Gaza: A Refugee's Perspective

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As Israel celebrates the 60th year since its establishment, the Palestinian people commemorate the 60th year of the Nakba (catastrophe) in which Zionist forces drove out the majority of the Palestinian people from Palestine, deprived them of their homes, lands and property and turned them into destitute refugees. The expulsion of the majority of Palestinians from their homes and replacing them by Jews from various parts of the world over the past 60 years has been a premeditated crime concocted deliberately by the Zionist movement whose ideology continues to be based on the war crime of population transfer aimed at simultaneously pumping out the indigenous Palestinian population and pumping in Jews from the world to create and maintain a Jewish state on the land of Palestine.

 This is an implementation of the Zionist slogan "a land without people to a people without land." Advocates of justice have often highlighted this slogan to emphasize the myths on which the state of Israel was formed (the myth of the empty land). In practice, the slogan is more indicative of the goals and aspirations of Zionism: to forcibly recreate the land as one empty of its indigenous population; goals and aspirations which Israel has systematically sought to realize through all of its political, economic, diplomatic and military might. Nowhere is this clearer than the place in which I live: Gaza.

The Gaza strip is a narrow piece of land along the coast of the Mediterranean sea. An area that is no more than 40km long and 10km wide, it is currently home to around 1.5 million Palestinians. The shape of this territory was defined by the armistice agreement between Egypt and Israel following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 on well over 78% of Palestine, and the mass expulsion of the majority of indigenous Palestinians by the Zionist militias of the time. These militias aimed to create in Palestine a state for 'Jews, all Jews and only Jews' in the words of Herzl.

 The majority of the Gaza strip's inhabitants are refugees whose families were uprooted and driven out of their homes to live in the wilderness. These refugees, who are from towns and villages in the costal and southern parts of Palestine, now total well over one million living in eight refugees camps in the Gaza strip. As such, two out of every three people in Gaza is a refugee, and one out of every seven displaced Palestinians lives in Gaza.

I am one of these refugees in Gaza. My family was expelled from al-Majdal. On the eve of its destruction, al-Majdal was a bustling coastal town of just under 11,500 people, and the place after which this publication is named. The vast majority of my townspeople were forced out by Israeli aerial and marine bombardment as part of Operation Yoav in November 1948, while many of those who were able to stay were later driven out through a combination of military force and administrative measures under the Israeli Emergency Laws that targeted Palestinian citizens of the newly established state. Since then, thousands of newly arrived Jewish immigrants were settled in al-Majdal under its new name: Ashkelon, while the original inhabitants ended up only a few miles away in the refugee camps of the Gaza Strip. In 1967, Israel continued its onslaught, and militarily occupied Gaza, as well as the West Bank, Sinai the Golan Heights and parts of southern Lebanon.

 We refugees have not accepted the sixty-year Zionist takeover of our towns and villages, and actually, like the rest of the Palestinian people, never condoned the very raison d'etre of the Zionist state at our own expense. We refugees have actively participated, sometimes exclusively, in every step of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli apartheid, colonialism, and occupation. As refugees still living in occupied Palestine, we are the ones who have faced all three of these regimes, described by John Dugard as anathema to the international system: Israel's apartheid regime is what prevents our return, the villages to which we want and have the right to return to have been colonized, and our place of refuge is under the brutal military occupation. It should come as no surprise then that the Second Intifada, like the first one, started off in Gaza, and that the leaders and the rank-and-file activists who rose up in these uprisings are mainly the second or third generation of the Palestinian refugees.

 This is significant enough as a message to the Israelis that those descendants of 1948 refugees have not forgotten and will not forget our towns and villages, and that we still know that those are the places to which we truly belong. This is not a welcome message in Tel Aviv and, compounded with the fact that the spirit of refugee resistance is the culture of Gaza, has formed the main context of Israeli policy towards this coastal cage. Stated plainly, the central aim of Israeli political and military strategy in Gaza is to eliminate the resistance and the existence of Palestinian refugees struggling to return.

The way that Israel has worked towards this goal of eliminating the refugees and their resistance in Gaza has been described by Israeli historian Ilan Pappe as genocidal. This is an accurate description given Israeli policy and practice with regards to this tiny strip of land, a central feature of which is segregation through confinement. Since the mid-1990s, Gaza has been completely sealed off with the Israeli controlled sea on one side, and Israeli controlled barriers on the other three sides. For the past year, Egypt has officially controlled the Rafah border between Gaza and Egypt, but this has not meant any lenience with regards to the segregation policy. As a result, Gaza is essentially the world's largest open air prison, a fact reiterated by John Dugard in his now famous statement that 'Gaza is a prison and Israel seems to have thrown away the key.' The confinement extends even to Palestinians in critical health conditions requiring treatment outside of Gaza who are systematically denied exit. The death of 10-month old Waseem Hamdan on 18 July 2008 brought the number of patients who died as a result of exit denial to 211, almost a quarter of whom have been children.

 The second feature of Israeli policy vis-à-vis Gaza has been isolation through the siege of Gaza. Israel has used its control over entry and exit into and out of the area to collectively punish the people of Gaza since 2006 (purportedly because the majority of Palestinians in the occupied territories voted freely in a democratic election that Israel and its US backers had demanded) by not allowing any of the most basic and essential needs into Gaza. The disastrous humanitarian situation that has resulted, including the use of cooking oil instead of petroleum that has poisoned the air, the dumping of sewage into the sea that has made it dangerous to swim in, the rampant poverty as a result of job-loss, and innumerable aspects of the misery in Gaza are written about elsewhere, and constitute one of the most cruel crimes committed by any state ever.

The third feature of Israel's genocidal policy in Gaza has been continuous military assault, with the threat of more deadly assaults constantly looming in Israeli political discourse. From 'Operation First Rain' in 2005 and 2006, to 'Operation Summer Rain' after the capture of Gilad Shalit in the summer of 2006, to 'Operation Autumn Clouds' in the Fall of 2006, to the present; hundreds of Palestinians have been killed and thousands injured directly as a result of military assaults.

 Although the original Palestinian inhabitants of Gaza suffer and resist like the rest of us, it is fact that by traumatizing, starving, and killing the Palestinians of Gaza, Israel is effectively trying to eliminate one million out of the seven million Palestinian refugees demanding to return to their homes and properties. In a trend that has become common Israeli practice, Israel is trying to hide or remove the evidence of one crime, the population transfer of over 800,000 Palestinians in 1948, by committing another crime, the Gaza genocide.

 While the steadfastness of the people in Gaza tries to announce to the world that we people of Gaza still exist in the face of Israel's war machine, only through international and internal pressure on Israel can this genocide be averted. As it stands, the current situation is one of certain unnatural death: whether from an Israeli bomb, from breathing in toxic fumes, from drinking poisoned water, from lack of essential life-sustaining supplies, from the factional in-fighting that stems from Israeli-US policy of divide and conquer, or from the stress and trauma of just living here. Even if the siege and its associated genocidal regime are lifted today, it will take years for us to recover. The one thing that is clear is that it must stop, and that Israel will not voluntarily stop unless forced to do so. The one path that we have all called for as Palestinians to stop, not just the genocide in Gaza, but the implementation of apartheid, colonialism and occupation throughout Palestine is boycotts, divestment and sanctions on Israel.