By Gary Fields

The blockade, however, is only part of a more longstanding pattern of purgatory imposed on Gaza by the Jewish state that predates Hamas. In 1948, Gaza became a crowded haven of Palestinian refugees evicted from their homes in the southern portion of what would become Israel by Zionist militias and later the Israel military. More than 200,000 Palestinians who were forced from their homes in areas near Lod and Ramle waited in refugee camps in Gaza, believing they would return after hostilities ended in 1949.

Even Moshe Dayan, chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, acknowledged the sad fate of these refugees in 1956. “For eight years now, they have sat in the refugee camps of Gaza,” Dayan commented, “and have watched how, before their very eyes we have turned their land and villages where they and they forefathers previously dwelled, into our home.”

Nevertheless, several thousand Palestinians from refugee camps in Gaza did try and return to their homes between 1948 and 1956, but the state imposed a “shoot to kill” policy for these so-called “infiltrators.” Israeli historian Benny Morris estimates that 2,500 to 5,000 Palestinians were killed as a result, the majority of whom came from the refugee camps of Gaza. These killings of unarmed civilians were only the beginning of repeated violence perpetrated by Israel against residents of the Gaza Strip.

In 1956, during a war against Egypt, the Israeli military occupied the Gaza Strip for four months and massacred an estimated 900-1,200 civilians in the cities of Khan Yunis and Rafah — emphasizing once again how Israel’s assaults on the people of Gaza have a longstanding pedigree that predates Hamas. In the more recent period, the people of Gaza have endured constant military bombardments from Israel resulting in thousands of civilians killed — most notably Operation Summer Rains (2006), Operation Cast Lead (2008-09) and Operation Protective Edge (2014).

Now, in a macabre acknowledgement of its role in blocking the Gaza Strip and effectively incarcerating its 2 million residents in an open-air prison, Israel dubs its current assault, “Operation Guardian of the Walls.”

In truth, the conflict in Gaza — and throughout the entire area under Israeli control — is the product of what Human Rights Watch now describes as Israel’s “crimes of apartheid and persecution.” These crimes refer to the institutionalized privileging of one group of people over another. What is occurring in evicting Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah, in demolishing thousands of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, in keeping Palestinians in Israel as third-class citizens, and blockading 2 million Gazans, are all products of this pathology. Until this crime is rectified, there is little hope that the conflict can ever end.

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