Life and Death Under Occupation

Beginning in 1947, some 750,000 Palestinian refugees fled Zionist forces, leaving behind their homes in what became the present-day state of Israel. Palestinians refer to this mass displacement as the Nakba, or “catastrophe”. In contravention of international law and UN resolutions, Israel never allowed them to return to their land.

In the 1967 War, Israeli forces took control of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Since that time, Palestinians living in those areas have lived under Israeli military occupation.

Israel later annexed East Jerusalem and unilaterally extended the city’s municipal boundaries. While Israel now considers this to be sovereign Israeli territory, all of East Jerusalem, including the Old City, remains occupied Palestinian territory according to international law.

Some 756,000 Israeli settlers have moved into at least 250 colonies built on Palestinian territory, the majority within the past few years. Not only does this violate the Fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits the transfer of civilian populations to land under military occupation, it also breaches the terms of previous peace agreements.

The 1994 Oslo Peace Accords offered limited autonomy to the Palestinian Authority in certain areas of the West Bank. Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza in 2005. Israel, however, retains ultimate control over many key aspects of daily life throughout all of the Palestinian territories. This includes regular military incursions into areas ostensibly controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

It also enforces a crippling siege of Gaza by land, sea and air, punctuated by three periods of intense military assaults. While Israel justified each of these offensives as a response to rockets fired by Palestinian militants, the level of casualties suffered by each side is shockingly disproportionate. The most recent offensive in 2014 killed more than 2,200 Palestinians, two-thirds of them civilians, including 521 children. During the same period, Palestinian militants killed 67 Israeli soldiers and five civilians.

In 2002, Israel began building a separation barrier in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Its construction began in the midst of the Second Intifada, or Palestinian ‘uprising’. According to the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, Palestinians killed 1,012 Israelis between the beginning of the uprising in October 2000 and the last suicide bombing which occurred in February 2008. During the same period, Israelis killed 4,536 Palestinians.

While Israel claims that the barrier was built only for security reasons, several key facts undermine this rationale. First, 85% of the wall’s route does not fall on the internationally recognized border between Israel and the West Bank, or Green Line, but cuts deep into Palestinian territory. For this reason, the International Court of Justice declared the barrier illegal in 2004.

Second, the barrier is only two-thirds complete. While Israel credits the wall for stopping suicide attacks, it was in fact a decline in attacks that led the Israeli military to stall its continued construction. As early as 2006, Israel’s internal security agency Shin Bet, told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz that the wall did little to deter attacks because it was easy to circumvent. Instead, the drop in violence was due partly to the Israeli forces’ ability to foil attacks, but primarily to a truce by Palestinian factions. Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinians pass through the barrier’s gaps on a daily basis in order to work illegally in Israel.

Former Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Arens declared in 2013: “It’s obvious today that the separation wall is completely useless. It’s damaging Israel in the international arena and it causes hardship for the Palestinians in their day-to-day lives.”

Since September 2015, there has been a surge in stabbing attacks by Palestinians against Israelis, which typically end with the wounding of the Israeli victim and the Palestinian assailant being shot dead. Some of the assaults inside Israel have been carried out by West Bank Palestinians who crossed the barrier. But in many cases, Palestinian citizens of Israel or Palestinian residents of Jerusalem have attacked Jewish Israelis who live on the same side of the wall as they do, further demonstrating the irrelevance of the wall as a security measure.

But it is a mistake to evaluate Israel’s actions only on the basis of episodes of Palestinian violence. The wall is just one of many examples of Israel’s structural violence that affects every single Palestinian every single day. Others include some 490 closures in the form of checkpoints, roadblocks, settler-only roads and other movement restrictions by which Israel limits Palestinians’ ability to move within their own land.

These and many other facts on the ground demonstrate the fundamental difference in power between between Israelis and Palestinians—the difference in power between occupier and occupied. Any attempt to reach peace with justice must begin with a basic understanding of this power dynamic.

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