

# Israeli-Palestinian Initiative Builds Kibbutz-like 'Sustainable Refugee Camps' for Displaced Gazans

The tent compounds include a kitchen, educational areas, electricity generators and water-treatment systems. The humanitarian initiative might reach a dead-end following Israel's blockage of aid through border crossings

Nir Hasson Mar 12, 2025 4:55 pm IST



Family members warm up by a fire at a tent camp for displaced Palestinians at the Muwasi, Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, on Monday, Feb. 24, 2025. Credit: Jihad Alshrafi/AP

Among the hundreds of thousands of Gazans who are still living in displaced persons' camps, about 12,000 of them are in camps based on a model inspired by Israeli cooperative kibbutz communities – with a communal kitchen, cooperative education and direct employment of residents of the camps in various jobs.

The continued operation of these camps, which were established through an extraordinary effort between an Israeli organization and a Palestinian nonprofit

group, is currently at risk – due to Israel's decision at the beginning of March to close the border crossings into the Gaza Strip. The border closure would disrupt the supply of equipment to the camps and possibly preclude the establishment of new camps that the initiative has planned.

The project is the initiative of Damour for Community Development, a Palestinian nonprofit organization headed by two ministers in the Palestinian Authority cabinet of former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, and of Israel's Arava Institute, an academic institution that operates out of Kibbutz Ketura in south Israel.

The project was undertaken out of a realization that the rehabilitation of residential areas in Gaza was proceeding slowly due to the shortage of heavy equipment and construction materials in the Strip, lack of sufficient funding and the absence of an organized approach to the vast quantities of rubble that need to be removed.



**A displaced Palestinian woman cooks in a sprawling tent camp adjacent to destroyed homes and buildings in Gaza City, Gaza Strip, earlier this month. Credit: Abdel Kareem Hana/AP**

International aid officials predict that it would take years for Gaza to return to a 'normal' state, even if Israel lifts its objections to the shipment of construction materials and engineering equipment into Gaza and if the cease–fire continues.

In the course of the war, the vast majority of Gaza's 2.2 million residents have been displaced from their homes. Most of them have moved to the southern portion of the Strip.

Since the cease–fire went into effect on January 19, hundreds of thousands returned to northern Gaza and have begun restoring residential areas there. Some have opted to live among the ruins, some in tents and others in spaces that have been created among the mounds of rubble.



Palestinians react while human remains are retrieved from the rubble of buildings in a ruined neighbourhood of Gaza's southern city of Rafah on January 22, 2025, Credit: Bashar Taleb/AFP

In recent months, humanitarian organizations have been planning for a transitional period, which they say they expect to last between three and five years, during which many of the Strip's residents would live in tents or temporary structures.

Damour and the Arava Institute have involved international agencies in their initiative, which is called "Jumpstarting Hope in Gaza" and aims to offer a model to

sustain Gazans during the transitional period.

During the first months of the war, the organization focused on either trying to help Gazans move from place to place within the coastal enclave, or to leave the Gaza Strip entirely, said The Arava Institute's executive director, Dr. Tareq Abu Hamed, who in the past served as Israel's chief scientist.

They later understood that the displaced would be living in tents for years. "We had to start working on establishing sustainable refugee camps, including drinking water, sewage, solar energy and the possibility of storing water," he said.



Equipment for Damour's displaced persons' camps. Aid organizations believe years will pass before life can return to normal in the Gaza Strip. Photo: The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies

So far, three camps have been established by "Jumpstarting Hope in Gaza" – in Muwasi and Zawaideh, located in the south-central portion of the Gaza Strip. The camps are surrounded by fences and consist of a compound of tents that includes a kitchen, educational areas, electricity generators and systems for water purification and sewage.

Aid workers expressed hope that they would be able to further improve the camps' conditions. That includes replacing the tents with trailers, a transition to electricity

generated from solar panels and the production of "biogas" cooking gas from sewage.



Equipment for Damour's displaced persons' camps. The humanitarian organizations are engaged in planning a "transitional period," during which many of the Gaza Strip's residents will live in temporary structures. Photo: The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies

Two main principles guided the planning of these displaced persons' camps.

The first was making sure that they were "off grid," meaning that they would be self-sufficient in supplying services such as electricity and sewage treatments without depending on the infrastructure in the Strip. This is due to the systematic destruction of the Strip's infrastructure during the war, which isn't expected to return to full capacity in the near future.

The second guiding principle was the importance of a cooperative approach, "somewhat similar to the Kibbutz ideal," said Abu-Hamed, whose institute, as noted, is itself located on a kibbutz.

The heads of the project plan to establish five additional camps in Gaza – two in the south, and three further north. One of them, which was planned to be established these days in Khan Yunis, was supposed to accommodate about 3,500 displaced people.

However, at this time, its establishment is facing uncertainty, due to Israel announcing a halt to the flow of humanitarian aid into the Strip in early March.



Truckloads of equipment for the displaced persons' camps. The second principle held by the camp's planners is cooperation, similar to how kibbutzim are managed in Israel. Photo: The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies

"Since last week, all the border crossings have been closed. As of now, we have 720 tents, winter clothing, mattresses, blankets, 3,000 hygiene kits, water tanks and Water Gen systems to produce water [from air], waiting on the border. Two desalination systems and biogas systems are also waiting on the border with Egypt," said Barak Talmor, a manager at the Arava Institute's Jumpstarting Hope in Gaza initiative.

Besides assisting with humanitarian aid entering Gaza from Israel, the Arava institute also helps raise funds for the project and cooperating with Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories.

"There are some that criticize us for cooperating with the Israelis," a former senior Palestinian official acknowledged, "but they're familiar with us, they understand that we're helping a large number of people and they thank us for that."

The impact of the border crossing's closures is already being felt in Gaza, according to Tahani Abu Daqqa, who was a former culture and youth minister in the

Palestinian Authority and a current partner of the Damour nonprofit organization.

"My sister just told me that one kilo of cooking gas now costs 120 shekels [\$33]. Two weeks ago, 10 kilos could be purchased for 70 shekels [\$19]," said Abu Daqqa.

"There's a shortage of mattresses and blankets. The tents have been in use for 15 months, and they're no longer usable. They're crumbling. I have a feeling that [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu wants to continue the war because he aims not only to eliminate Hamas, but to carry out a [population] transfer."

The cooperation between the Arava Institute and Damour on initiatives in Gaza began years ago, focusing mainly on environmental projects involving solar production of electricity, water purification and sustainable agriculture.

They continued to work together even when most points of contact between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza were cut off following the Hamas takeover and the subsequent Israeli siege of Gaza in 2007.

Before the outbreak of the war on October 7, 2023, the two organizations managed to complete work on a large, 24 dunam [6 acre] solar panel farm in Gaza, that was built to address the shortage of electric power in the coastal enclave.

The solar farm, which was just a week away from being connected to the electricity grid when the war broke out, was completely destroyed in the fighting. Still, on the second day of the war, the Israelis and Palestinians involved in the initiative made sure to get together on a video conference call and agreed to continue working together.