

The Wars on Gaza

Displacement, Discrimination, and Systematic Annihilation

Tayseer Arouri

War and the City: A Continuing Discussion in Progressive Planning

The article in this issue by Tayseer Arouri is the first in what we hope is a continuing series of articles on war and the city.

We have witnessed the devastating effects of the Israeli attacks on Gaza, one of the most densely populated urban areas in the world. With more than half the world's population living in large cities, civilian populations are increasingly vulnerable. In addition, many people live in cities that are under military control, with checkpoints and other controls over free movement and restrictions on their right to the city. Wars take many forms: world wars, binational wars, civil wars, wars on terror or drugs, and the less obvious wars on the poor and the "other."

These various forms of violence undermine the city as a space for human and community development and compromise the ability to plan for the future. This is of special concern to urban planners, architects and designers, who specialize in the preservation and development of cities and planning for a viable urban future. Yet urban planners for the most part have not spoken up about the destruction of cities and the planning of physical and other barriers that result from military instead of democratic rule. In the past, Planners Network has opposed the destruction of Iraqi cities and the construction of Israel's separation barrier in occupied Palestine.

We welcome more articles that can explore other ways that wars undermine the right to the city in all regions of the world. Articles should go beyond the description of conditions, seek to analyze events, and put forth ideas about what planners and urban experts can do. We welcome articles with a point of view and clear political content.

—The Editors

UNDER THE ON-GOING humanitarian, psycho-social and national pressures, it is genuinely difficult to write of city and war, particularly when the subject of concern is Gaza. I have procrastinated five weeks waiting for the cannons to rest; for the air, naval and land strikes by Israel on Gaza to stop. I waited for the clearing of the smoke of shelling, the settling of the dust of destroyed properties and livelihoods, for the final statistics of casualties and destruction, rather than the status quo of mounting numbers. The statistics are a tasteless coding for names, lives, emotional networks of families and communities, and a purpose of being. They result from the shelling released through the fingers of soldiers and pilots, trained persons whose brains have been washed of the reality that Palestinians are humans as any others, and whose actions embody the recommendations of former Israeli Army Chief of Staff Raphael Eitan to treat Palestinians with methods that would push them to act "like drugged cockroaches scurrying in a bottle."

One of the most striking aspects of this latest assault on Gaza has been the widespread Israeli acceptance and public circulation of expressions of hate and racism against Arabs. Across generations and media outlets whether digital, visual, written and through social media, incitement has become the new form



Tayseer Arouri is a Professor of Physics at Birzeit University, member of the Palestinian National Council, and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Centre.

of expressing Israeli “patriotism.” We wait for measures of accountability against the Israeli soldier that proudly detailed the sniping at 16 Gazan children on his Facebook page, showcasing his skill and the fruits of years of racist education propagating superiority that he received in the army, in the school before that, and likely at home. As the cannons continue their rhythmic pounding, I find myself forced to break the wait for the international community to uphold its commitments to prevent atrocities against mankind, to uphold my commitment of delivering this piece for this special issue.

Long History of Attacks on Gaza

Gaza holds a record in the number of military attacks since World War I. In 1917 it was occupied by the British and put under its Mandate, a political format designed to facilitate the execution of Lord Arthur Balfour’s (then UK Foreign Secretary) Declaration in which he supported the “establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” As the renowned Israeli historian Ilan Pappé meticulously documents in his work “The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine” this – political but unreal – imagination of a “land without people” put forth a series of colonial policies that enabled the creation and growth of Zionist terrorist militias (Haganah, Stern and the Irgun). In the two years between November 1947 and December 1949 they occupied the greater part of Palestinian cities, abducting Palestinian modernity, destroying 421 villages, displacing their population, and expelling 720,000 of the 900,000 Palestinians who inhabited the geography that since then became known as Israel. In those years Palestinians fled in search of safety to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and – as they were then called – the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Gaza’s share of the total refugee population was estimated at about 200,000 of the total. As of 1 January 2014 the number of United Nations registered refugees in the Gaza Strip stood at 1,240,082 which amounts to two-thirds of the overall population of 1.8 million in this narrow coastal stretch, which is 25 miles long and 3-7 miles deep. Gaza has an average density of 13,000 persons per square mile, with 8 refugee-camp “neighborhoods” whose density at points exceeds 125,000 per square mile (for example, at the Jabalya Refugee Camp). It is the home of the recurrently displaced. How many military operations

could such a setting endure in less than seven decades?

In October 1956, and upon the nationalization of the Suez Canal by then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Tripartite Aggression (by UK, France and Israel) included the occupation of the Gaza Strip by Israel, which withdrew six months later in March 1957. A decade later Israel returned, occupying it in the 1967 Six-Day War along with the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights of Syria. In spite of its settler-colonial policy in Gaza and the other annexed areas, awareness of the demographic and financial burden of this space fueled Israel’s repeated attempts to get rid of Gaza, starting with the Allon Plan soon after the 1967 War and up until today. In 1992 former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said “For my part, Gaza may drown at sea,” and his delegates to the Washington Negotiations in September of that year at the sixth round offered to dismantle the settlements and withdraw from Gaza as a signal of “good intentions.” Aware of the fact that Israel’s strategic interests lie in the West Bank, the response of the Palestine team was to refuse and insist on equating the destiny of Gaza with that of the West Bank, which together compose less than 22% of historic Palestine.

In September 1993, the Palestinian Liberation Organization committed the unforgivable mistake of signing on to the Oslo Accords, after which Israel partially withdrew from the Gaza Strip in July 1994. It kept under its control 19 colonies hosting around 6,000 settlers, controlling 16.5% of the total area of the strip. In other words, each Israeli settler retained 60 times the share of a Gazan. At the time, 40% of Gaza’s drinking water was channelled to this fraction of settlers, who were 0.6%, of the overall population. The exaggerated level of consumption of ground water led to an ecological imbalance, the result of which was the spilling of sea-water into Gaza’s groundwater aquifers, rendering them undrinkable for decades to come. Moreover, in the early 1990s, a third of the Palestinian labor force operated in Israeli markets, and with the rise of Likud to power in 1996, the number of permits granted for Palestinians in general and Gazans in particular was significantly reduced, causing an intentional spike in levels of unemployment and poverty. Discrimination and denial of basic needs are also reiterated interventions in Gaza.

Disengagement and Attack

In August 2005 then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon put forth a full-scale Disengagement Plan from Gaza, with no coordination with the Palestinian Authority, knowing the grave impacts of such a move on the fragile political stability of Gaza. Further, since summer of 2007 Israel has been imposing a suffocating blockade on this impoverished enclave. In December 2008, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead which lasted 3 weeks, employed internationally banned weapons (such as white phosphorous shells), harvested more than 1,400 deaths, 82% of them civilians, wounded more than 15,000 persons, and caused the large-scale destruction of property and infrastructure. In the aftermath the UN-Commissioned investigation – known as the Goldstone Report – concluded that Israel committed several violations of International Law, amounting to war crimes presentable to the International Criminal Court (ICC). On November 5, 2009, the UN General Assembly voted on a resolution (A/Res/64/10) in favor of the adoption of the report's findings, stating that it "calls upon the Government of Israel to take all appropriate steps, within a period of three months, to undertake investigations that are independent, credible and in conformity with international standards into the serious violations of international humanitarian and international human rights law reported by the Fact-Finding Mission, towards ensuring accountability and justice."

The protection of civilians rights and justice for victims necessitated and still demands the enforcement of the norms of international justice. In particular, the UN Security Council should have acted in accordance with the seventh clause of the UN Charter that authorizes it to refer matters to the ICC. However, the continued immunity provided by the USA, European complicity, and the humiliating lapses of Arab governments have given Israel the free range to proceed with its violations of international law.



In the aftermath of the 2008–2009 assault, Israel imposed many restrictions including what they call a “security zone” that is 1,000 feet deep along the Gaza border (5.4% of the total area). This area includes agricultural zones that are scarce in Gaza, intentionally compromising the brittle economic and food security of the besieged population. In addition, the permitted fishing range was reduced to six nautical miles from the coast, which makes the practice difficult. Trespassing by fishing boats immediately triggers deadly fire from naval guards. Often, Israel has reduced this range

to three miles. Further, border crossings were shut down and occasionally reopened, making movement a great challenge for persons and goods alike. Among the countless devastating aspects of the siege is the limited supply of electricity which has amounted to 6 hours per day. These measures and many more are tools in a policy aimed at the economic strangulation of Gazans, rendering their everyday life a near inferno.

Israel's placement above the international law and its mechanisms of liability have enabled it to conduct crimes against neighboring countries (including the repeated invasion of Lebanon and air strikes on Syria), and particularly against the Palestinian population in the occupied territories. On November 14, 2012, Operation Pillar of Defense was launched against Gaza, killing 133 Palestinians, injuring close to a thousand, and inflicting significant destruction.

Today's Latest Assault

Today as I compile these lines Operation Protective Edge is piling annihilation; since July 6, 2014 and up to the day of this writing, August 24, 2014, official statistics indicate there were 2,120 deaths including

90 entire families. Of those murdered 577 (27.2%) are children, 260 (12.3%) women, and 101 (4.8%) elderly. The number of wounded is nearing 11,000 of which 3,307 (30.5%) are children, 2,042 (18.8%) women, and 401 (3.7%) elderly. To place things into perspective, if the same proportion of deaths were to affect the USA it would result in 353,000 deaths, a loss exceeding that of World War II. As for the images of destruction, those remind us of Stalingrad and Dresden where entire neighborhoods were reduced to rubble, foretelling a humanitarian crisis whose peak is still to be reached with every day that passes as losses are counted and winter approaches. In seven years of siege Gaza has lived through three Israeli military operations and a strangulating blockade on goods, including those fundamental for reconstruction such as cement. What form of urbanism, let alone development, can be expected in the midst of continued crisis and emergency?

Moves Towards Annexation

Besides displacement, discrimination, and systematic annihilation Gaza is being used as a distraction. While the eyes of the world are focused on the tribulation of this coastal strip, only miles away Israel has taken additional moves towards annexing the West Bank. On July 30, 2014, the Knesset passed a motion that, according to the Jerusalem Legal Aid Centre, “grants all permanent Knesset committees powers to discuss . . . all matters relating to Judea and Samaria [West Bank]; in effect enabling Knesset committees to directly address the respective ‘administrative apparatuses’ operating in Judea and Samaria including the army and security apparatuses, taking actions they deem appropriate in accordance with rules of attendance and delivery of information.” These newly granted jurisdictions were hitherto limited to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, given the legal classification of the West Bank as occupied territory.

This political decision of allowing Israeli state representatives to interfere in matters relating to this “extra-territorial” space lends significant legal support to the age-old policy of creating irreversible facts on the ground starting with areas classified as “C” in the Oslo Accords. These include built-up and illegal

Israeli settlements in Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley in particular, and in the West Bank in general. Thus, the highly deliberated term of “land swap” used by negotiators – whether delegates from the sovereignty-less Palestinian Authority, Israel, or the USA co-conspirators – is a manoeuvre aiming at legalizing and later annexing the colonies. Ultimately, combining this and similar Israeli political moves in the past with the disengagement from, siege around, and large-scale destruction of Gaza (which in effect widens the socio-economic and geo-political differences between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) adds up to a strategy of mutation and differentiation that facilitates separating the destiny of the two.

Wars on Palestinian Cities and Israeli Apartheid

Israel’s repeated wars on Palestinian cities and Gaza have far reaching ideological meanings beyond the monochromatic “security” mantra. Abortion of Palestinian normality, modernity, and the periodic creation of crisis and emergency are the tools for the age-old Zionist policy of inducing Palestinian subsidiarity. Yet, in spite of these grim conditions, the recent and unprecedented global expressions of consciousness and solidarity are re-fuelling the hope and optimism that we Palestinians refuse to relinquish. Most noteworthy is the increased momentum and scale of boycott campaigns against Israel, whether economic, cultural, academic and otherwise, and secondly, the institutionalization of these movements which indicates that they are neither temporary nor transitional.

These remind us of attitudes towards the Apartheid regime of South Africa in the 1980s which eventually brought about its demise. Are we on a similar path that shall dismantle the Zionist apartheid in Palestine? And how many years will we need to achieve that goal?. While only time will tell, one matter remains evident. The only assurance against the recurrent Israeli violations lies in holding it accountable for the atrocities it committed and commits, whether overt transgression by its security apparatuses, or covert disenfranchisement through matrixes of legal compounds that systematize the inferior status of Palestinians and the deprivation of their right to self-determination. P²