

Flowers Under Siege: Gaza's Withering Floral Industry

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A farmer in Rafah taking care of a flower greenhouse during harvest. 29th June 2020

Flower cultivation in the Gaza Strip began in the 1980s and flourished in the mid 1990s. Once known for growing citrus and fruit, the farmers of Gaza had been forced to change their produce due to the Israeli occupation policies amid the 1967 War, which resulted in evicting the people, and confiscating the land (including the West Bank and Gaza Strip). Those practices included preventing citrus exports to Israel, prohibiting planting new trees or replacing old ones, and giving over to growing only specific crops – such as strawberries. Within this context, farmers in the Gaza Strip started to look into flower planting, and – thanks to the availability of workers, the area's climate, and international support to help them get started and learn how to best care for the plants – the flower farming business proved to be successful.

The floral industry particularly thrived in the north (Beit Lahia) and south (Rafah) of Gaza. However, the Second Intifada (of 2000) put this sector under threat: The Israeli military incursions and land bulldozing forced farmers in northern Gaza to stop: Planting flowers was becoming too dangerous and costly, and farmers were not compensated or insured for any of the damages. As a result, flower cultivation became mainly restricted to the remaining greenhouses in Rafah.

The following are the stories of those who still continue to work in this sector, despite all the challenges.



A farmer in Beit Lahya handpicking damask roses. 19th June 2020

Abu Ayman Abu Halima has been working in the floral industry for 25 years. “We started planting flowers in the mid-eighties,” he reflects. “During that time, flower cultivation was very rewarding, as crossings were open for export and import. We also had international support that provided us with the needed equipment and materials to work in this sector, until we succeeded and our flowers reached the Netherlands.”



The first stage in flower cultivation when farmers prepare flower seedlings and take care of them before planting. Rooting of pink carnations in Rafah. 29th June 2020.

Following the Second Intifada in 2000 and due to the Israeli military incursions and destruction of Palestinian lands, the situation worsened for Palestinian farmers and “led to major restrictions on crossing and exports,” Abu Ayman proceeds. “The clashes between the Palestinian National Authority and the Israelis following the 2000 Second Intifada,” which severely confined the Palestinians while the Israeli military forces made sweeping incursions and destroyed much of the land, “led to major restrictions on crossings and ultimately, the siege of Gaza (2007) led to the complete ban of flower exports. The sector has relatively died out, yet we reserved a couple of dunums for the local market.”

Abu Ayman adds: “We were 50 farmers in the north of Gaza. Each of us had at least 10 to 20 dunums to work on. But today, I am one of the four remaining farmers in all of the Gaza Strip! I insisted to preserve my flower greenhouse so as to provide for the local market, albeit in small part. Although the process is costly, yet flower cultivation is quite rewarding when there is good economy and by that means more demand. However, our strenuous situation in Gaza has highly impacted the economic condition; which no longer makes the floral industry rewarding. Knowing that we have a very limited market does not allow us to venture to expand. The local market, which is now our main target, is in deep economic deterioration, under siege, and in an overly populated area. Whereas this sector needs the opposite conditions: It needs a strong economy and an open market to allow for us to expand.”



A farmer taking care of flower seedlings through spraying with water so that seedling roots grow and get ready for planting. Rafah. 29th June 2020.

“These factors largely reduced the floral industry,” Aby Ayman explains, “There used to be at least 500 dunums cultivated with flowers, but there is not more than 10 dunums today. Workers in the field have lost their jobs, as each dunum needs two workers. With the loss of 500 dunums, 1000 families from this sector have lost their livelihood.”



The next stage is the actual planting of the flower seedling. Rafah. 29th June 2020.

Ghazi Hijazi, a farmer who started flower cultivation in 1991 to export internationally, also had to reduce his flower greenhouse. He notes that the many attempts to open crossings with the aim to export flowers have all been unsuccessful. The confinements have made farmers in Gaza unable to deliver the flowers as requested by merchants overseas on time. As such, Gaza’s flower market lost its international place in the global flower stocks – after having been ranked second place – to other farmers from countries like Morocco and Kenya which do not have such export restrictions on products. Prior to the siege, Gaza’s flowers were in high demand and were exported mainly during Christmas, New Year’s, Valentine’s, and International Women’s Day.

According to Abu Ayman, the limited consumption of flowers due to the deteriorating conditions often leads to their surplus in the local market. Israel's frequent military strikes and siege, coupled with the recent financial deficit of the Palestinian Authority (whose employees constitute a significant segment of Palestinian society), largely impact the economic cycle, diminish salaries, and obscure the future of Gaza. Undoubtedly, the stifling developments also affect the flower sector. As Abu Ayman demonstrates: "Flowers are a commodity that is in demand in the course of a thriving economy and as per the luxury of the community it is marketed in... which is not the case in Gaza."



After cultivating the flower seedling, it is taken care of by watering through distilled water pipes. Rafah. 29th June 2020.



Taking care of the cultivated flower plants involves two stages: the first is irrigation through distilled water pipes, and the second is pruning the tree to remove the damaged parts and trimming the flower plant to help its growth. Rafah. 29th June 2020.



While taking care of flowers. Rafah. 29th June 2020

“Having no other alternative, we can only deal with our challenges through patience,” Abu Ayman concludes, “That is our only option since we are sieged and cannot reach a larger market outside. I am one of the farmers who had to reduce his previous 20 dunums of flower cultivation (when export was allowed) down to five dunums (for the local market alone). Now, due to the coronavirus, I had to reduce it to three dunums; a decision I made when preparing for the new season this year. We are in the shrinking stage, but are not sure what the future holds. Some flower greenhouses were given over to growing citrus fruits or vegetables, but we hope that flower cultivation – even if limited – does not cease to exist in Gaza. We won’t stop working in this field. We hope that crossings reopen so that we can export again. This would help us thrive. But as long as we are sieged and limited in the local market then the flower cultivation will not be very fruitful.”



When flowers have blossomed and been handpicked, this farmer uses this old tiny spot of his greenhouse to prepare for local market distribution (which used to include the international market). He also prepares bouquets for individuals upon their request. Rafah. 29th June 2020.

Waseem, a flower shop owner from Gaza who started his flower business in Gaza in 2000, explains the changes that took place in this sector. According to him, 'the sector used to be more dynamic when there was demand for flowers in the local market, not to mention overseas. Now, however, due to the political developments (particularly the siege), and the economic situation that is exacerbating each year (most recently with the reduction of the PA employees' salaries and now the COVID19- crisis), this sector is under heavy pressure.'

Instead of being sold to the local market as planned this year, the flowers have been damaged due to the coronavirus.



After all the efforts and costs farmers put to care for the flower cultivation greenhouses to ensure that beautiful flowers are produced and can be shared at least to the local market, their hopes were shattered this year with the coronavirus restrictions, causing damage to the entire pretty roses produced this year. Rafah. 29th June 2020.

"These days," Waseem continues, "demand on flowers is confined to occasions like weddings and holidays whereas before people used to frequently get flowers every week for work, home, to give to people, or visit patients. But now that people are mainly focusing on covering their basic needs, there is less demand for flowers. I can see that each year the demand is getting less and less."



Trimming of carnation flowers by one of the farmers left in Gaza who still cultivates flowers. Beit Lahya. 19th June 2020.

Waseem affirms that people in Gaza are trapped in a cycle wherein they cannot afford to buy flowers for various occasions as they once did. Purchasing flowers has become restricted to rare occasions, and if so, they have to be economical. Consequently, he limits the amounts he buys from the farmers now, which in turn reduces the flower cultivated greenhouses. Of the hundred farmers who cultivated flowers in Rafah, only a few have remained.

Gaza, in his view, has been suffering for 13 years from the siege, yet the current coronavirus has further impacted not only Gaza but the world at large. With that said, Waseem still persists in his work: “We will continue until we get out of this crisis. We hope that the circumstances will improve so that people will be able to create, develop, and grow again. It would be great to see Gaza exporting like it once did – as it was famous for shipping citrus and many other crops like strawberries overseas. It is sad to think of how Gaza, which was known for its exports, is now importing flowers, citrus and watermelons like it never did before.”



Roses prepared for distribution at a tiny spot in one of the greenhouses in Rafah. 29th June 2020.

The blockade has not only denied the development of Palestinian economy, but it also led to a state of de-development by damaging the infrastructure with frequent military strikes and imposed restrictions. Aside from affecting people's ability to export to the global market, the siege has also affected people's ability to import the needed materials, equipment and products.

These repercussions are unsurprising, since Gaza's residents themselves are unable to grow and connect with the rest of the world that they have been denied from. It has become too difficult to develop human capital, which is essential for a strong economy and an independent society. The lack of opportunities, high unemployment, and extreme poverty rate due to Israeli policies have had a spillover effect in creating a fragmented and dependent society. COVID19- comes within an already complex context in an area deemed uninhabitable. All of those elements combined deny hope for development and bring about even more uncertainty about the future and life in the Gaza Strip



A florist shop in Gaza, 25th June 2020.

The story of flower cultivation in the Gaza Strip is a mere glimpse of the impact of the Israeli occupation and -13year-siege of Gaza. Despite the challenges and high costs, the floral industry continues to have great importance for the Gaza Strip. After all, the flower farming business used to contribute to around 25\$ million annually to the national income, with 4500 workers in this sector. In view of that, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still continue to create opportunities and farmers are still maintaining their flower cultivation while clinging to the hope that the flower sector will flourish again.



Florist shops prepare bouquets of natural roses, such as the precious damask roses, carnations, lilies and various types, upon the request and desire of customers and according to the occasion prepared for. Gaza, 25th June 2020.

Similarly, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, despite all obstacles, still continue to create opportunities and resist with any means possible. With that said, without lifting the siege and ending the occupation, there will not be a functioning and strong economy and no independent and prosperous society.

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