of the increasing restrictions. Now the fishermen are hauling less than 500 tons of fish a year. This is an inevitable consequence of Israel continually violating the Interim Arrangements"

As well as having their boats, nets and other fishing equipment damaged or destroyed, more than 70 Gazan fishermen were arrested by the Israelis last year. Jamal Bassalla and his colleagues are angry and frustrated they can no longer earn a sustainable living from fishing without risking their lives. Another syndicate member, Abdullah, says he does take risks. "I take my boat 4 or 5 kilometres from the shore - what choice do I have! Sometimes we manage, but other times we are actually hauling our catch when they start firing and force us back. Then we have to abandon the whole haul."

The Rafah fishermen say these restrictions have also affected the type of fish they catch, making them increasingly reliant on shallow-water fish like sardines. Many have resorted to using smaller nets, catching smaller and younger fish in order to increase their haul. Jamal claims they have no choice because of the Israeli blockade, but the fishermen have been criticised for severely over-fishing remaining local stocks. Ironically, the number of fishermen in Gaza has increased since the mid nineties, because some of the thousands of men who used to work in Israel have turned to professional fishing in order to survive.

The sea is Gaza's greatest natural resource, and for the men at the Rafah Syndicate, the solution to their crisis is radically simple: they will settle for their rights as stated in the Interim Arrangements. "We need open seas" says Jamal. "I am an educated fisherman: I have a geography degree from Beirut University, but I returned to fishing because I love the sea." He has two brothers and six sons. All of them are fishermen. "We have nets and our boats" he says. "We are ready to work."