

“There Is No Safe Place in Gaza”: Palestinians Speak Out During Israeli Assault

In a vicious five-day assault, Israeli occupying forces killed 33 Palestinians in Gaza.

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Global Research, May 24, 2023
[Truthout](#) 23 May 2023

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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On May 18, thousands of Palestinians in Gaza joined the “[Palestine Flag March](#)” to protest Israel’s “Flag March” happening the same day. On “Flag Day,” tens of thousands of ultraright-wing Israeli settlers, who illegally live on stolen land, [attacked](#) Palestinians and journalists, chanting “Death to Arabs” and “Your village will be burned.”

“The Israeli Flag March means nothing, they walk in our streets, and the land denies their existence,” Gaza resident Amna al-Banna told [Mondoweiss](#). “Raising the Israeli flag in Jerusalem will not make people ignore that it’s Palestinian land, and that Israel occupies it.”

On May 13, Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad had reached an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire agreement following a five-day Israeli military onslaught against the people of Gaza. Although Palestinians fired some rockets into Israel, the [death toll](#) was lopsided.

During the Israeli assault, dubbed “Operation Shield and Arrow,” Israeli Occupying Forces (IOF) [killed](#) 33 Palestinians, including six children, and injured at least [147 Palestinians](#). The airstrikes damaged 2,041 houses, [destroyed](#) 31 buildings, and rendered 93 families homeless and 128 homes uninhabitable.

The Biden administration not only refused to condemn Israel for the devastation it wreaked in Gaza; it [blocked the United Nations Security Council](#) from issuing a statement condemning the Israeli airstrikes as well as the rockets fired from Gaza.

This was the [sixth](#) such attack on Gaza since the Israeli blockade of the strip (which is a crime under international law) was [permanently imposed](#) in 2007. Two million Palestinians live in the Gaza Strip, often called “[the world’s largest open-air prison](#)” because Israel controls the ingress and egress of all Gazans.

“A friend in Gaza said to me recently, ‘What is worse than dying in Gaza is living [in Gaza],’” Palestinian writer and publisher Michel Moushabeck [wrote](#) in a recent article for *Truthout*.

The Gaza Palestine Hearing: International People’s Tribunal on U.S. Imperialism

Several hours before the May 13 ceasefire was announced, the [Gaza Palestine Hearing](#) of the “[International People’s Tribunal on U.S. Imperialism: Sanctions, Blockades and Coercive Economic Measures](#)” convened. Some of the [co-organizers](#) of the tribunal include the National Lawyers Guild, International Association of Democratic Lawyers, Alliance for Global Justice, CODEPINK, Black Alliance for Peace, Franz Fanon Foundation, Confederation of Lawyers of Asia and the Pacific, Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.

As a juror for the tribunal, I attended the hearing and was stunned by the powerful statements of people who testified from Gaza as the Israeli bombs were falling on their neighborhoods.

In 2021, Riyad Iskhuntana’s residence was the target of a direct Israeli bombing. “My four kids and my wife were killed in the apartment that I lived in, and they were killed in a brutal way. In one moment, I lost my four kids and my wife,” he testified. “And I remained under the rubble for 12 hours with my youngest daughter, not knowing if my kids had died or not. But eventually they were all dead except me and my youngest daughter.”

Iskhuntana spoke about the traumatic IOF bombing of Gaza on May 12. “Yesterday,” he said, “my neighbor also was bombed, and this even deteriorated the psychological condition of myself and my daughter beyond what we had lived through in 2021. One of the psychological issues that we’re experiencing is that we began to forget things, and now with the restarting of the bombings again, the trauma is back. And we’re scared and trembling all the time.”

“I’m speaking to you as the enemy’s planes are bombing all civilian places,” Iskhuntana added. “All the rockets are getting even more aggressive. There is no such thing as civilian or military target; it’s all civilian targets being targeted. Nothing is safe and secure.”

Malak Nidal is a 16-year-old girl who’s in 10th grade. “There is no safe place in Gaza,” she testified. “I prefer to stay at home and die in my home, better than living in this area,” Nidal said. “I’m talking with you now when we have war, and I don’t know if I’m going to die now in this moment. The plane is over my head, and we hear a lot of noise right now while I’m speaking with you.”

Wafa-al-Udaini is a prominent Palestinian journalist. “I covered several Israeli aggressions here in Gaza,” she testified. “Always, it was so risky for me to go outside and interview people because, as Palestinian journalists based here in Gaza, we don’t have immunity. And actually, for the occupation, we are a target because they want, indeed, to silence the truth.”

Al-Udaini added that many of her colleagues were murdered, injured and maimed while reporting on the events in Gaza. “So far, nobody holds Israel accountable for their crimes against the Palestinian journalists.” She noted that cameras and camera accessories are not allowed to enter Gaza, which poses a major obstacle to the work of photojournalists.

“Every Palestinian in occupied Palestine is a target,” Al-Udaini said. “The main mission for the occupation here in Palestine actually is just to end or eliminate any existence of Palestinians.” Since 2007, “the Israeli occupation authorities imposed a land, air and ground siege on the people of Gaza, which is considered like a collective punishment.”

Collective punishment is considered a war crime under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Gazans Support “Freedom Fighters” Who Resist the Occupation

The people in Gaza support the “freedom fighters” who “manage to resist the occupation by all means they have,” Al-Udaini testified. “Everyone, every child, you just go in the street and ask the people, ask the children about the resistance. They all honor the resistance and the freedom fighters because they believe that they are the only ones who can defend them from the occupation.”

Yasser al-Dirawi is a Palestinian lawyer who wrote his thesis about the authority of the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC). “I apologize, the internet is weak and got disconnected because of an Israeli attack that just happened to us,” he said while testifying. “The bombs are falling next to us. I’m feeling the vibrations happening to my civilian neighbors.”

Al-Dirawi testified, “[The Israelis] don’t distinguish between a child, a woman, an elderly. They kill all civilians without any distinction between different targets.” (Targeting civilians constitutes a war crime prohibited by the Fourth Geneva Convention.) “There is no distinction between civilians or non-civilians, and there is no distinction between children and non-children, women and not women.”

The lawyer described the inability of the people of Gaza to import agricultural products and seeds “which literally led to the destruction of the agricultural sector and the inability of the fishermen and the fishing industry to survive,” adding that “it has a component of revenge on the people who live in Gaza.” The blockade of Gaza also prevents the importation of medicine and medical equipment, he said.

“The economic situation overall in Gaza is a humanitarian catastrophe,” al-Dirawi stated. “This is a targeted project. The U.S. is the primary supporter of the blockade. We call it the ‘United States of Imperialism’ that supports the Israelis.” Al-Dirawi noted that two days before this hearing, the U.S. had [squashed any criticism](#) of Israel’s assault in the UN Security Council.

Two years ago, former ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda opened a formal investigation into war crimes committed in Gaza since 2014, but there has been little progress in the probe, thanks to [U.S. pressure on the ICC](#).

When I asked al-Dirawi whether he thought Karim Khan, the current ICC prosecutor, would file war crimes charges against Israeli leaders, he said that Khan was acting with “intentional slowness.” Al-Dirawi contrasted Khan’s delay in investigating Israel with his immediate commencement of “a very serious” investigation of war crimes committed during the war in Ukraine. Although al-Dirawi has sent copious evidence and testimonies to Khan for the Israel investigation, he has received no formal response.

On May 13, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights [called](#) on ICC prosecutor Khan to issue a public statement condemning the Israeli aggression in Gaza and expedite the

investigation into the situation in Palestine. To date, Khan has not responded.

On May 15, Palestinians commemorated the [75th anniversary of al-Nakba](#) (Arabic for “the catastrophe”), when Israelis ethnically cleansed nearly 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland and destroyed over 500 Palestinian villages and towns during the creation of the state of Israel.

Also on May 15, for the first time in history, the UN General Assembly (which is comprised of 193 UN member states) officially condemned the Nakba. The [International Commission to Support Palestinians’ Rights](#), based in Gaza, called it “a unique and unprecedented step,” adding that it should be “translated into enabling the Palestinian people to exercise their right to independence and return.”

The U.S., which unconditionally provides Israel with \$3.8 billion annually in military assistance, did not attend the General Assembly’s commemoration of the Nakba.

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Featured image: Thousands of Palestinians protests along the fence separating Gaza from Israel against the racist Flag March taking place in occupied East Jerusalem on 18 May 2023 [Mohammed Asad/MiddleEastMonitor]

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