



Gaza's Petrol Stations

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The numerous petrol stations in the Gaza Strip currently stand empty, devoid of fuel, unable to serve customers. Access to the small coastal territory has been restricted since 1991, but since 2007 it has been subjected to a severe blockade enforced by the Israeli military and supported by bordering Egypt.¹ The precise terms of the closure have changed over the years, but the result has been that the 1.7 million residents of the densely populated area feel increasingly isolated – politically, economically, and socially.

Following the massive destruction caused by the Israeli attacks termed 'Operation Cast Lead' in 2008/9, the tunnels underneath the Gaza-Egypt border were the only lifeline supplying the 'luxury' items that Israel declared non-essential – such as tea, coffee, and biscuits, but also sanitary napkins, notebooks, cement for rebuilding, as well as petrol.

In recent months, most of the smuggling tunnels have been shut down by Egypt, resulting in increased dependency on Israel.² Electricity, provided by a single power plant, is often cut and fuel for cars and generators is in short supply, affecting basic services such as water supply, sewage treatment, and the operation of hospitals.³ Drivers resort to using cooking oil to power their cars, accepting that this will damage their engines because in a perpetual crisis, life still has to continue. As it turned out, cooking oil was more effective, so people began to joke: "Choose your flavour: chips, falafel, fish – your car will smell horribly either way!" Others chose to revert to using bicycles and carts drawn by donkeys or horses.

Although most of them are now deserted, the petrol stations' unique form causes them to stand out among the ubiquitous concrete. They appear to be architectural remnants of the hope for another kind of life, a modernity that never came to be. Streamlined embellishments recall a mid-20th century vision of the future while pharaonic columns hark back to a glorious past. Some stations still bear Hebrew signage, a reminder of the days before the withdrawal of Israeli settlers in 2005, but also of the ongoing dependency on Israel. The modernist shapes and optimistic colours now appear almost cruel; a cynical, unfulfilled promise.

NOTES

The images published here constitute part of a year long photography project carried out in the frame of a Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship in 2009/10.

1. Amnesty International, *Israel/OPT: Gaza power crisis has compounded blockade's assault on human dignity* (December 2013).
2. International Crisis Group, *The Next Round in Gaza, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°149* (March 2014).
3. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory, *Humanitarian Impact of Gaza's Electricity and Fuel Crisis* (March 2014).

Fig. 1 (opposite). Untitled © Hanna Baumann



Figs. 2 (top), 3 (middle), and 4 (bottom). Untitled © Hanna Baumann



Figs. 5 (top), 6 (middle), and 7 (bottom). Untitled © *Hanna Baumann*



Figs. 8 (top) and 9 (bottom). Untitled © Hanna Baumann



Figs. 10 (top) and 11 (bottom). Untitled © Hanna Baumann