

Palestine / Israel - 1948: The Stakes of the Great Return March

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For seventy years, Israeli violence has permeated every aspect of Palestinians' lives. Once again, Palestinians are resisting.

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On May 14, 1948, seventy years ago, Israel issued its "declaration of independence." Since then, every May 15 has been Nakba Day, when Palestinians mark the ethnic cleansing of their people entailed by the creation of Israel. This Nakba Day will feature the culmination of the Great Return March, when Palestinians will march en masse to the fence Israel erected to separate Gaza and Israel and say that they intend to try to pass through the barrier. As of this writing, Israel has already killed at least 52 Palestinian demonstrators in what Amnesty International has called "an abhorrent violation of international law," involving "what appear to be willful killings constituting war crimes."

Like other settler colonial states, Israel aims to asphyxiate the socially reproductive capacities of the indigenous populations it seeks to dominate. That imperative is particularly urgent in the Israeli case, where the Jewish and non-Jewish populations under the state's control are of comparable size and the land in question is relatively small. This discriminatory denial of rights extends to Palestinians across the globe, whether they live as second-class citizens of Israel, under occupation, in the diaspora or in refugees camps. All are prevented from returning to their homes through the use of violence and with decisive help from the US.

The unmistakable message for Palestinians at every turn, from before the Nakba to the Great Return March, is that the slightest resistance to the ethnostate erected on their homeland will be met with imprisonment or lethal force.

Anatomy of Repression

Israeli violence permeates every aspect of Palestinians' lives, even as its strategies of control have taken a variety of shapes over time. To create the state in 1948, Zionist forces expelled 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. In the process, they carried out roughly ten large-scale massacres, each with at least fifty victims, along with around one hundred smaller massacres. The forces of Israel's pre-state paramilitaries killed Palestinians in nearly all of their villages, repeatedly dumping the victims' bodies into pits. On numerous occasions, Zionist militias killed Palestinian children and raped Palestinian women.

Similar atrocities continued in the state's early years. In 1953, Israeli forces massacred 69 Palestinian villagers in Qibya after complaining of "infiltration" of Israeli territory by Palestinian refugees. During the Suez conflict three years later, they killed 48 Palestinian laborers in Kafr Kassim; 275 Palestinians civilians at Khan Yunis and a nearby refugee camp; and then 111 more Palestinians at Rafah refugee camp.

After 1967, with the Israeli state now consolidated, it began to pursue what Tariq Dana and Ali Jarbawi call "its dream of a 'Greater Israel' of maximum land with minimum Arabs." 350,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes as Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem (as well as Syria's Golan Heights and Egypt's Sinai). Nearly 600,000 settlers illegally colonized the occupied territories with the state's support. And Israel's massacres of Palestinians have continued since then: as recently as the summer of 2014, Israel left 2,251 Palestinians dead — including 1,462 civilians and 556 children — during a murderous rampage called Operation Protective Edge. As Canadian scholar Nahla Abdo has observed, violence by Palestinians has to be viewed in the context of this "asymmetrical relation" between the two sides.

Meanwhile, Palestinians in the occupied territories — but not Israeli settlers — are systematically denied due process of law: held without trial in administrative detention or subjected to farcical military prosecutions, and routinely tortured. Such treatment extends to Palestinian children, who are subject to practices that, in the words of UNICEF, "amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention against Torture," including threats of "death, physical violence, solitary confinement and sexual assault, against themselves or a family member." Currently there are over 6,000 Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails.

When Palestinians aren't being shackled, tortured, bombed, or gunned down, they live under the perpetual threat of such actions. After the 1967 war, Israel established a regime to scrutinize everything from Palestinian workshops making furniture, soap, textiles, olives product, and sweets, to how many televisions, refrigerators, gas stoves, orchards, animals, and tractors Palestinians owned, while also monitoring and often censoring Palestinian textbooks, novels, movies, newspapers, and political leaflets.

Economic Dispossession

Economic violence — the expropriation of Palestinian wealth and the destruction of Palestinians' capacity to sustain themselves — has defined Israel's treatment of the Palestinians from the beginning. In the years immediately following 1948, Israel adopted policies aimed at seizing and controlling Palestinian land, most notably the 1950 Absentee Property Law, through which Israel secured 90 percent of the land by designating as "absentee" every Palestinian who left their residence due to the 1947 partition brought about by the United Nations.

Israeli settlements are built on resource-rich areas, designed to exploit Palestinian water and arable land — a policy which both adds to Israel's resources and deprives the Palestinians of economic development. After the 1967 occupation, Israel built an economic regime aimed at incorporating the Palestinian economy into Israel's own economy, thus making its colonial rule a cheap venture while simultaneously stymieing Palestinian economic development. Among measures adopted were the closure of Arab financial and monetary institutions, the imposition of the Israeli currency, the banning of exports and imports except through Israeli-controlled borders, the imposition of high taxes (customs, income tax, VAT), poor investment in infrastructure, strict licensing for industrial activities, and control over communications, electricity resources, water, and natural resources.

Israeli policies transformed the Palestinian market into a captive one that became a convenient dumping ground for shoddy Israeli industrial products that could not compete with the manufacturers of the industrialized countries of Europe and North America. This has not only brought massive profit to the Israeli economy, but it has also formed a new class of Israeli capitalists whose primary manufacturing activities were designed for the occupied territories.

Thus, Israeli policies brought about a deterioration of the Palestinian economic base and created a structural dependency on the Israeli economy, as Israel controls key nodal points of economic activity such as borders, land, natural resources, trade, the movement of labor, fiscal management, and industrial zoning. For more than a decade, moreover, a brutal US-Israeli-Egyptian military siege has decimated Gaza to the point that it may soon be uninhabitable. Israel's military and settlers have uprooted hundreds of thousands of Palestinian olive trees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in the first years of the millennium the Israeli military razed four million square meters of cultivated land.

The Great Return March

Since the beginning of the Great Return March demonstrations on March 30, Israel has killed dozens of Palestinians and injured almost 4,000, including 2,200 shot. Zero Israelis have been injured. The power of the march is that it calls attention to the illegitimacy of artificially maintaining a Jewish demographic majority across historic Palestine. As masses of Palestinians approach the fence between Gaza and Israel, the marchers embody the "threat" of Palestinians returning to their homes and living in a Palestine-Israel that isn't premised on keeping Palestinians out and perpetually stateless — as refugees, occupied subjects, or as an oppressed minority inside Israel.

The demonstrators are, in short, attempting to assert, at least temporarily and symbolically, their right to their land, their identity, their nationhood, their liberation — precisely what negotiations with Israel and its American patron have not produced.

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P.S.

* Jacobin, 05.14.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/05/great-return-march-nakba-palestine-resistance>

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