

Israel-Hamas war

Gaza's farmers and fishermen eat weeds and turtles as food runs out



Attacks on agriculture exacerbate desperate shortages and enclave's slide towards famine

Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper in Beirut

Published MAY 10 2025

Wajieh Hamad has been a fisherman for more than 40 years, but of late he has looked to the land to survive. He has killed a horse, butchered wild rabbits, boiled stunted weeds, and turned at last to the small, dark turtles he once ignored as he would push out into Gaza's churning sea.

Fishermen are not allowed into the sea any more, but the turtles come close to shore, where Hamad can catch them. [Gaza's](#) port has been destroyed by bombs and more than 1,000 boats, including his own, have disappeared. The shallows swirl with sewage and refuse from overwhelmed hospitals.

Recently Hamad entered the sea again, this time on a raft made from a refrigerator packed with styrofoam. Salty water seeped in as he looked for sardines to feed his family of 22. Though the shoal fish are small, Hamad never goes more than 100 meters from the coast: any farther and the danger of an Israeli attack is too great.

"It's absolutely forbidden for anyone to fish," he said. "But we are forced into the sea, although we might be killed, because we can't find anything to eat."

Hamad's desperation has only deepened since [Israel](#) blocked all food, fuel and supplies from entering and broke a shortlived ceasefire in March, leading to intensifying starvation across the enclave of 2.2mn. As Israel extends its total blockade for a third month, it is also decimating Gaza's ability to feed itself, making the effects of its siege that much more catastrophic.

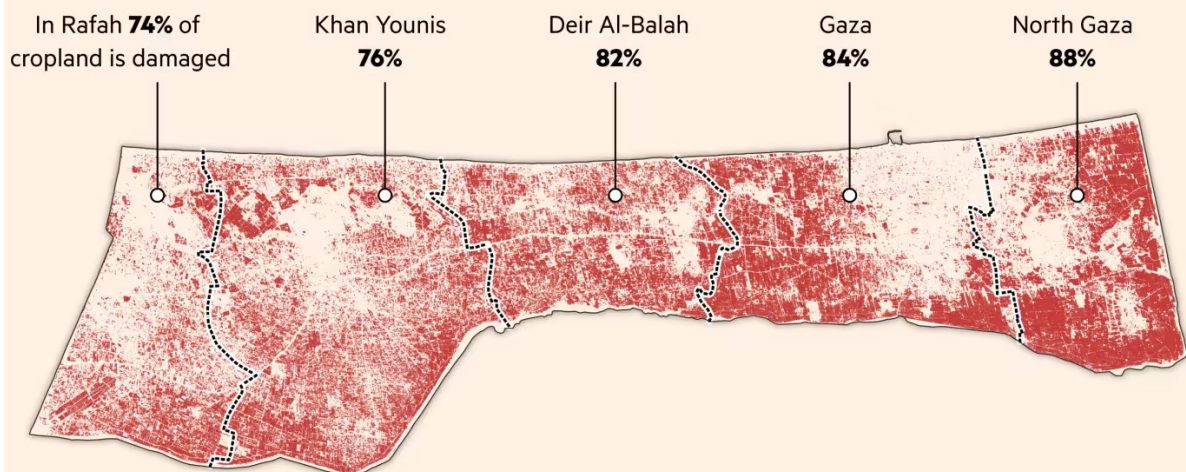
Israeli forces have killed dozens of fishermen who ventured into the water and have targeted farmers across Gaza as they cultivate their land. In the first week of May alone, five farmers were reportedly killed, while off the Gaza coast, one fisherman was killed and five injured, according to the UN.

Israel has obliterated nearly all of Gaza's livestock, according to the FAO. Its bombs and seizures of land have also rendered most of the enclave's once-fertile farmland — which accounts for more than 40 per cent of its area, and used to supply nearly half of its agricultural products — barren.

Over 80 per cent of agricultural land in Gaza had been damaged as of March 2025, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, with razing, bombing and shelling also affecting the health of crops.

More than 80% of cropland in Gaza is damaged

Damage analysis based on Sentinel-2 satellite imagery between March 2018 and March 2025



Source: Unosat; Sentinel-2
© FT

Israel last week approved plans for an expanded Gaza offensive, which would include the potential reconquest of the whole enclave and the forced displacement of the entire population southward, in what it says is an effort to destroy Hamas and free the remaining hostages seized during the October 7 2023 attack that triggered the war.

Farmers say this would leave them with even less cropland and more dependent on aid. Israel is pushing another scheme, widely denounced by aid agencies as “cruel”, to distribute limited quantities of supplies at sites controlled by the military and private security contractors.

Much of Gaza's agricultural land lies in the 2km-wide band along its borders, now a

so-called military buffer zone. The remaining arable land is constantly shrinking.

Maraab Masalma, whose farm sits along Gaza's north-eastern border, has been unable to cultivate most of his land because of Israeli attacks, which have wounded 15 of his farmhands.

But a tiny slice remained in reach. He planted peppers, eggplant, cauliflower and cabbage. Then this week, Israeli quadcopters fired bombs at people working the land, which was suddenly designated as a military zone. Masalama was forced to abandon it, too.

"Our tractors, our tools, they're all gone," he said, adding that water wells and irrigation networks had been ruined.



A Palestinian farmer growing vegetables around his tent © Anadolu/Getty Images

Before the war, Gaza's largest export in value was strawberries. Their late winter harvest now seems a faraway luxury.

Strawberry grower Saqr Abu Rabaa fled his farm near Gaza's northern border as it was engulfed in bombing the day the war began.

He returned half a year later, planting vegetables instead. He was resting in his field

He returned half a year later, planting vegetables instead. He was resting in his field with his son on a late October afternoon when the drone circling above fired a missile on the farmers, killing Abu Rabaa's son and two other workers, and wounding Abu Rabaa in the stomach.

He fled Beit Lahia again that day, leaving his land but bringing a horse. Two weeks later, Israel struck the horse, too.

"He disintegrated," Abu Rabaa said. "[Israel] doesn't want Gaza to manage its starvation. Anything that people could make use of or live from, they target," he said of the horse. Israel denies that it is deliberately attacking civilians or trying to starve people.

PLAY | 00:09

Food prices have soared after Israel halted aid deliveries into Gaza © Reuters

Gaza's farmers know the few vegetables they do still harvest are sold at rates impossible for most Palestinians to pay, with the UN's World Food Programme saying that food prices rose up to 1,400 per cent following end of the ceasefire.

"We're not happy that a kilo of tomatoes costs Shk20-Shk30," said Kamel Alrai, who has rented a few disjointed slivers of farmland after he was forced to abandon most of his land in Deir al Balah.

But they say they have no choice but to charge such high prices because the cost of

But they say they have no choice but to charge such high prices because the cost of production has skyrocketed amid the siege, with most materials destroyed or unavailable. Fuel that once cost Shk5 was now near Shk100, while fertiliser and pesticide prices have also spiralled.

"I'm forced to pass this on to the consumer, to the people," Alrai said.

On Gaza's coast, even dolphins that get tangled up in remaining nets are slaughtered for meat. Hamad, the fisherman, drags buckets of flimsy anchovies to the shore and sells them to intermediaries for \$30 a kilo, many times the prewar price.

But the returns are still not enough: vegetables are too rare, too expensive. "We are in a famine," he said. "We think of our children before we think of ourselves."

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Israel-Hamas war

Agriculture

Human rights

Gaza

Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper