

World Inaction Is Driving the Slow Death of the Gaza Strip

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This month marks 10 years since Israel withdrew its last troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip. It has spawned a narrative as deceitful and destructive as that of Israel's "generous" offer at Camp David in 2000.

The so-called disengagement from Gaza was billed as a momentous opportunity for its people. However, the subsequent blockade of the territory and full-scale onslaughts by Israel's military have culminated in a warning from the UN this month that Gaza could become "uninhabitable" by 2020. Its residents were not offered freedom, simply a modified prison cell.

To understand how it has come to this, it is necessary to pick apart the entrenched fallacies surrounding Israel's narrative of its withdrawal. First and foremost, it was not a goodwill gesture – Israel was withdrawing from Palestinian land, not its own, and some settlers were relocated to the West Bank to continue living illegally on occupied territory.

Besides that, there were two underlying motives behind the withdrawal, one of them being demography. Gaza constitutes less than 6 per cent of the land mass of the occupied territories, but is home to more than 40 per cent of the Palestinian population.

The foreign minister at the time, Silvan Shalom, claimed that his country was "prepared to take risks for peace", but withdrawing from Gaza was not a risk. From the point of view of maintaining Jewish numerical supremacy – a prime objective repeatedly stated by Israeli officials – it was a no-brainer.

Though demography is often overlooked by Israel's allies and lobbyists when considering its motives, its government at the time was unambiguous. "We are disengaging from Gaza because of demography," then-deputy prime minister Shimon Peres told the BBC.

Then-prime minister Ariel Sharon, whose Kadima party platform states that "in order to maintain a Jewish majority, part of the land of Israel must be given up", said at the time: "Over one million Palestinians live [in Gaza], and they double their numbers with every generation."

The other underlying motive was consolidating Israeli control over the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories – the West Bank, including East Jerusalem – by banking the international goodwill generated by the misperception that the Gaza withdrawal was a major concession for peace.

The ensuing siege of the territory – a violation of international law because it constitutes collective punishment of a civilian population – is part of this second motive. Israel has deliberately created and exacerbated a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, thereby eliciting intermittent rocket fire from there. This is the only time the international community pays attention.

Israel then frames its military attacks and invasions as self-defence, and cites rocket fire as evidence that further territorial withdrawals would jeopardise Israel's national security because Arabs are inherently opposed to peace and incapable – even unworthy – of governing themselves.

In other words, put people in a cage, constantly provoke them, wonder why they are not grateful and blame them when they lash out. It is an absurd narrative that has nonetheless taken hold. Relieved of the burden of policing Gaza – which was notorious for being particularly unruly – Israel has zealously entrenched its occupation and colonisation of the West Bank.

It has facilitated this by seeking, ever since its withdrawal from Gaza, to separate the territory from the West Bank – not just physically, but also politically and diplomatically – as part of a classic divide-and-rule strategy. This is despite the Oslo Accords, to which Israel is a signatory, recognising Gaza and the West Bank as a single territorial unit.

Gaza is now all too often spoken of as a distinct, separate entity, rather than as part of the wider Palestinian nation and people. Even supporters of the Palestinian cause inadvertently foster this impression when they call for “freedom for Gaza” rather than “freedom for Palestine”, and when the lifting of the blockade is viewed as the solution, rather than a step toward realising Palestinian rights.

As if simply lifting the blockade would fulfil Gaza's aspirations and rights, and as if Gazans would be happy to leave their compatriots in the West Bank and in refugee camps to their own fate. Israel may be hoping that given enough time, the international community – and even the Palestinians – will come to accept this separation as a *fait accompli*.

Israel's apologists peddle the notion that the situation in Gaza is fundamentally different because it is no longer occupied. That is another falsehood that has become accepted wisdom. Under international law, occupation exists if a state has “effective control” over a territory, not necessarily a direct military presence.

Explaining why Israel maintains “effective control” of Gaza and is thus still the occupying power, Amnesty International wrote in August last year: “Israel maintains sole control of Gaza's air space and territorial waters [including offshore gas reserves] and continues to prohibit any movement of people or goods via air or sea.

It directly controls all but one of Gaza's land border crossings, and continues to close three out of the four crossings for commercial goods, restrict the volume of key imports and ban most exports, all of which have a serious impact on humanitarian and socioeconomic conditions in Gaza.

Amnesty added: “Israel continues to control the Palestinian population registry ... so all identity documents (including passports) require Israeli approval. And the Gaza Strip continues to depend on Israel for the majority of its electricity supply. Since 2005, Israel has

continued its land incursions into Gaza ... Several large Israeli operations in recent years have had a devastating effect and Israeli forces regularly use live fire against Palestinian civilians.”

As such, despite what Israeli officials have been claiming since the withdrawal, their country is still legally responsible for Gazans’ welfare – not that it had previously been shouldering that responsibility.

The situation in Gaza has continued to deteriorate to such an extent that ISIL is beginning to establish a foothold there. This, in addition to Israel’s siege, military attacks and constant provocations, leaves little hope on the horizon for a beleaguered people.

The UN’s warning that the territory could become “uninhabitable” in less than five years will probably turn out to be prophetic. To many Gazans, that stage has already been reached. The international community, either in its shameful inaction or its blind kowtowing to Israel, shares the blame for this tragedy.

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