

The Purgatory Imposed on Gaza by Israel Predates Hamas

By Gary Fields

<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/story/2021-05-19/opinion-israel-palestine-conflict-history>



Two brothers from the Gaza City neighborhood of Shuja'iyya stand in front of their house destroyed during Operation Protective Edge in 2014. *Photo by Gary Fields*

Once again, the political establishments in the U.S. and Israel are assigning blame for the current hostilities in Israel/Palestine by repeating a familiar refrain. “Israel has the right to defend itself,” insists President Joe Biden in parroting the words of his Israeli counterpart. In a metaphor of the stark asymmetry between the belligerents, there is no mention of the same right for Palestinians. Indeed, there is an Orwellian accent to this notion of Israel as the beleaguered victim of an implacable aggressor.

The hostilities unfolding in Israel/Palestine derive most fundamentally from several sources: the annexation by Israel of Palestinian East Jerusalem; the 54-year military rule by Israel over Palestinians in the West Bank; and the third-class status of Palestinians in Israel, affirmed again in 2018 with passage of the country’s nation-state law that explicitly privileges Jews over non-Jews. However, what Biden and his Israeli counterpart are justifying, when they proclaim Israel’s right of self-defense, is the destructive bombardment of the Gaza Strip by the Jewish state.

For the past 14 years, Israel has imposed a blockade around Gaza controlling all goods and people entering and exiting the territory. The blockade has created a humanitarian crisis in Gaza that, in the words of the United Nations, has rendered the territory completely impoverished and soon to be uninhabitable. In 2010, then-British Prime Minister David Cameron [described](#) Gaza under this blockade as “a prison camp” and “a sort of open-air prison.”

In international law, a blockade is an act of war. Israeli ambassador to the U.N. Abba Eban acknowledged this fact in 1967 when he [argued](#) that a blockade removes any doubt about who fired “a first shot.” Nevertheless, in what is truly Orwellian, Israel declares war on the Gazan people with its blockade, and becomes indignant when the people being besieged enlist what James C. Scott famously describes as “weapons of the weak” to fight back.

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 of Israel [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 blockading 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 Sheik 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.

Fields is a professor in the Department of Communication at UC San Diego and the author of “Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror.”