

The Twelve Wars on Gaza



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The fifty-day war on the Gaza Strip during the summer of 2014 was far more devastating than previous conflicts. But it was neither unprecedented nor unpredictable, being, in effect, Israel's twelfth war against Gaza. This essay contends that if the seemingly endless cycle of violence is to be broken, the latest conflict must be placed in its proper context: the eleven wars on Gaza that preceded this one and Israel's obdurate refusal to countenance the national rights of the Palestinians or recognize Gaza as an integral part of Palestine.

GAZA HAS LONG BEEN one of historic Palestine's main cities, its gateway to the Sinai Desert, and a thriving oasis in Wadi Ghazza (the sharply defined streambed whose flow was higher than the Jordan River during the rainy season). Under the British Mandate, from 1922 to 1948, Gaza was one of the six districts of Palestine. When the United Nations (UN) voted in 1947 to partition the country between Jews and Arabs, Gaza was supposed to be one of the main ports of the future Arab state.

After the partition plan was approved by the Zionist leadership and rejected by the Arab side, the ensuing war between Jews and Arabs in Palestine had little impact on Gaza since only 2 percent of the district's population was Jewish. But the situation changed dramatically with the proclamation of the State of Israel in May 1948. The Egyptian army entered the territory, and Gaza soon became a safe haven for waves of refugees fleeing from other parts of Palestine. Although Israel then bombed Gaza from the air, the ground, and the sea, the Egyptian army stood fast until the cease-fire concluded under UN auspices went into effect in January 1949.

Crucible of Palestinian Nationalism

This *first war* created the 140-square-mile swath of land we know today as the "Gaza Strip," and saw the influx of over two hundred thousand Palestinian refugees whose arrival increased the local population of eighty thousand by a factor of 2.5 (approximately the same proportions obtain to this day with 1.2 million of the territory's 1.8 million inhabitants consisting of refugees). The Gaza Strip remained under Egyptian military control but as Egypt refused to annex it, the territory became the only part of historic Palestine that was neither absorbed by the new state of Israel nor annexed by Transjordan (which became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as a result). And therein lies the explanation for Gaza's transformation into a magnet for Palestinian nationalism.

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It was indeed in the very city of Gaza that the short-lived All-Palestine Government (*hukumat 'umum filistin*) operated in September–October 1948. It was in Gaza that the first Palestinian National Council was then convened and that the declaration of independence of Palestine was proclaimed.¹ It was in Gaza that the Palestinian right of self-determination found unprecedented collective expression.

David Ben-Gurion understood the long-term menace for the Zionist project of such a concentration of Palestinian refugees. That is why his plenipotentiary at the UN-sponsored Lausanne peace conference in May 1949 made a formal proposal for the annexation of the Gaza Strip. Even though this was based on an incorrect estimate of one hundred thousand refugees rather than the two hundred thousand actually present in the Gaza Strip, Israel presented its “offer” as its final contribution to the settlement of the refugee problem.² The “offer” was flatly rejected by the Arab states and the Lausanne conference broke up without achieving any result.

The *second war* was part of what Israeli historian Benny Morris has described as “Israel’s border wars,”³ a seven-year period of hostility on Israel’s borders with Syria, Lebanon, and the Jordanian-annexed West Bank, as well as the Gaza Strip. In this war of attrition, ostensibly waged to deter Palestinian “infiltrators,” mostly peasants who wanted to visit their lost homes and tend their lands, Israeli brutality in Gaza was far more systematic than in the West Bank, Syria, or Lebanon. In October 1951, when Egypt claimed it was unable to seal off the Gaza Strip from the Sinai Peninsula, Israel’s response was that the bulk of Palestinian refugees should be transferred to the other side of Egypt and be placed in the desert on the Libyan frontier.⁴

Israel intensified its attacks on Gaza with the formation in 1953 of the secret Unit 101, a group of special forces headed by the ambitious major, Ariel Sharon. Tasked with striking preemptively deep inside the Palestinian territories, Sharon first led his commandos in a raid against the refugee camp of al-Bureij, south of Gaza City, killing at least twenty civilians. The most murderous raid occurred in February 1955, when thirty-six Egyptian soldiers, two Palestinian civilians, and eight Israeli troops lost their lives in the Israeli attack on an Egyptian barracks north of Gaza City.

Instead of “terrorizing the terrorists,” however, the Israeli initiative backfired. In August 1955, Egypt’s intelligence service launched a counteroffensive by proxy, overseeing the infiltration into Gaza of trained and armed Palestinian militants called fedayeen. Israel retaliated by killing seventy-two Egyptians and Palestinians in Gaza, after which an uneasy truce prevailed. But, following Israel’s heavy artillery bombing of Gaza City in April 1956, Egypt unleashed a second fedayeen wave.

Such challenges convinced Israel that Nasser’s Egypt had to be confronted and Gaza’s “fedayeen nest” liquidated. Thus, Israel’s *third war* on Gaza began as part of the overall Israeli campaign against Egypt, planned in an active alliance with France and Great Britain. During Israel’s occupation of the Gaza Strip from November 1956 to March 1957 to “hunt” for “terrorists,” there were at least two instances of mass killings, first in Khan Yunis, then in Rafah refugee camps—both well documented by Joe Sacco in his graphic masterpiece, “Footnotes in Gaza.”⁵

The conservative estimate stands at around one thousand killed during the four months of the Israeli occupation, out of a total population of some three hundred thousand.⁶ Palestinian sources claim 1,231 persons were killed and 239 went missing.⁷ If one adds to the number of fatalities all those injured, detained, or tortured, at least one percent of the Gazan population suffered firsthand from unbridled Israeli violence. Until the 2014 assault, so-called Operation

Protective Edge, this third Israeli war on Gaza was proportionately the bloodiest for the Palestinian population.

A ten-year truce then followed. From 1957 to 1967, Israel relied on Nasser to rein in Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip. In Israel, there is an obvious nostalgia today for this iron fist-imposed quiet along the southern border, although Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (the current president of Egypt) is no Gamal Abdel Nasser. Still, in an effort to defuse the mounting Palestinian pressure from Gaza, Nasser presided over the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, all the while ensuring that its military arm, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), remained dependent on the Sinai-based Egyptian command and deprived of any heavy weaponry.⁸

Less than three years later, in June 1967, Israel went on the offensive again, this time against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. This *fourth war* lasted only two days before Egypt's unconditional surrender in Gaza. The forty-eight-hour battle had been extremely violent, however, causing extensive "collateral damage," including the death of fourteen Indian UN peacekeepers who were killed in Israel's aerial bombing of their Gaza hotel and the partial destruction or looting of ninety out of a total one hundred UN-run schools.⁹ And deadly mopping-up operations went on for days in Khan Yunis, long after the Israeli-Egyptian cease-fire came into effect.¹⁰ So vivid did the trauma remain from Israel's 1956–57 occupation, that at least one-tenth of Gaza's Palestinian population fled.¹¹ According to the Israeli author, Tom Segev, the Israeli leadership, long obsessed with the Palestinian birth rate, actively fostered collective flight from the territory.¹²

Still, the "demographic war" was only a sideshow for Israel's *fifth war*, against what had become an indigenous low-intensity insurgency. For four years after the June 1967 war, the Palestinian resistance movement displayed extraordinary resilience, which stemmed from the unique blend of "classical" military training of former PLA noncommissioned officers and the revolutionary "popular struggle" approach of fedayeen organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Fatah. In July of 1971, Ariel Sharon, now chief of the Southern Command, ordered and led the Israeli army's bulldozing of significant portions of refugee housing in Gaza, burying alive an unknown number of Palestinian guerrillas in underground tunnels.

The *sixth war* was a covert one, with Israeli intelligence supporting Islamist militants against nationalist activists, in a perverse version of "divide and rule" tactics. In March 1973, the "Guevara of Gaza," as the local PFLP leader Muhammad al-Aswad was nicknamed, fell in an Israeli ambush. Six months later, the Israeli military governor attended in person the opening of Shaykh Ahmad Yasin's new mosque in the Jawrat al-Shams neighborhood of Gaza. Yasin had organized the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood as a *mujamma' Islami* (Islamic congregation), whose activities were tolerated years before their official approval by the Israeli authorities in 1979. Yasin was both aware and wary of the Israeli game, but he had shunned the call to join the anti-Israeli resistance as early as 1967, and was pushing a "re-Islamization" agenda that put him at odds with the nationalist camp.¹³

The divisive tactics worked well for Israel during the bloody vendetta that pitted Islamists against nationalist militants in Gaza between 1979 and 1983. But the occupying forces found the blowback hard to handle when the rift between rival factions led to anti-Israeli escalation under Islamic Jihad's growing influence. In December 1987, Yasin dissolved the *mujamma'* and launched the Islamic resistance movement (*harakat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya*), known by its Arabic acronym, Hamas, against the backdrop of the first intifada, which broke out on the ninth of that month.

Bastion of Resistance

Israel's *seventh war* against Gaza was part of the brutal suppression of the unarmed civilian uprising. Between 1987 and 1993, more than five hundred people were killed in the Gaza Strip and about the same number of homes were destroyed. Furthermore, in January 1991, Israel revoked the "general exit order" that it had issued in 1972 to allow residents of the occupied territories to move freely between the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel during daylight hours only. With this new measure, Palestinians now had to request individual exit permits every time they wanted to leave the territory. In March 1993, for the first time, Israel completely sealed off the Gaza Strip from the rest of the world, going on to make increasing use of such collective punishment measures.

Following the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Oslo accords in September 1993 between PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat and Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, control of most of the Gaza Strip (excluding the settlements and the self-styled Israeli military zones) passed to the Oslo-created Palestinian Authority (PA). Arafat was able to return to Gaza in July 1994 and spent most of his time there until he could, more than a year later, transfer the main seat of the PA to Ramallah.

The original "peace process" lasted in earnest only two years, until Rabin's assassination in November 1995 and the seven-month interim government of Shimon Peres that followed. But even during the heyday of the process, in Gaza, residents were often banned from using the territory's main roads—which the Israeli army reserved for the exclusive use of settlers—and the Strip was sealed off from the rest of the world one day out of three, a total of 342 days in the 1993–96 period. There *was* no peace dividend for the Palestinians of Gaza: in 1994–95, the total volume of international transfers did not offset the negative impact of repeated closures.¹⁴

A staunch opponent of Oslo, Benjamin Netanyahu sabotaged the accords during his first term as prime minister (1996–99), and his successor Ehud Barak perpetuated the downward spiral. The effective collapse of peace negotiations in the summer of 2000 undermined the authority and prestige of the PA and played into the hands of Hamas, whose more confrontational and radicalized stance helped set the stage for the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000. Gaza's airport had operated for less than two years, basically serving few besides the Palestinian *nomenklatura*; major development projects like the Gaza port and business incubators ran aground; and the industrial zones in the border areas of Erez and Karni were, in effect, integrated into the Israeli market.

From February 2001 until September 2005, when Israel put in place what it described as a disengagement plan, Ariel Sharon, now prime minister, waged the *eighth war* on Gaza. Building on his previous experience during the second and fifth wars (1953–55 and 1970–71, respectively) Sharon took the cycle of hostilities to new heights of ruthlessness. Initially, Israel's main target was the PA, with major operations aimed at destroying the tunnels to Egypt. Then the focus moved to the Hamas leadership, which was liquidated by means of purported "surgical strikes" that were in fact carried out at a high cost to civilians.¹⁵ Hamas's leader, Yasin, was killed in March 2004, as was his successor, 'Abd al-'Aziz Rantisi, the following month.

During the second intifada, some three thousand Palestinians perished in the Gaza Strip (three times the number of those killed in the West Bank, which was "re-occupied" by Israel in 2002).¹⁶ In January 2005, Mahmud Abbas was elected the new PA president, two months after the death

of Arafat, and in March, Hamas and the other Palestinian guerrilla groups agreed on an informal truce with Israel (*tahdi'a*, literally calming or pacification). Sharon regarded this eighth war as a victory, and in August and September 2005 proceeded with the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip. The PA had no say in this dramatic development, while Hamas was able to claim that it had succeeded in forcing out the Israeli occupier.

The *ninth war* on Gaza was launched simultaneously with Israel's so-called disengagement, and it lasted two years. Sharon fired off the first salvo in October 2005, with an offensive symbolically named Eternal Renewal. The Erez industrial zone was dismantled and its thousands of Palestinian employees summarily laid off; Israel arbitrarily reduced the Oslo-assigned Palestinian fishing zone from twenty to only nine nautical miles; and a concrete wall several meters high was rapidly built around the "evacuated" territory, with frequent and devastating Israeli incursions across what is referred to as the fence (especially after the June 2006 kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit).

In actual fact, Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip had only changed the form of the occupation without altering its fundamentally oppressive nature. The Israeli army now implemented an innovative version of remote-control occupation, saving on the military, human, and financial costs of direct control, while maintaining authority over who and what could come in or out of Gaza and when (with the close cooperation of Egypt at the southern crossing point of Rafah).

Legally speaking, Israel remained the occupying power in the Gaza Strip,¹⁷ since it held full control of the territory's land borders (with the exception of Egyptian-controlled Rafah), air space, and territorial waters (with fishing limits downgraded to six, and then to three nautical miles). In September 2007, Israel officially declared the Strip a "hostile entity," where no Israeli citizen should be allowed other than in combat. With the appalling record of suffering and destruction wrought by nine Israeli wars during the previous six decades, such a "hostile" branding appeared both ludicrous and obscene.

But this Israeli stigmatization of Gaza proved very efficient in obliterating the human dimension of the territory. Fewer and fewer foreigners, and absolutely no Israelis, were allowed in, which made the situation in Gaza much harder to report to the outside world, especially in Israel. Sealed off from the rest of the world, the Gaza Strip became some kind of an abstract territory on which the media focused only in times of conflict or to warn periodically about an impending humanitarian catastrophe.

During this round of raids and incursions in the "evacuated" Gaza Strip in 2005–7, Israel killed 668 Palestinians (including 359 civilians). At the same time, 357 Palestinians (half of them bystanders) were killed in the feud between the PA and Hamas, escalated by Hamas's electoral victory of January 2006. By the end of June 2007, Hamas had expelled the PA from the Gaza Strip and established its undivided rule over the territory. Israel, along with Egypt, could now justify their blockade of the Gaza Strip on the grounds that it was necessary to contain and fight "terrorism."

"Quiet" on the Southern Front: Gaza Uncowed

Operation Cast Lead was Israel's code name for its *tenth war* on Gaza in December 2008–January 2009, when 1,417 Palestinians lost their lives, including 236 fighters, and the territory was pummeled from the air, land, and sea. In June 2010, after nine Turkish NGO activists had been killed in an

attack by Israeli commandos in international waters as they attempted to break the siege, Israel decided to alleviate the blockade.

In a self-proclaimed gesture of goodwill, it appeared to reverse its siege policy by publishing a list of only forty-two commodities whose entry into the Gaza Strip would henceforth be regulated,¹⁸ whereas, previously, all commodities had been banned from entering the territory until proven necessary. In practice, however, because of the end certificate that Israel requires on all commodities, the ban effectively remains in place. The import of building materials, for example, remained conditional on the certification of their final use. Only UN agencies or well-established NGOs have the manpower to handle the massive paperwork this “facility” required. As a result, imports of consumer goods and commodities rose by twenty-five percent in 2010, while those of building materials went up by only 10 percent.¹⁹

The effective continuation of the blockade on building materials contributed to fortunes being made by those running the smuggling trade with Egypt. According to the UN, in September 2011 alone, ninety thousand tons of cement were brought into the Gaza Strip via the tunnels—ten times the authorized amount that came in through the only official crossing point for this trade at Kerem Shalom.²⁰ Israel’s siege thus became a major incentive to the smuggling business with Egypt. Hamas adapted its rule to this situation and eventually benefited from it through the taxation of the tunnels or its monopoly on “strategic” commodities otherwise banned by Israel.

Meanwhile, according to a document leaked to *Haaretz* in October 2012, Israeli decision-makers had fixed the average daily intake for the population of Gaza at 2,279 calories per person, and were allowing supply trucks into the Strip on that basis.²¹ The fact that Israel could feel empowered to decide how much a Palestinian could eat on a daily basis shows how perverse and degrading the post-2005 occupation of the Gaza Strip had become. The description of Gaza as an “open-air prison”²² was actually far from the mark since, in any jailhouse, detainees are not supposed to be shot at or bombed except in the case of a full-fledged riot. In Gaza, Israeli raids, whether “targeted” or not, remained a regular occurrence.

Thus, a year after its tenth offensive against the territory, Israel could believe that it had found the perfect formula for this upgraded occupation of Gaza: while evidencing utter disregard for the Palestinian population, Israel lost three soldiers and no civilians in 2011 while seventy-one Palestinians, including twenty-three civilians, were killed in Gaza-related clashes that year. But the cycle of violence spiraled out of control once again, and in November 2012, Israel launched the *eleventh war* against Gaza, so-called Operation Pillar of Defense. While there was no land offensive involved in this conflict, 166 Palestinians were killed, an overwhelming majority of them civilians. One could, however, rightfully consider the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip for the previous seven years—with Egypt’s significant contribution on the southern border—as an act of war.

The *twelfth Israeli war* on Gaza started on 8 July 2014. Contrary to previous offensives, this one was not launched to punish Gaza for its resistance, but because the Netanyahu government was bent on sabotaging the April 2014 reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas. The seven-year feud between the PA-run West Bank and Hamas-ruled Gaza was a major strategic asset the Israeli prime minister sought to protect at all cost: Although Gaza had not been in its sights to start with, the anti-Hamas campaign Israel unleashed in the West Bank in June 2014 soon led to an escalation.

The disaster this twelfth war has caused after fifty days of hostilities is far worse than the previous “record” from January 2009 when the damage inflicted by the Israeli offensive was estimated at a minimum of \$1.6 billion.²³ Operation Protective Edge may have caused damage worth four or five times that figure²⁴ and has left approximately 108,000 Palestinians homeless as a result of the total or partial destruction of some 18,000 dwellings. According to UN estimates, only 10 percent of the population was receiving water once a day for six to eight hours, with 75 percent getting water once every four days, or worse.²⁵

There were two phases in this twelfth war: most of the casualties fell during the first twenty-nine days as Israel launched a ground offensive, bombing and reoccupying part of the Gaza Strip, and driving one out of three inhabitants from their homes; the second phase, from 5 to 26 August, consisted of a succession of fragile truces, brokered under Egyptian auspices, and punctuated by renewed outbreaks of hostilities. Egyptian mediation efforts had to be beefed up by US and European contributions to reach a lasting cease-fire on 26 August.²⁶ Under the terms of the cease-fire, Israel agreed to alleviate the pressure on the crossing-points into the Gaza Strip at Erez and Karni, to restore the six-nautical-mile fishing zone, and to scale back to one hundred meters the three-hundred-meter no-go zone inside the Gaza Strip from its border. Hamas, for its part, committed to handing the crossing points to Israel and Egypt back to the PA. Palestinian demands for an operational port with a connection to Cyprus, for the reconstruction of the Gaza airport, and for the release of more prisoners were left to future discussions.

Throughout the fifty days of conflict, Israel was unable to stop Hamas rocket-fire into its territory, further demonstrating that the 2005 “unilateral withdrawal” could not provide a lasting solution to Israel’s security requirement on its southern flank. Israel badly needs a powerful partner in Gaza and given the demise of the Egyptian option over half a century ago, the partner clearly has to be Palestinian. And if Israel will not consider official dealings with Hamas, then it has to accept the Palestinian reconciliation and allow the PA back into Gaza.

At the same time, the Palestinian population of Gaza has the absolute right to live in peace without paying the price of Israeli blockades and offensives. That is why the lifting of the siege is essential to reach a lasting pacification of the area. The cease-fire concluded on 26 August provides only minimal confidence-building measures in that regard. And international monitoring will be key to moving forward and consolidating the truce.

The European Union (EU) pledged its readiness to revive its Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), a short-lived monitoring mission that was established in Rafah after the 2005 Israeli withdrawal but soon collapsed because of Europe’s decision to boycott the newly elected Hamas authorities in 2006. In addition to the crossing points, the EU could also provide naval escorts and controls to sea traffic between Gaza and Limassol (Cyprus). Those are not mere technicalities, since Washington would finally have to accept that the EU is not just a donor as generous as it is passive.

Conclusion

Historians well know that there is a limit to the suffering a designated power can inflict on a population it deems “hostile.” This twelfth Israeli war on Gaza should be the last one if an even more major catastrophe is to be avoided. Israel has tried everything in Gaza and failed repeatedly,

with the territory's Palestinian population paying with its own flesh and blood the price of Israeli failures over and over again. There is not a family in Gaza that is not mourning a relative killed, maimed, or detained—and in many cases, many more than one relative. Such tragedy is by no means destined but rather the product of this twelve-war cycle inflicted on Gaza, which came full circle with the elusive conclusion of Operation Protective Edge.

Gaza is not only an integral part of Palestine, it is the only one that survived the 1948 Nakba without either being absorbed into Israel or annexed by Jordan. There was no place for an entity like Gaza in the Zionist plan, which is a major reason for the extreme brutality that Israel has visited on the territory's population throughout the twelve wars. But Gaza is there to stay as a collective embodiment of Palestinian nationalism: It is in Gaza that Palestinian independence was proclaimed, in Gaza that the fedayeen first arose, in Gaza that the founders of Fatah gained their know-how, in Gaza that the first intifada started, and in Gaza that Hamas was established. More importantly perhaps, it is in Gaza that the Palestinian resistance movement was able to cause an Israeli withdrawal after its first occupation of the territory in 1956–57.

The 2005 “unilateral withdrawal” was supposed to transform the occupation and render it less costly for Israel both financially and in terms of security. But as the four wars since then have shown, the “reformed” occupation has proved frustrating for the Israelis and devastating for the Palestinians. With no more Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip, no religious sites that are disputed between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and the 1949 cease-fire lines long accepted as a permanent border, agreeing on the parameters of peaceful coexistence should have proven easier in Gaza than in the West Bank. Yet, the twelve-war cycle has demonstrated quite the contrary.

This might be because the core issue in Gaza holds the key to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Is Israel able to deal with Palestinians who are neither occupied nor dependent? It is a simple question, but one which has far-reaching implications. If the answer is resoundingly positive, Gaza, as the cradle of Palestinian nationalism, could become the cornerstone of an authentic peace between Israel and Palestine. Conversely, it is clear that there will never be hope for Palestine as a whole as long as Gaza remains under attack.

About the Author

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