

PEACE AND SECURITY

URBAN PLANNING AFTER THE WAR

Palestinian Perspectives on the
Reconstruction of Gaza

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The conflict in Gaza has caused extreme humanitarian conditions, with 5% of the population killed or injured and around two million displaced. Immediate actions are needed to restore essential health and education services, shelter, and basic utilities.



A thorough needs assessment is crucial for planning short, medium, and long-term recovery efforts. Priorities include essential services, housing, business support, and clearing rubble.



Gaza's outdated urban planning and building regulations need reform to support sustainable development, affordable housing, and economic growth, addressing uncontrolled urban expansion.

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The conflict in Gaza has resulted in severe humanitarian conditions, with significant loss of life, displacement and infrastructural damage. Since 7 October 2023, 5 per cent of the population has been killed or injured, and around two million people have been displaced. The UN, EU and other partners have highlighted the extreme severity of this crisis. Immediate recovery actions should focus on restoring essential health and education services, providing shelter, and resuming basic utilities such as energy, water and telecommunications. Addressing these urgent needs is critical to re-establish a sense of normalcy and provide psychosocial support.



A Gaza Early Recovery Rapid Needs Assessment is essential to underpin both short-term recovery projects and medium- to long-term reconstruction efforts. This assessment will guide urban planning and governance strategies, helping local authorities to prepare long-term development plans. Key early recovery actions include enabling access to essential services, rehousing displaced people, and setting up temporary structures for essential businesses. Additionally, the removal of unexploded ordnance and clearing rubble are high priorities. The reconstruction process requires substantial efforts and international coordination, with a focus on sustainable and resilient development.



Gaza's existing urban planning and building regulations are outdated and inadequate to meet current and future development needs. The region has faced uncontrolled urban development due to limited land, rapid population growth and political instability. Modernising these regulations is necessary to support affordable housing, stimulate economic investment and promote sustainable development. New regulations should address issues such as land densification, urban space relationships and the balance between developed and protected lands. A reformed planning system should empower local authorities to understand and serve citizens' interests, fostering social cohesion and economic development. Historical foreign administrations have influenced Gaza's current local government system, which now requires comprehensive reforms to better address the needs of its residents.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://palestine.fes.de/topics/palestinian-perspectives-on-the-reconstruction-of-gaza>

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Content

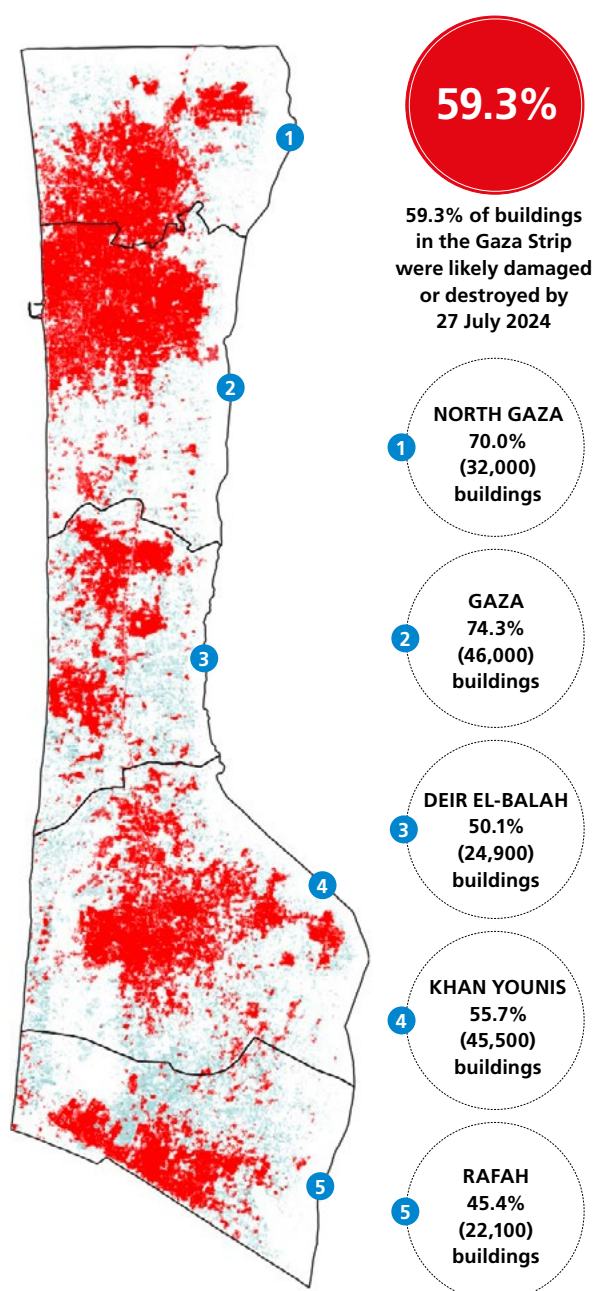
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1

BACKGROUND

After 7 October, Israel tightened its blockade and launched one of the most destructive bombing campaigns in modern history, before commencing a large-scale ground invasion on 27 October. Since the start of the Israeli operation, more than 35,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, at least 56 per cent of whom, according to UN estimates, are women and children. Some 10,000 others are missing and presumed trapped under rubble. Israel's tightened blockade has cut off basic necessities and its attacks on infrastructure have led to a humanitarian crisis, including a collapse of the health-care system and an impending famine. By early 2024, Israeli forces had damaged or destroyed more than half of Gaza's houses, at least a third of its tree cover and farmland, most of its schools and universities, hundreds of cultural landmarks, and dozens of cemeteries. Satellite data analysis shows the true extent of the destruction (Figure 1). In general, Israeli bombardment and the blockade have led to a total collapse of Gaza's civil infrastructure, including sewage treatment, waste disposal, water management and fuel supplies. Across Gaza, residential areas have been left ruined, previously busy shopping streets reduced to rubble, universities destroyed and farmlands churned up. Furthermore, tent cities have been springing up in the southern part of the Gaza Strip to house the many thousands of people left homeless. About 1.7 million people – more than 80 per cent of Gaza's population – have been displaced, with nearly half crammed into the middle and far southern end of the strip (BBC 2024).

Figure 1
Buildings damaged or destroyed in Gaza



Sources: Analysis based on Sentinel-1 radar, Open Street Map and Microsoft building footprint data. Credit: Jamon Van Den Hoek PhD – vandenhj@oregonstate.edu | Corey Scher – cscher@gradcenter.cuny.edu. Decentralized Damage Mapping Group – www.conflict-damage.org.

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EARLY RECOVERY RAPID NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip has caused loss of life, forced displacement and damage to social, physical and infrastructural elements. The United Nations (UN), European Union (EU) and other humanitarian and development partners have repeatedly called it an extremely severe humanitarian crisis. The speed and extent of the catastrophic damage caused by the war on Gaza are unparalleled and incomparable in recent times. Since 7 October 2023, 5 per cent of the population have been killed or injured and about two million people displaced.

Early Recovery Rapid Needs Assessment should form the backbone of any plan, underpinning both the early recovery projects and interventions for medium- to longer-term reconstruction. This assessment will, among other things, certainly help in formulating urban planning priorities within the framework of the governance sector. This sector will be guided by the local authorities and public administration and their responsibilities in preparing long-term strategies with regard to urban development. The overall assessment has to be conducted by PNA Ministries and Agencies with the support of local and international partners. The assessment should include the following sectors:

Social sector

- Transitional shelter and housing
- Health and nutrition
- Education
- Social protection and social safety nets
- Psychosocial wellbeing
- Culture, heritage and faith-based institutions

Economic sector

- Agriculture and food security
- Industrial and other private sector establishments
- Employment and livelihoods

Infrastructure, natural resources and the environment

- Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
- Solid waste management
- Land, soil and biodiversity
- Energy: electricity, fuel and gas
- Transportation and telecommunications

Governance sector

- Local authorities and public administration
- Civil society and community-based organisations
- Safety and security, including civil defence

Table 1
Estimated damages caused to the built infrastructure of the Gaza Strip (by end of January 2024)

Sector	USD	Sector	USD
Housing	13,298,711,000	Education	341,240,000
Commerce, industry and services	1,655,486,000	Cultural heritage	319,397,000
Agriculture	628,780,000	Energy	278,522,000
Health	553,666,000	ICT	90,225,000
WASH	502,711,000	Municipal services	19,647,000
Environment	411,300,000	Finance	8,174,000
Transport	357,972,000	Total	18,465,831,000

Source: World Bank/European Union/United Nations (2024: 6)

“Unlike previous wars, the destruction in Gaza today is unprecedented in scope and scale and coupled with the loss of homes, livelihoods, natural resources, infrastructure as well as institutional capacities, may have deep and systemic impacts for decades to come”, said ESCWA Executive Secretary Rola Dashti. “This assessment projects that Gaza will be rendered fully dependent on external assistance on a scale not seen since 1948, as it will be left without a functional economy, or any means of production, self-sustainment, employment, or capacity for trade” (UNDP 2024). The interim damage assessment published on 29 March 2024 estimates that direct damages of around 18.5 billion US dollars (USD) have been caused to the built infrastructure of the Gaza Strip (by end of January 2024).¹ The results show that the physical and corresponding monetary impacts caused by the conflict are dominated by damages to residential buildings (72 per cent of the total), followed by the physical assets of the commerce, industry and services sector (9 per cent of the total), while effects on other infrastructure – such as education, WASH, health, energy, ICT, municipal services and transport – account for the remaining 19 per cent (Table 1). The sectors with the highest estimated damage include housing, at approximately USD 13.29 billion and the commerce, industry and services sector, at USD 1.65 billion, followed by agriculture, at USD 629 million, health care, at USD 554 million, WASH, at USD 503 million, the environment (including the removal of rubble), at USD 411 million, transport at USD 358 million, and education, at USD 341 million (Table 1) (World Bank/European Union/United Nations 2024)

SOCIAL SECTOR

The United Nations and other international organisations have stated that the conflict has caused an unprecedented and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Gaza. More than 1 million people have lost their homes. Health service delivery is experiencing major disruptions as nearly 84 per cent of health facility buildings have been destroyed or damaged and those remaining lack access to medicines, ambulances, basic lifesaving treatments, electricity and water. The education system has completely collapsed, with all children out of school and most schools being used as shelter for internally displaced people (IDP). As a result, due to the current trauma linked to the ongoing violence mental health has deteriorated severely, especially among the most vulnerable, including women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities (World Bank/European Union/United Nations 2024). Moreover, according to satellite imagery analysis, UNOSAT has identified 36,591 destroyed structures, 16,513 severely damaged structures, 47,368 moderately damaged structures, and 36,825 possibly damaged structures for a total of 137,297 damaged structures overall. These correspond to around 55 per cent of all structures in the Gaza Strip and an estimated total of 135,142 damaged housing units. This is a preliminary analysis and has

not yet been validated on the ground (United Nations, The Question of Palestine 2024, UNITAR, 2024).

From what we can tell, however, it is clear that any plan to tackle the problems of the social sector should highlight how Gaza’s emergency and primary health care systems have been overstretched and under-supported during the Israeli offensive, as most of the medical facilities have sustained severe damage. Border closures have prevented the flow of vital medical supplies and the transfer of high-risk medical cases, and the capacity to respond rapidly to emergency cases has been significantly diminished. Numerous education establishments, from kindergarten to university level, have also suffered extensive damage. Large areas have been reduced to rubble, with more than 50 per cent of all housing units damaged or destroyed. The social protection sector has been also badly affected, and a number of orphanages, disability centres and service centres for vulnerable persons have been demolished. More importantly, the number of poor, unsheltered persons has increased, as has the number of the disabled and orphans, as well as female-headed households. All this puts more pressure on the remaining social protection network. Mosques, cultural institutions and historic buildings have also suffered extensive damage in the indiscriminate bombardment.

Furthermore, numerous sites of significant heritage value, representing diverse historical periods and cultures, have been destroyed or severely damaged. Notable sites destroyed or damaged include Anthon Harbor, the Roman cemetery in Gaza City, Al Pasha Palace Museum, the ancient Samaritan Bathhouse, and other landmarks. Additionally, four out of 10 identified archaeological sites have been destroyed. Besides, 11 out of 12 assessed religious heritage sites have been damaged, including Saint Porphyrios Orthodox Church Complex, believed to be the world’s third oldest church, and the Great Al Omari Mosque, Gaza’s oldest mosque. Two national monuments have also been destroyed, including Rashad Ash-Shawwa cultural centre. In addition, the activities of most cultural centres in the Gaza Strip have been suspended, which has a direct impact on the livelihoods of artists and cultural professionals, many of whom indeed have lost their lives (World Bank/European Union/United Nations 2024).

ECONOMIC SECTOR

The ILO estimates that more than 200,000 jobs have been lost in Gaza, some 90 per cent of the pre-conflict workforce. The UN agency further calculates that income losses there have reached USD 4.1 million per day, an 80 per cent decrease in the enclave’s GDP. Also, according to the ILO, construction – one of the most important industries in Gaza – is down some 96 per cent. Almost all other major productive sectors, including agriculture, industry and services, have also come to a standstill. The few businesses that are still operating are generally small-scale local enterprises, including bakeries, other food-related businesses and some pharmacies (United Nations, UN News 2024).

¹ As the destruction has continued, the figures will be much higher by the end of the war.

Therefore, any reconstruction plan should also document the severe effects of the Israeli attacks on Gaza's already weakened economy, including the agriculture sector, which has been severely affected, with the widespread destruction of cultivated land, greenhouses, livestock and poultry farms, water wells, irrigation networks and other productive assets. Furthermore, more than 50 per cent of the total cultivated area has been completely destroyed, and many families have lost their homes and livelihoods. Much of the remaining capital stock and employment opportunities have also been seriously impacted. The economy will be able to recover only after the end of the war and after the blockade and other restrictions on Gaza's economy have been lifted, and most importantly after the overall macroeconomic environment has stabilised. Consequently, substantial efforts should be made in support of the private sector in Gaza, which has been badly affected.

authorities for public administration purposes. This situation has been exacerbated by the displacement or death of so many civil servants. As a result, normal governmental functions, such as the administration of social services, have been considerably diminished or entirely disrupted. Therefore, a lot of effort is required to make improvements in this sector to restore stability and ensure security and order within the community.

INFRASTRUCTURE, NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Essential infrastructure sustained severe damage during the Israeli bombardment and invasion. The assault has severely impacted the provision of basic services, and humanitarian and recovery assistance, and extensive disruption has been caused to water and sanitation networks, energy supplies and facilities, roads and bridges, and the telecommunications system. In addition, the Rapid Needs Assessment should detail the destruction the Israeli army has caused to natural resources and the environment. Fragile groundwater resources have been severely compromised, particularly from the destruction of the waste-water infrastructure, which has released hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of raw sewage into the environment. Additionally, a large portion of productive lands have also been affected by heavy-tracked military vehicles and Israeli chemical munitions. The inaccessibility of waste disposal sites due to military activities has disrupted the regular collection of solid waste, resulting in the creation of numerous informal dumping sites and indiscriminate burning of rubbish, with potentially severe impacts on the environment and public health. Moreover, much of the rubble resulting from the bombardment is contaminated with unexploded ordnance, which will remain a significant threat to life until it is adequately dealt with.

GOVERNANCE SECTOR

Finally, in terms of governance, the plan should underline how the majority of citizens in Gaza have experienced a breakdown in channels for public decision-making, protection and human rights. Civil society has also been severely damaged, leading to social fragmentation and a collapse of civilian structures. In addition, more than 1.7 million Gazans have been displaced, thousands of household bread-winners have been killed, and other people have been imprisoned without recourse to legal aid. The war has also resulted in the destruction of physical infrastructure used by local

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRIORITIES FOR EARLY RECOVERY ACTIVITIES

According to the World Bank report “Gaza Strip Interim Damage Assessment, 2024”, global experience and best practices have shown that the following principles should be considered as recovery plans are developed:

- balance urgent needs with medium- and long-term goals;
- ensure a approach based on “building back better” (BBB), pledging a more resilient reconstruction;
- activities should target the most vulnerable groups (including women, children and people with disabilities); and
- ensure inclusive and participatory planning through a whole-of-society approach. The scale of the needs will also require significant private sector investment. Most importantly, transitioning from humanitarian to recovery interventions will depend on a favourable operating environment in Gaza (World Bank/European Union/United Nations 2024).

As the scale of destruction in this war is unprecedented and has had so many consequences, any reconstruction process should involve strategies over the short, medium and long terms. The Gaza Early Recovery Rapid Needs Assessment should form the backbone of the plan, underpinning both the early recovery projects and the medium- to longer-term reconstruction interventions. While recovery and reconstruction will require substantial, years-long efforts, early recovery actions should begin as soon as the situation allows and complement scaled-up humanitarian assistance. According to the World Bank, the EU and the UN, priority early recovery actions that should be considered include enabling access to, and resumption of, essential health and education services to re-establish a sense of normality and provide direly needed psychosocial support. The provision of shelter and rapid, cost-effective and scalable rehousing solutions for displaced people, combined with the resumption of basic energy, water and telecom services should also be prioritised.

In addition to humanitarian assistance and food aid, first-stage interventions should focus on improvements in food production and the restoration of livelihoods, including

through cash-for-work programmes. To enable the private sector to respond to urgent needs and create jobs, priority actions may include setting up temporary structures for enterprises providing essential goods and services (such as bakeries, pharmacies, retailers, distributors), setting up digital payment systems to enable electronic transactions, and restoring partially damaged facilities. Finally, priorities also include identifying and removing unexploded ordnance (UXO), as well as clearing (and recycling) of approximately 35 million tonnes of rubble. The feasibility of most of these actions will be highly dependent on the entry of materials and equipment, safe access to sites, and the viability of governance and security arrangements. Some key early recovery efforts can begin rapidly after the cessation of hostilities. Such early recovery activities should include the following (World Bank/European Union/United Nations 2024):

- Clearing the huge volume of rubble and debris from main streets, intersections and secondary and tertiary roads for easier access to essential services, such as health facilities, shelters and schools. This should also include the innovative use of rubble as reconstruction material to mitigate material access issues, as has been done in the past, with appropriate sensitivity to the presence of human remains.
- Rapidly conducting mine action to identify areas that are not contaminated, remove UXO, educate the population about ordnance and explosives, and provide technical advice to organisations and personnel on the risks. Debris removal and mine action will be particularly important as a prerequisite for establishing safe shelter.
- The immediate restoration of social services, such as health care, education and cash support. This would entail the repair of relevant facilities, provision of medical supplies and equipment, as well as provision of essential services, including mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS). Students would receive education services in temporary learning spaces (for example, school tents), as well as in less impacted schools that require only minor rehabilitation.
- In the short term, the provision of shelter and rapid, cost-effective and scalable rehousing solutions for displaced people could be considered. The huge scale of

the damage in the housing sector requires the development of unique solutions to rebuild or repair the impacted housing units, and overcome the loss of housing for over a million people. To prevent additional social tensions, it is critical that there be one agreed housing recovery strategy that all the donors agree to abide by, which specifies who is eligible and for what amount of support.

- Resumption of basic energy, water and telecom services. As with building materials, the ability to restore basic services will be determined by the ability to import vital parts and equipment, solar panels and fuel for electricity generation (from Gaza Power Plant and diesel generators). Immediate support will also be essential with recurrent expenditures of municipalities and Joint Service Councils, especially fuel, other supplies and labour-intensive operations and maintenance for sustaining service delivery.
- In addition to humanitarian assistance and food aid, first stage interventions should focus on improvements in food production and distribution. Priority actions in the agri-food sector include the provision of critical agricultural inputs, such as fuel, animal vaccines, plastic shed materials, animal fodder and irrigation needs, to support agricultural holdings or producers that could restart production capacity swiftly.
- Specific efforts will be required to address the environmental impact of the conflict in Gaza, including contamination of the soil and aquifer, which will have a long-lasting and detrimental effect on water supplies, food production and the health of Palestinians in Gaza. Considerations with regard to environmental sustainability in the context of urban planning will also need to inform early recovery planning and interventions focused on transitional shelter solutions, as well as housing rehabilitation and reconstruction.

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POST-WAR URBAN PLANNING PRIORITIES

Previous experience shows that the regional plan for the Gaza Strip impacts the quality of planning at the level of cities/neighbourhoods, and most of the challenges facing planning here require the adoption of new urban plans and amendment of the current building regulations. It is worth mentioning that Palestine has been administrated by foreign powers: the Ottomans, the British, the Jordanians, the Egyptians and the Israelis. These foreign powers laid down the basis for the Palestinian local government system, but none was able to empower the system to understand citizens' interests and gain meaningful local insights. Instead, local government was led by the central authority and used as a means of control by the governing power rather than to foster social cohesion and economic development. These various administrations have affected the current Palestinian building and planning system, so that the existing laws, regulations and orders are a mixture or amalgam of sundry previous laws and orders.

MODERNISING PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS IN THE GAZA STRIP

Building regulations govern the management and development of the urban environment. Inadequate regulations can be among the major barriers preventing innovative mayors and urban managers from initiating reforms and overcoming the pressing challenges of their cities and urban systems. In the Gaza Strip, an adequate proportion of public facilities and green areas and the optimal ratio between built-up areas and open spaces cannot be achieved within the existing building regulations, many of which are out of date. The limited available land, the rapidly growing population, the poor urban development planning, the political division, the decisions of policymakers, and the changing and unstable political situation in the region have played a major role in the spread of uncontrolled urban developments in the Gaza Strip. In order to limit this, existing planning laws and regulations must be reviewed and amended. In fact, the planning and building laws prevailing in the Gaza Strip are out of date and need to be adjusted to fit the existing and the future urban development needs (Abdelhamid 2006).

Amendment of the current planning laws and regulations should be aimed at helping citizens to achieve proper access to good health, dignity and citizenship, as well as to suffi-

cient, affordable and good quality housing. Moreover, it is expected that new regulations could stimulate the national economy through investment, the absorption of labour, the development of new technologies, and the creation of sustainable development, including more compact urban growth and prudent management of land, water and other natural resources.

It is essential to review the current regulations on, among other things: residential area classification/issues of land densification; the minimum frontage on the street; placing a building on the property line (urban space relationship); built volume/horizontal and vertical built area instead of setbacks/max height); the percentage of parcels (being redeveloped) that should be given over to the public domain; and lands for future urban development versus lands protected as natural resources. The current planning laws and building regulations have served the Gaza Strip over the years, but the time has now come to reflect on the growth and development that has occurred over the years, to consider current development issues and challenges, and to forecast how the region can be expected to grow in the future.

Furthermore, the latest war on Gaza (2023/2024) has made it a necessity to update the current building regulations, for the following reasons:

- The need for more compact neighbourhoods, as the war on Gaza requires an increase in building density to save more neighbourhood recreational areas. This will improve the living environment and limit the scattered distribution of residential buildings and preserve more land for agriculture and food security.
- The need for building densification is one of the main elements in achieving sustainable communities, mixed land use, transit-oriented development (TOD)² and more walkable cities. This is especially important because so many large-scale housing projects have been entirely destroyed and need to be rebuilt with up-to-date norms and parameters, alongside currently available building technologies.

² In urban planning, transit-oriented development (TOD) is a type of urban development that maximises the amount of residential, business and leisure space within walking distance of public transport.

- The need for more sustainable residential areas and energy-efficient development requires the amendment of building regulations to encourage energy saving, walkability, rain water collection, exploiting renewable resources, and protection of biodiversity.
- Applying smart-growth principles and the wide-ranging attributes of new urbanism requires an amended set of building regulations, as smart growth is an overall approach to development and conservation strategies that can help protect our natural environment and make our communities more attractive, socially diverse, and resilient to climate change.
- To succeed in implementing the objective of “sustainable human settlements” the planning laws and regulations should promote a new sustainable growth model for human settlements in the Gaza Strip that recognises the region’s limited land and natural resources and the need to adapt to climate change and potential new natural hazards. In this regard, the sustainability aspect should relate to the need for compact urban development that respects the Gaza Strip’s environment and scarce natural resources.

Urban planning in the Gaza Strip has been regulated mainly by the British Mandate’s 1936 TPO (Town Planning Law No. 28), subsequently approved by the Egyptian and Israeli administrations. The Palestinian Authority has also recognised it as the operative urban planning law in the Gaza Strip. However, the law also states that “a District Commission shall have power from time to time to make by-laws in respect of all or any town planning area within its District”. With this in mind, local government units should make use of this right and develop new by-laws, adopting a new set of building regulations that correspond to the local conditions of each town or city in the Gaza Strip. Adapting new building regulations should also enable developers and contractors to produce more affordable housing, including the development of the Apartments and High-Rise Property Law of 1996. The overall vision guiding the review of legal and regulatory instruments should be the promotion of sustainable human settlements. Human settlements are more than just housing units; they also encompass the vital physical and social infrastructure for households, including bulk infrastructure (water, electricity, roads) and access to transportation and key social amenities, such as schools, markets, and attractive living environments (Al-Qeeq et al. 2019).

GAZA STRIP REGIONAL PLAN UPDATE

Urbanisation is one of the major challenges facing the Palestinian territories. The current unbalanced development strategy in Palestine is leading the country to unsustainable socio-economic development, including increasing income disparities, waste of resources, environmental degradation, damage to Palestine’s natural and cultural heritage, and growing social unrest. Rapid urbanisation, high population growth rates and scarcity of land are considered among the

main challenges facing Gaza’s urban areas today. These are putting growing pressure on land, infrastructure and resources and as a result, random and uncontrolled developments have emerged in the cities and around the fringes of towns, encroaching on surrounding agricultural land.

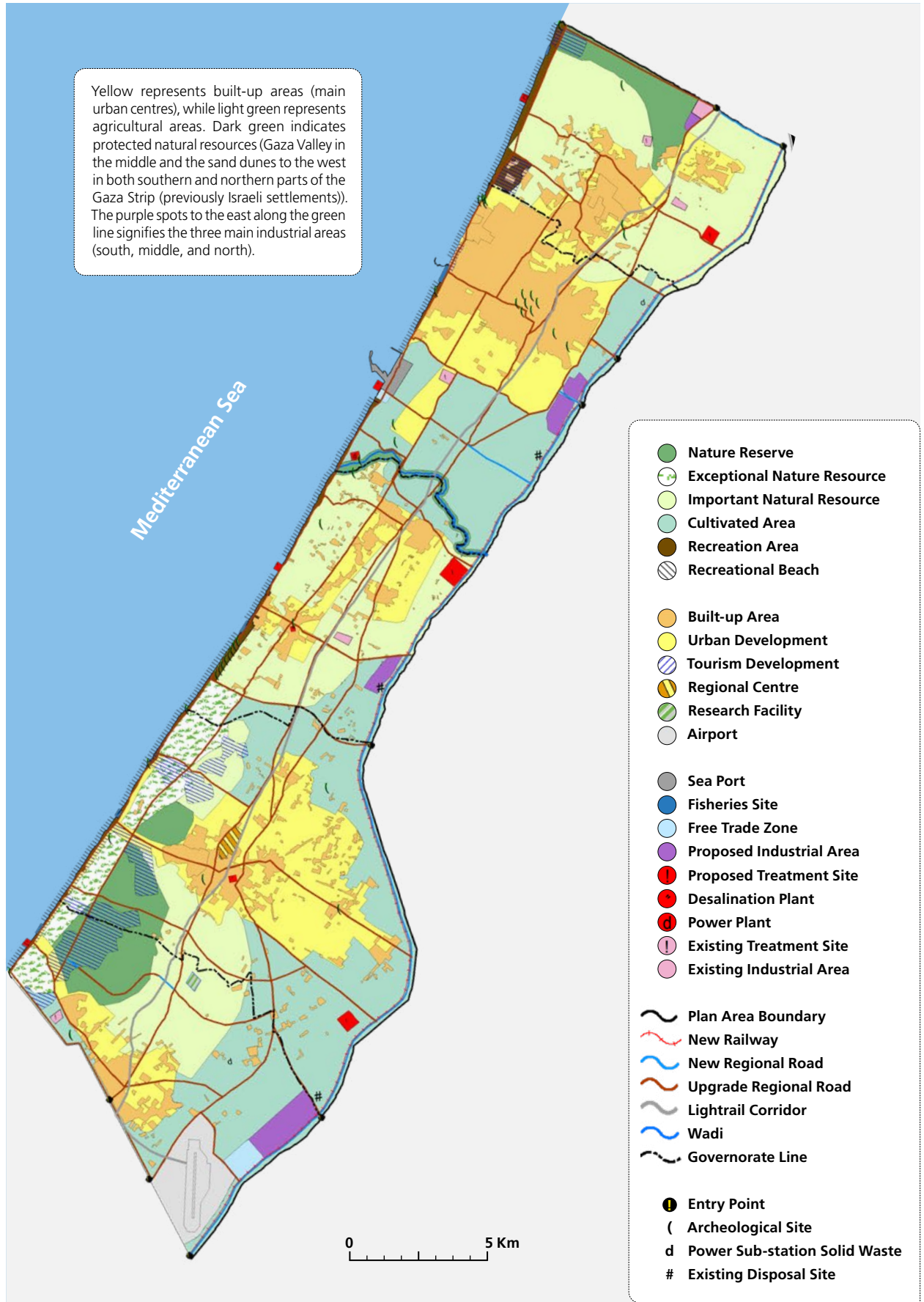
In addition, population growth will have a strong impact on available resources in the future. With the small amount of land available in Gaza, its impact will underline the conflict between the need to protect important natural resources and the need for development to satisfy the requirements of a growing population. Therefore, the density of future development should be increased in order not to affect the land available for future generations. As a result, future urbanisation should be located within municipal boundaries, in areas as close to the existing urban areas as possible or outside the municipal boundaries, where development is not in conflict with important protected areas. Location of future urban development should take place on land of marginal natural resource and environmental value. Also, local land use plans should be monitored in order to make sure that they are in accordance with the objectives of the regional plan.³

The new planning policy should be based on a number of guiding principles that maintain socio-economic sustainability. First and foremost, the urban areas should cover human needs for adequate basic services and infrastructure, transportation, environmental sustainability, community and social facilities, such as schools, health-care centres and so on. Moreover, in order to make urbanisation work for all communities in the Gaza Strip, all residents of cities and urban areas should have equal access to basic social services and amenities. In addition, appropriate planning guidelines should be adopted to ensure that recreation and leisure opportunities will be available within future built-up areas and the quality of beaches close to urban areas should be improved. Any proposed regional plan for the Gaza Strip should be a step towards a comprehensive national strategy for urban development and protection of natural resources. While there have been some significant amendments to the Regional Plan (Map 1) over the years (especially in 2005 after the Israeli withdrawal from settlements in the Gaza Strip), it has not been subjected to a comprehensive review since its adoption over 20 years ago.

In fact, the current regional plan was developed in 1998. Considering therefore that such plans are usually valid for 20 years from their creation, a new plan has to be developed without delay. Although the urban development of the Gaza Strip did not strictly follow the main guidelines of the regional plan due to the political instability during that period, the plan has somehow served the Gaza Strip over the years. However, the time has now come to reflect on the growth and development which has occurred over the years (especially after the latest war), to consider current

³ Almasri, A. (1999): “Planning for Housing: Planning Strategy for Sustainable Refugee Settlements in the Gaza Strip”. Architect and Development Course, Lund University, Sweden.

Map 1
The Regional plan, Gaza governorates



Source: MOPIC (1998)

development issues and challenges, and to forecast how the region can be expected to grow into the future. Governments must create mechanisms and institutions to develop and implement such a plan. At the national and regional levels, human settlement planning should be coordinated with the vision, goals and concrete plans to be formulated under the National Spatial Plan for Palestine (NSP). Therefore, it is important to integrate spatial planning at national and regional/local levels with human settlements planning and reviewing the legal and regulatory framework in all domains. Planning policies must be adapted to promote greater consistency between lands needed for future development and those requiring protection for their natural resources.

To ensure environmental sustainability, urban areas and neighbourhoods should be integrated into spatial plans at national and local level that emphasise the need for compact urban growth rather than unregulated sprawl. This is particularly important in the Gaza Strip, which has the highest population density in the region, with limited land and resources, as well as a fragile ecosystem. This gains special importance, especially after the new reality that has emerged in the wake of the 2023/2024 war, characterised by the huge destruction of regional infrastructure and the bombardment of entire neighbourhoods and residential compounds, which has left tens of thousands homeless. It will become clear that the main priority will be for more residential units to compensate for those units entirely or partially damaged during the war. Moreover, the new reality of urban areas, which has become apparent during the war, reveals a new shape for the Gaza Strip's main urban centres. The demolition of so many urban blocks has altered the configuration of the urban fabric in so many locations along the Gaza Strip. This may give planners a new vision of how to reorganise some aspects of land use at regional and local levels.

It is also worth mentioning that the regional visions developed in the past few years by some international organisations⁴ have limitations, as the planning approach has not followed normal procedure and official Palestinian organs that are responsible for planning were not properly involved in the process. Moreover, thorough analysis of existing conditions has not been carried out (for example, Wadi Gaza and Al Shoka have been considered agricultural areas in one of these plans without considering the current situation of the built-up area; in addition, the airport has been relocated in the north on land assigned for natural resources). Furthermore, the previous regional plan was not properly evaluated as part of this process (what has been implemented and what not, and why, lessons learned, and so on). Although

these previous efforts will be of substantial importance in implementing the new regional plan, not all these urban visions have been officially recognised and a comprehensive and cohesive regional plan, officially approved by relevant government bodies, must be a priority.

⁴ Examples:

1. Global Palestine, Connected Gaza was prepared by AECOM and the Portland Trust in close coordination with a wide range of local and international stakeholders in 2016.
2. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP/PAPP) and the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) launched the second edition of *Spatial Visioning Reflections* magazine, with a special focus on the Gaza Strip, 2015.

5

HOUSING, LAND AND PROPERTY

Housing, land and property (HLP) rights protect people's relationships with plots of land, homes or property. They entitle people to claim their land, home or property or obtain compensation for the loss of it. Sometimes, when a conflict ends, disputes over occupied land or property may constitute a source of instability and cause recurring displacement. They arise in most crisis situations, whether armed conflicts or natural disasters, particularly when such crises are accompanied by displacement. In the Gaza Strip, the UN and other international organisations have stated that the latest conflict has caused an unprecedented and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian crisis. More than 1 million people have lost their homes. In addition, more than 1.7 million Gazans have been displaced. Drawn from international humanitarian and human rights law, housing, land and property rights entitle displaced people to a safe home, free from the fear of forced eviction, a place that offers them safety and the ability to obtain a livelihood. Consequently, access to housing, land and property rights is foundational to socio-economic inclusion and an essential steppingstone for displaced people to rebuild their lives. Therefore, it is key for all humanitarian actors to understand the underlying tenure issues or disputes related to their project interventions (such as housing construction or rehabilitation, WASH infrastructure, or agriculture/rural livelihoods) and to address these issues and related challenges (NRC 2024).

The legal landscape governing housing, land, and property (HLP) in Gaza comprises an intricate web of Ottoman, British, Egyptian, Palestinian and Gaza's de facto authority laws and regulations, with no unified land law. In addition, Israel is unilaterally imposing military orders affecting housing, land and property issues, including declaring military-only buffer zones and developing military infrastructure on Palestinian-owned lands. Moreover, 30 per cent of Gaza's land remains unsurveyed (primarily privately owned) and unregistered. The five primary land categories in Gaza – private land (called »tabo« in Arabic), unregistered private land, state land, Waqf land, and land with special status and distinct rights for owners or occupants, such as UNRWA land and project housing – further complicate the situation (HLP Technical Working Group 2024):

Secure access to adequate housing and land plays a critical role in facilitating access to a range of human rights, including rights to food, shelter, water, sanitation, health,

work, security, and freedom of movement and is therefore a key factor in addressing the drivers and consequences of forced displacement. It is therefore crucial to address housing, land and property issues in humanitarian interventions from the outset, as well as to integrate them in development programmes in order to protect the housing, land and property rights of displaced people, who face particular difficulties in this connection. Many have been forced to flee and to leave their homes, agricultural or other lands and related properties behind. Additionally, finding housing or accessing land as a displaced person can be one of the toughest challenges. When displaced people return home after a conflict ends, they may find their homes and lands destroyed or occupied by others, and they may have lost or lack the means to prove their relationship to their homes or lands. Therefore, it is important to provide housing, land and property counselling and legal assistance from experts with a range of justice mechanisms – traditional, religious and statutory – to help resolve disputes. The following key points should be considered (UNHCR 2023):

- Encourage local authorities to take measures to ensure that displacement does not cause the loss or destruction of land and property registries, cadastral records or personal documents that can prove ownership or rights of tenancy or use.
- The land tenure arrangements in a given locality should be clearly understood before land is utilised for emergency shelter or associated activities. It is essential to realise that different types of land tenure systems (statutory, customary and religious) may conflict with each other.
- It is acceptable in principle to utilise traditional justice mechanisms to the extent that they are accessible and effective in resolving disputes promptly and reliably.
- Consideration should always be given to local experience with regard to housing, land and property. In many localities and traditions, women's access to housing and land is often subject to the authority of a male relative, while female-headed households may be restricted in accruing the full range of rights otherwise available to male counterparts.

- Housing, land and property information should be collected as early as possible. Attention should be given to customary and statutory land regimes; contested land claims tied to return; and housing, land and property assets that forcibly displaced persons may have lost or been forced to abandon.

It is worth mentioning that a housing, land and property Technical Working Group (TWG) has been established during the war (2023/2024) by local and international organisations (as mentioned in the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the Group), among them NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council), UN Habitat, UNRWA, UNDP, and PHC (Palestinian Housing Council). The HLP TWG is led by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UN-Habitat as co-chair. The HLP TWG define themselves as a technical and participatory forum comprised of agencies, international and national non-governmental and humanitarian organisations and representatives of relevant clusters to advocate for housing, land and property rights holders in case of any violation. In the Housing, land and property TWG ToR, it is also mentioned that representatives of national and local authorities and other stakeholders can be invited to participate in HLP TWG meetings, as agreed upon by HLP TWG members.

According to the HLP TWG, the most common housing, land and property issues identified in Gaza include tenure discrimination leading to inequitable assistance, unclear property boundaries due to widespread destruction, inheritance issues, loss of housing, land and property documentation, the destruction of property records resulting from damage to the Land Authority, limited access to land for shelter and livelihoods, forced eviction, secondary occupation of land, the presence of unexploded ordnance on land, and occurrences of land grabbing. These disputes can hinder the provision of durable shelter/WASH services and other humanitarian assistance.

The HLP TWG stated that “as the momentum of reconstruction efforts in Gaza intensifies and thousands of displaced individuals seek to reclaim their land, the critical need arises to establish unambiguous ownership rights, especially for historically vulnerable groups, including women and refugees, amongst others”. The group recommended that this essential step must be taken before proceeding with any rebuilding initiatives, the establishment of collective centres, or the allocation of reconstruction grants. Furthermore, the Group asserted that collective rights, including those related to debris and rubble management, must be properly addressed.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

»Palestinian Perspectives on the Reconstruction of Gaza« is a joint project carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. The papers published within the framework of this project focus on Palestinian needs and priorities with regard to a range of topics linked to early recovery and reconstruction of Gaza after the 2023/2024 war. In this context, they do not regard the Gaza Strip as a separate entity, but as part of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967. They also hold that all approaches, be they short or long term, should be compatible with the principle of Palestinian self-determination. The objective is to highlight key insights from Palestinian experiences and expertise and introduce them into the international debate. Papers cover aspects such as security arrangements, governance, the role of women and urban planning for recovery and reconstruction. They reflect the author's views only.

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