

GAZA: six millennia history – before creation of Israel

Gaza, one of the world's oldest cities, lies between Africa and the Levant and has always been of strategic importance and very much coveted by conquerors who also eyed its fertile land. Its earliest beginnings are recorded as Canaanite, and at different times, it has come under the rule of the Hyksos, Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and the Turks. The dogged resistance of the people against all invaders is legendary, yet over time, every invader contributed to the rich Gazan melting pot. Under the Philistines it grew into the largest of five city-states. During the Byzantine era, Gaza flourished intellectually and economically, its exports reaching as far as England in the 5th century AD. So prosperous did Gaza City become over the following ten centuries, the Ottomans allowed it to remain a regional capital of Palestine. But as the Ottoman Empire declined, so too did Gaza. Napoleon entered Gaza without resistance, as he passed through to Egypt. The British though, pounded Gaza with shells during World War I as European interest in Palestine grew again due to its strategic location.

1948 Israel's ethnic-cleansing of Palestine crowds Gaza

The Palestinians who lived in Askalaan– what Israel today calls Ashkelon – were dispossessed of their lands and fled in terror to nearby Gaza in 1948. Fleeing Palestinians from other towns and villages also ended up as refugees in Gaza. Today, some 80 per cent of the 1.5 million Palestinians crowded into Gaza belong to families who once lived in what is now called Israel.

1967 Israel's occupation shuts down Gaza's economy

Since Israel's occupation of the little land left to the Palestinians after the 1967 six-day war, Gaza has suffered miserably. In the years that followed, Israel has done everything to shut off opportunities for economic growth and has made sure that Gaza's infrastructure remained undeveloped.

1993 Oslo increased Gaza's dependency on Israel

Despite the optimism of the Oslo Accords, Israel's vice-like grip on Gaza continued and the people found themselves increasingly denied freedom of movement which again impacted on their economic development. Unable to produce or invest, the Palestinians became more and more dependent on imports from Israel.

2005 "Disengagement" does not end occupation

Nothing changed after Israel removed the deliberately implanted 8,000 Jewish settlers to a massive publicity campaign around Israel's "painful sacrifice for peace". Instead, the Palestinians were left hopelessly impoverished and were literally strangled economically and socially by Israel's formidable military cordon around the Gaza Strip. This, despite Israel claiming that it had disengaged and was no longer occupying Gaza. It closed Erez Crossing between Gaza and Israel and the Karni Crossing – the commercial and humanitarian lifeline of Gaza. Worse still, Israel began the insidious opening and closing of Rafah Crossing on Egypt's border, the only remaining access out of, or into, Gaza. Many Palestinians found themselves stranded on either side of the crossing not knowing when it might open to access medical care, studies, work or to return home.

2006 Israel imposes sanctions after Hamas elected

Hamas is elected to government in fair and democratic elections, but Israel and the world decide to cut off funds for the government's operating budget while Israel arrests 64 Hamas government officials, the majority of whom (including 6 cabinet ministers) remain in Israeli military prisons. The Palestinians in Gaza already reduced to dependency on international donors, now find themselves effectively imprisoned and living under a state of siege.

2006 – 2009 Israel's offensive operations in Gaza

Israeli raids, incursions and bombardments in Gaza occurred on and off for years before Israel's "disengagement" and since. From 2000 – 2006, some 2,300 Palestinians in Gaza were killed. From 2006, Israeli operations are as follows:

Jun 2006 - "Operation Summer Rains" – 250 Palestinians killed, hundreds wounded

Jul 2006 – 170 Palestinians killed; 395 wounded

Oct 2006 – "Operation Rain Man" 23 killed; 100 wounded.

Nov 2006 - "Operation Autumn Clouds" – 77 Palestinians killed, 250 wounded

Mar 2008 – "Operation Hot Winter" – 120 Palestinians killed; 150 wounded.

Dec 2008 – "Operation Cast Lead" – 800+ Palestinians killed; 3000+ wounded

(The assault on Gaza continues: 12 January 2009)

DISPELLING THE MYTHS CREATED BY ISRAEL

MYTH NO 1: Gaza is no longer occupied by Israel

Israel says that when it withdrew the 8,000 Israeli settlers from Gaza in 2005, it had given control back to the Palestinians. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Israel tightened its grip even more and has full control of Gaza's air, sea and land spaces. Furthermore, it imposed a draconian siege that created a complete humanitarian crisis even before the latest military assault.

MYTH NO 2: Hamas violated the ceasefire

This is totally untrue. Israel violated the ceasefire when it killed several Palestinians in November provoking a Hamas response. Israel also refused to end the siege as required under the ceasefire arrangements, allowing at best a trickle of aid through while keeping the border hermetically sealed 70% of the time. Even after all the death and destruction of this military campaign, Israel refuses to countenance a cease-fire.

MYTH NO 3: Israel wants peace

Since the beginning of the Annapolis Peace Process in Dec 2007, and before this latest offensive, Israel killed 546 Palestinians (including 76 children), some 5,000 Palestinians were arrested and checkpoints were increased from 521 to 699 in the West Bank. Furthermore its illegal settlement projects have continued and have increased by a factor of 38.

MYTH NO 4: Israel is acting in self-defence

As the Occupying Power with the largest military arsenal in the region, Israel has a complete monopoly over the use of force and claiming self-defence when it provoked the confrontation is simply mendacious. Furthermore, Israel let it be known for some time that it intended to launch a military assault on Gaza which clearly suggests that this offensive was premeditated.

MYTH NO 5: Israel strikes only military targets

This is the familiar refrain whenever civilians are killed and/or wounded, with Israel attributing the deaths and injuries to either an unfortunate mistake, collateral damage, a technical malfunction, or explosions caused by Palestinian militants themselves. This is despite Israel clearly having hit schools, mosques, a university, a hospital, government buildings, charitable institutions and marked UN-run organisations.

MYTH NO 6: Hamas is the target not Palestinians

There is no way that bombs and artillery fire can distinguish between people who are Hamas supporters and those with other or no political affiliations.

MYTH NO 7: Palestinians are the source of violence

The root cause of the conflict is Israel's occupation of Palestine since the 1967 war and its oppressive military control that denies the Palestinians their freedom, human rights and their right to self-determination in their own land.