

“The Gaza Envelope – ‘Otef ‘Aza”, Dr. Dotan Halevy, Tel Aviv University, 3.7.25 - English

Description

The lecture presents an historical analysis of the ongoing Israeli military operations in Gaza, framing them not as a series of separate conflicts but as one continuous war stretching from 2007 to 2023. Israel’s prolonged engagement in the Gaza Strip has been sustained by mechanisms that benefit from the war’s continuation rather than its resolution. Central to this analysis is the evolving concept of the “Gaza Envelope” (Hebrew, ‘Otef ‘Aza), initially a security perimeter but later transformed into a spatial-ideological construct embedded in Israeli consciousness. The term emerged in the early 2000s, and was strategically defined, expanded, and institutionalized—serving not only as a geographic buffer but also as a symbolic frontier.

Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for this final session of the week, part of the second week of “Eyes on Gaza”. Today, we are joined by Dr. Dotan Halevy, a historian of Gaza, from the Ottoman period to the 20th century, from Tel Aviv University. Thank you for being with us.

Lecture

What I’d like to do in the limited time we have is to share a few preliminary thoughts—still in formation—that explore the current war on Gaza as something that reveals longer-term mechanisms. Specifically, I want to examine the ongoing war with, on, and in Gaza, stretching from 2007 to 2023.

One of the things that becomes increasingly clear, the longer this war drags on, is that Israel is using the very same mechanisms it has employed over all these years. If we take a broader view, looking at the sequence of military confrontations—2008, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2022, and 2023 before October 7—we are in fact witnessing a single ongoing continuous war. Perhaps it is more accurate to analyze it as such: a single, drawn-out war that entered its most brutal and intense phase in October 2023. If we adopt that perspective, it’s worth asking: What are the mechanisms that have allowed this war to persist for so long?

(I’ll be sharing a presentation—apologies in advance for its visual design; it’s merely a tool to help illustrate the early stages of these ideas.) I refer to this as an ongoing continuous war, drawing in part on the writings of Yuval Krennitzer. A war, after all, usually seeks resolution—its violence is meant to bring an end to the state of war. The more lives lost, the more infrastructure destroyed, the closer we should be to a decisive outcome. But if a war continues for such a long time, it suggests that certain mechanisms within it are serving one side, offering reasons to maintain the conflict. The last two years have brought this reality to the surface. And in that context, it makes sense to analyze the “long war” from 2007 to 2023.

Among these mechanisms on the Israeli side are systems like the Iron Dome, which for over 15 years has rendered rocket fire nearly imperceptible, along with early-warning systems. But today I want to focus on a single concept—or mechanism—that I believe has played a central role in Israel’s ability to maintain or prolong this war: the concept of the “Gaza Envelope” (‘Otef ‘Aza).

Of course, the Gaza Envelope refers to a specific geographic region, a place with an identity. But here, I want to analyze it not simply as a place, but as a concept, a mechanism. As a historian, my tools lead me to examine how even something that seems old has a moment of birth—it emerges in specific contexts and for specific purposes. Broadly speaking, the beginning of the Gaza blockade

precedes the 2005 disengagement and Hamas' rise to power. We can trace it back to 2001, during the Second Intifada. This is when Gaza began to undergo a process of securitization—when it became a security object, managed exclusively through military means. The blockade, in varying degrees, begins there and intensifies until becoming a full siege in 2007.

Simultaneously, 2001 also marks the launch of the first rocket from Gaza into Israel—landing in Sderot. Between 2001 and 2005, the area surrounding Gaza increasingly takes on the role previously held by the settlements: a security buffer designed to absorb rocket fire and Palestinian resistance to occupation. As rockets reach further, coinciding with the advancement of the Israeli plan of disengagement from the Gaza Strip (announced in 2003 and executed in August 2005), a shift occurs. From 2007 to 2010, the term “Gaza Envelope” becomes concretized (“cemented”) as part of Israeli strategic thinking—a cornerstone in the shift from peace-seeking to conflict management. Briefly, I'll trace the chronology of how this term enters public and governmental discourse:

During the Second Intifada, with rockets falling outside Gaza, the Israeli government begins discussing the need to reinforce the “Greater Sderot” area. By 2004, the Gaza disengagement is on the horizon, and for the first time, the Gaza Envelope is defined as a 6-kilometer radius around Gaza Strip encompassing 34 communities. In August 2004, this zone is expanded to 7 kilometers and 44 communities. Soon after, the term “Gaza Envelope” disappears, replaced by “the Gaza periphery” (Hebrew *Sovev 'Aza*), which is when we first see tax benefits introduced for the region's inhabitants. It's stated explicitly that this 7 km expansion is final, and further expansion of recognized communities is blocked. In 2005, just before the disengagement, these communities are classified as a “confrontation line,” gaining preferences in government tenders and other advantages. By 2006, post-disengagement, the first discussions of physical fortification appear—what we now consider the hallmark of government action in the region.

A new term is introduced: “resilience.” The Israeli government declares it will strengthen the capacity of residents of Sderot and nearby communities to withstand the security situation—a language that later becomes central to the policy vocabulary.

From a historian's perspective, quotation marks in official texts are telling: when *'Otef 'Aza* appears in quotes —“Gaza Envelope”— it signals that its meaning is still in flux, that it needs definition. Even as late as 2010, if you search Google, you'll find the term was still rare in usage—it entered the conversation only gradually.

The 6-to-7 kilometer range, by the way, was not arbitrary. It reflected the range of the Qassam-2 rockets at the time. But while rocket fire has since reached nearly every part of Israel, the boundaries of the Gaza Envelope have remained frozen. Requests to include other towns, like Netivot (just 9 km from Gaza Strip), have been repeatedly denied. This rigidity persists even with new bureaucratic structures like the “Tekuma Authority” (Hebrew *Minhelet Tekuma*), whose mandate remains tied to the original Gaza Envelope map—despite the absence of an actual map in its planning documents. Why? Because maps are politically volatile. Fortunately, the Knesset Research Center was tasked with mapping Gaza Envelope after an MP asked: “What exactly is the Tekuma Authority managing?”

Broadly speaking, what was defined as part of the Gaza Envelope in 2006 still serves as the basis for the Tekuma Authority's jurisdiction today. In other words, this framework has been anchored and solidified over time. But when does this geographic limitation stop being relevant—or even disappear? In a sense, it dissolves for a specific reason: the moment the Gaza Strip becomes a concept. And with that, Gaza Envelope evolved from a radius into an identity. Ask a resident, and they won't say, “I live within 6–7 km of Gaza.” They'll say, “I live in a region with a distinct identity, with ideology, with purpose.”

One of the things that fascinates me is how these maps—those that began circulating once rocket fire from Gaza started—helped to turn the entity known as the Gaza Envelope concrete as a fixed

geographic reality in the Israeli consciousness. But within this construct called Gaza Envelope, if you ask a resident today, they likely won't say, "I live within a 6-to-7-kilometer range from the Gaza border." Instead, they'll say, "I live in an area with a distinct identity, with ideological significance." This marks a deeper shift—one that parallels a broader paradigm change in Israel: from attempts to resolve the conflict, to managing it. From efforts at peaceful resolution to the institutionalization of conflict management. And this shift unfolds in tandem with the transformation of the Gaza Envelope into a space with identity, ideology, and mission. It becomes a new frontier—Israel's new front line, a site of renewed Zionism. It is the land of the "Red South" (Hebrew *Darom Adom*), a term that encapsulates the dual meaning of the region: both Color Red (the rocket warning system) and anemones in bloom. Every visit to the area, every show of solidarity, becomes part of a national effort to strengthen the resilience (Hebrew *khosen*) of those who live there—to fortify the population, prepare them for the next round of conflict, and help them cope with the traumas of the last. I came across a document that captures this mindset precisely.

In 2007, Amir Peretz, Deputy Prime Minister, wrote to then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in response to a proposal to increase the number of protected spaces in Sderot. He articulated the sentiment when he began his letter with the following: "I have no doubt that the citizens of Israel will mobilize for this effort [that is, to fund protective infrastructure in Sderot], because they view the residents of Sderot and the Gaza Envelope as the forward civilian outpost, whose resilience stems from the proximity and sacrifices that we—the families living here, with our toddlers, our children, our elders—make on behalf of the State of Israel." For anyone living in the Gaza Envelope, or with loved ones there, or who has visited the region, this sentiment likely feels entirely natural. It has become part of what people internalize as the reality of their lives. But what I want to emphasize is that this identity—this framing—was forged under specific political circumstances, and it was designed to serve a particular purpose: to sustain a policy of continuous war from 2007 to 2023, and to uphold a national strategy of conflict management in place of resolution.