

What the Gaza Protests Portend

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Ali Jadallah/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

A Palestinian woman on the Gaza side of the fence on a day of bloody protests at the buffer zone with Israel, May 14, 2018

The battle against infiltration in the border areas at all times of day and night will be carried out mainly by opening fire, without giving warning, on any individual or group that cannot be identified from afar by our troops as Israeli citizens and who are, at the moment they are spotted, [infiltrating] into Israeli territory.

This was the order issued in 1953 by Israel's Fifth Giv'ati Brigade in response to the hundreds of Palestinian refugees who sought to return to homes and lands from which they had been expelled in 1948. For years after the war, the recently displaced braved mines and bullets from border kibbutzim and risked harsh reprisals from Israel's army to reclaim their property. The reprisals included raids on refugee camps and villages that often killed civilians, as the Israeli historian Benny Morris and others have laid out. Still, refugees persisted in their attempts to return, and Israel persisted in viewing these attempts as "infiltration."

Over the past six weeks, Israeli soldiers have killed some forty Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the majority of them unarmed civilians, and injured more than five thousand protesters. As the US relocated its embassy to Jerusalem Monday, the violence escalated alarmingly. Israeli forces shot dead at least another fifty Palestinians and injured more than 2,400, making it by far the bloodiest day yet in the current round of protests in Gaza.

Like their grandparents, these Palestinians are seeking justice and redress for their families' expulsion from their land. Unlike the house-to-house reprisal attacks of the 1950s, however, today's killings are carried out from a distance. Israeli snipers are positioned on raised berms just beyond the sophisticated fence and expansive buffer zone that separate Gaza from Israel. From this safe perch, soldiers aim their rifles and shoot Palestinian protesters; according to Amnesty International, the targeting includes "what appear to be deliberately inflicted life-changing injuries." Yesh Gvul, the movement founded in 1982 by Israeli combat veterans who refused to serve in the war in Lebanon, has publicly endorsed the call by the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem urging these soldiers to disobey a patently illegal order.

Yet the shootings continue. As in the 1950s, Israeli officials justify the army's use of overwhelming lethal force as a necessary security deterrent. Calling the protests a "March of Terror," Israel's Minister of Defense,

Avigdor Lieberman, noted that the army will not “hesitate to use everything [it] has” to stop them.

Palestinians in Gaza have preferred to name their demonstration the “Great March of Return.” It began on March 30, when thousands congregated close to crossing-points into Israel. The start date marked the anniversary of Israel’s shooting of six unarmed Palestinian citizens as they participated in strikes and marches in 1976 against the government’s appropriation of their private lands. The March of Return was planned to continue until May 15, the anniversary of the Nakba, the Palestinian “catastrophe” caused by the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. (For Palestinian citizens of Israel, even commemorating the day has been penalized since 2011 by the Nakba Law.)

Seventy years ago this month, more than 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forced to flee homes that fell within the borders of the nascent state of Israel. These refugees, their children and their grandchildren, are the “infiltrators” whom Israel is still bent on deterring from claiming their right of return. This right was first upheld by the United Nations in 1949 and has been ratified every year since, making it one of the rights most consistently upheld by the General Assembly in the UN’s history.

Out of this mass exodus of refugees, close to 300,000 had taken shelter in the Gaza Strip, overwhelming the coastal enclave’s population, which was then about 80,000. They built temporary residences on the peripheries of Gaza’s cities and waited for a resolution to their dispossession, often only a few miles from their original homes. Today, their grandchildren have proclaimed a “national” and “humanitarian” march at the fence area, in which “Palestinians of all ages and various political and social groups... meet around the universal issue of the return of refugees and their compensation.”

Hamas, the party that has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, has jumped on the bandwagon of this popular movement. Its leaders have made speeches encouraging Gazans to join the marches, while its administration has offered services, including bus rides and tents, to support the protests. Facing its own challenges in Gaza, primarily in the form of economic stagnation and humanitarian suffering, Hamas hopes to reap the rewards of this nonviolent protest—though its efforts to do so threaten to hijack the protests and derail what has hitherto been a genuine grassroots mobilization. To underscore its engagement with this movement, Hamas has temporarily embraced a tactical commitment to popular resistance rather than press its official policy of armed struggle. Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s leader, recently stated that protesters will be unarmed, stressing that Hamas is not seeking a new war with Israel. While there have been isolated instances of armed fighters attempting to breach the fence, Hamas’s military restraint is evident in the fact that, at the time of this writing, no rocket had been fired from Gaza despite Israel’s repeated and reckless use of excessive force.

This March of Return is partly then a story of Gaza, one with deep roots in the Strip’s history and current predicament. The Gaza Strip forms less than 1.3 percent of the land of historic Palestine. But because of its geographic proximity to Israel, refugee restlessness, and population density, Gaza is an exceedingly troublesome sliver of land for Israel. It has been a hotbed of resistance, giving birth to national leaders, armed movements, and popular uprisings. Since 1948, as the French historian of the Middle East Jean-Pierre Filiu has charted, Israel has unleashed no less than twelve full-scale wars on this coastal enclave, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians. In a 1956 letter to Israeli’s prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, regarding the ferocity of Israel’s military tactics toward Gaza, UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld wrote, “You believe that reprisals will avoid future incidents. I believe that they will provoke future incidents.”

The trouble is not just with Gaza’s popular defiance. This strip of land presents Israel with another, equally insoluble, challenge: demography. In 1967, the Gaza Strip fell under Israel’s direct control as part of the wider occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Israel’s occupation initially entailed placing 1.4 million Palestinians in Gaza under direct military rule, while it settled a mere 8,000 Jews in the Strip. Integrating such a high number of non-Jews under Israeli jurisdiction, which included the West Bank, threatened to make Jews a minority ruling over a majority population of non-Jews.

Shortly after the first Palestinian Intifada erupted in Gaza in 1987, Israel initiated measures to correct this problem and began separating the Gaza Strip from the rest of the territories. As the veteran Israeli journalist Amira Hass has reported in detail, stringent crossing requirements and elaborate permit systems were put in place. These measures were expanded against the backdrop of the peace process that began in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

While countless rounds of negotiations wore on throughout the 1990s, Israel gradually reshaped the architecture of its occupation. After three years of the bloody Second Intifada, under the pretext of security, Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon, announced his decision in 2003 to formalize Israel's separation policies toward the Gaza Strip—to “disengage”—while simultaneously strengthening Israel's hold on the West Bank. In a rapid transition, Israel's occupation of Gaza morphed from direct colonization into a system of external control.

The loss in the 2006 election in Gaza by Fatah, the dominant PLO faction, to Hamas, an Islamist organization that refuses to recognize the state of Israel and is committed to armed resistance, appeared to give credence to Sharon's unilateral security measures. Fighting between the two groups eventually broke out, leading to Hamas's takeover of the Strip in 2007—though this came only after months of US and Israeli interference, which included supporting Fatah's efforts to undermine the elected party, arming Fatah, and starving the democratically-elected Hamas government of funds. Hamas's seizure of power provided a perfect alibi for Israel's policies of separation and enclosure of the Gaza Strip. Israel reacted by tightening its hold over Gaza into a hermetic blockade, conclusively severing the Strip from the outside world and creating, in effect, an isolated Hamas-run territory there.

Sharon's reconfiguration, however, did not change the essential facts of the occupation. Politicians in Israel may have hoped the new policy would give the impression that Gaza's two million Palestinian inhabitants no longer fell under Israeli jurisdiction, thereby resolving their demographic quandary. But all international organizations agree that the Gaza Strip remains firmly under Israel's grip. It is the Israeli government that today controls Gaza's population registry, a clear sign that the state has never relinquished full control. The Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) is an administrative unit within the Israeli Ministry of Defense that “implements the government's civilian policy within the territories of Judea and Samaria and toward the Gaza Strip.” Perversely, as its website notes, this includes “the implementation of humanitarian aid programs” in the occupied territories. For Gazans, COGAT is the entity that controls the entry and exit of all goods and people from the enclave with dire precision, including the calculation of the calories required to avert mass starvation.

The Israeli government's references to “infiltrators” who threaten to swarm into Israel have little basis in the reality of Gaza as an occupied territory, and obscure Israel's history of harsh reprisals against it. Absent from the official discourse is the fact that, under international law, Israel has a responsibility to protect those civilians living under its occupation. Absent, also, is the acknowledgement that Gaza is not a state bordering Israel. It is an anomalous space in which a non-Jewish population is penned for reasons of demographic engineering—namely, to safeguard the Israeli state's ethno-nationalist aims. Recent data (from COGAT) suggest that more non-Jews than Jews now live in the land of historic Palestine between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

The Great March of Return is thus not just a story of Gaza. Israel's fear of “infiltration” is not limited to a few Palestinians breaking through the fence. It is a deeper and more existential fear that dates back to 1948—a fear that demands for Palestinian rights, which Israel has long worked to marginalize, might infiltrate the consciousness of a restive population. It is a fear that defiance might seep back into everyday Palestinian life and undermine an occupation that has been designed to ensure permanent subservience. This goal was embedded in the architecture of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the main product of the 1993 Oslo Accords and the entity ruling over the West Bank, which is committed to expansive security coordination with Israel. Palestinians have grown increasingly disillusioned with the PA, viewing it as little more than a subcontractor to the occupation that puts Israeli security interests before Palestinian rights. Although originally planned as a temporary measure lasting five years, the PA has become a permanent institutional fixture of the occupation, subsuming the PLO and forfeiting Palestinian liberation in return for limited powers of local government.

The PA's drift toward authoritarianism and its crackdown on civil society have prevented protests in the West Bank. Yet the grassroots defiance in Gaza is the latest manifestation in a long history of popular struggle that has recently gathered force throughout the Palestinian population. Arab political parties in Israel have become far more active against the government's systemic discrimination against non-Jews. In April, thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel carried out their own March of Return south of Haifa as Israel celebrated its independence. Last year, Palestinians in East Jerusalem successfully led the “prayer intifada” to protest Israeli

efforts to alter the status quo around al-Aqsa Mosque. Elsewhere, the Palestinian diaspora is coalescing into a more effective international solidarity movement organized around the goals of freedom, justice, and equality.

Such widespread civic engagement and grassroots mobilization has rarely been seen since 1987, with the eruption of the First Intifada. That popular uprising was first met with force—Yitzhak Rabin as defense minister famously instructed Israeli soldiers to “break the bones” of protesters—and then sidetracked into fruitless diplomatic efforts toward a two-state solution, beginning with the Oslo Accords and ending with President Trump’s Jerusalem declaration in 2018. Palestinians have come to realize that this political process, which held out for Palestinian nationhood as part of that strategy, failed them. The endless negotiations merely allowed Israel to entrench its occupation to previously unimaginable levels.

Today, time has run out even for the bad faith that characterized Israel’s approach to the peace process—demanding Palestinian concessions while building more settlements on occupied land. Israeli leaders now openly and brazenly speak of annexation. As comparisons to South Africa’s system of apartheid become more difficult to ignore, nationalist leaders like the minister of education, Naftali Bennett, are pushing Israel toward a one-state reality, seemingly confident that an apartheid-like regime might, in Israel’s case, prove sustainable. Little in the five decades of occupation has challenged Israel’s belief that it can run things in ways that flagrantly violate international law.

Both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas’s Gaza government have become servile proxy authorities, stabilizing a captive population under Israel hegemony. While the PA is explicitly committed to this supine role, Hamas’s pacification is different—arising from its de facto need to manage and restrain its official policy of armed resistance from Gaza because of the devastating force Israel has used in a series of short wars against the coastal enclave since 2007. In these circumstances, the Palestinian struggle for self-determination has, in effect, dissolved into numerous local battles: equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, freedom of movement for West Bankers, residency rights for East Jerusalemites, education for refugees, an end to the blockade for Gazans.

This fragmentation is not, however, a given for all time. The dense smoke, burning tires, and the masses of people huddled under gunfire on Friday afternoons is what, at this moment, the recalibration of the Palestinian struggle looks like. The images coming out of Gaza are an indication of Palestinian disenchantment with the political process and with their leaders. In a deeper and more significant way, we are also witnessing a revival of the core principles that always animated the Palestinian cause but that were displaced in the tangled maze of political negotiations.

Israel rightly fears the power of such popular mobilization. Movements like the Great March of Return have the potential to transcend the fracturing of Palestinian political aspirations so deftly imposed by the state, by uniting the Palestinian people around a single message of rights. Israel’s response to this message—from the Giv’ati Brigade commands of the 1950s to Rabin’s orders during the First Intifada and Lieberman’s recent statements on the March of Return—is always to resort to overwhelming force. For close to a century, Palestinian popular protests for rights have yielded only bloodshed. But Palestinians also take notice of global precedents.

From Sharpeville to Selma, the history of marches for civil and political rights is long and bloody. This mass mobilization around the core principles of Palestinian liberation—arising from civil society independently of discredited political leaderships—holds immense power to disrupt the status quo. Whether this movement, from East Jerusalem to Gaza, Israel to the West Bank, eventually bends toward justice depends on whether the international community will tolerate Israel’s capacity to deny an entire people their basic rights and rob them of a future because they are not Jewish. The past record is not encouraging, but something new has started.

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of Palestinians and Jewish settlers originally in the occupied Gaza Strip; it was 1.4 million Palestinians (not 1.8 million) and 8,000 settlers (not 4,000), respectively.

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