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## The Never-Ending Nakba

From Gaza to Gaza Camp

by JOHNNY BARBER

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*Northern Jordan.*

Immediately preceding the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the country that now demands others acknowledge its “right to exist” depopulated and destroyed *over 400* Palestinian towns and villages, forcing the inhabitants to flee for their lives. The new state planted trees and established national parks over the ruins of dozens of villages where Israelis now spend quiet afternoons and enjoy picnics in the shade. The cries of the dead are drowned out by the laughter of children playing on the remains of ancient homes. The Arabic names of the destroyed villages have been erased. The Israeli state still clings to the myth of “A land without a people, for a people without a land,” and deny the Nakba took place, just as many Americans still deny an indigenous genocide in “our” country. Zochrot, an Israeli NGO, has identified and mapped every destroyed Palestinian village and town in order to reeducate the Israeli public. Their message is largely ignored.

The evidence that could not be erased- the millions of displaced people living across Israel, in what remains of Palestine, in camps in neighboring Arab countries and the wider Palestinian diaspora are marginalized in an attempt to silence them. Silenced, they are more easily forgotten.

Take Gaza for example. As Hamas and Fatah announced critical gains toward establishing a unity government in the summer of 2014, Israel escalated hostilities in Gaza. In response to Israeli violence, including drone strikes and targeted assassinations, rockets are fired from Gaza into Israel. Both sides escalate the violence. Suddenly, Gaza exists again- as a threat to the state. Hamas is condemned in the media. Politicians declare, "Israel has a right to defend itself!" Israel, with the backing of the United States, begins an assault that includes a sustained aerial bombardment as well as a ground invasion using tanks, howitzers, and thousands of troops against a largely unarmed, civilian population. From Gaza rockets continue to fly in unprecedented numbers.

7 civilians are killed in Israel. 1660 Palestinian civilians are killed. In Gaza, hospitals, mosques, schools, and office towers are destroyed. Entire neighborhoods are pulverized to rubble. Israel faces harsh criticism as pictures of carnage flood social media. After 50 days a ceasefire is brokered by Egypt. Israel makes concessions. The buffer zone will be reduced. Fisherman will be able to fish further into the sea (but still well within the limits granted to them during the Oslo process). The siege will be loosened, allowing people to travel. Materials, including concrete, will be permitted into Gaza to begin rebuilding. Nations around the world promise billions of dollars to help with the rebuilding effort. "Calm" is restored.

The ceasefire is broken by Israel in a matter of days. Farmers are shot in the buffer zone. Silence. Fishermen are attacked at sea. Silence. The Rafah border crossing with Egypt is sealed. The siege is worse than before the Israeli attack. Silence. Ten months later, building materials have still not entered Gaza. The billions of dollars promised for rebuilding doesn't materialize, nothing is rebuilt. Silence. Thousands live in the rubble of their destroyed homes. Children freeze to death during the winter. Thousands more remain in the UN schools they fled to during the July attack. Silence. Israeli soldiers publish testimonies that point to war crimes committed in the offensive. In America, the mainstream media largely ignore the testimonies. Silence. Gaza is forgotten.

The U.S. Congress praises Netanyahu. Obama congratulates him on forming a new cabinet, and no one comments on the newly appointed racists in his coalition government- one of which said killing mothers of martyrs is justified to prevent "more little snakes being raised there," another calling Palestinians "sub-human". Aid, in the billions of U.S. dollars continues to flow unabated to Israel.

While rockets from Gaza garners some attention, other Palestinian refugees suffer in complete isolation.

Just a 5-kilometer drive from Jerash, the beautifully preserved remnants of a once wealthy Roman city, is Jerash Camp. Known locally as Gaza Camp, it was established in 1968 as a temporary camp to house 11,500 refugees fleeing Gaza during the 6-day war. Many of the

refugees were refugees for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, having originally fled Beersheba during the Nakba in 1948. The refugees from Gaza were not granted Jordanian papers.

The situation facing those in Gaza Camp is the most difficult of the 2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan today. Now home to an estimated 30,000 people, the camp sits on less than .75 sq. kilometers of land. The sewage system is an above ground channel system that cannot contain the volume of waste, which flows down the alleyways and streets, the only space where children can play. The UN itself estimates that 75% of the houses are uninhabitable- some still have the original cancer causing asbestos and corrugated tin sheeting provided for roofing in 1968. The refugees are denied support by the Jordanian government. Electricity and water are supplied to the camp at cost. Internet connections are not available. There are no pharmacies in the camp, and only one health clinic administered by UNRWA. The residents of Gaza Camp cannot access public health care. They cannot open bank accounts or purchase land.

Education is highly valued. University students from the camp finish in the top percentiles of their class, but higher education is costly, as students can't access public education. Children sometimes go hungry so parents can keep them in school. Others go hungry because the average family lives on \$2.00 a day. Those who finish their college education cannot pursue the occupations they trained for. Doctors, engineers, and lawyers are denied licenses and employment by the state.

While Benjamin Netanyahu calls out to Jews around the world to “come home” to Israel, the original inhabitants of the land are denied that right. In fact, their rights are not even part of the conversation. In order to claim it is the “only democracy in the Middle East,” while subverting the rights of its Palestinian citizens, Israel must maintain it's Jewish majority. The Arab nations that house the Palestinian refugees are not much better. They claim they deny citizenship so people's refugee status remains intact. But that doesn't explain the denial of basic human rights that would allow people to live with basic necessities, some comfort, and the hope of a better future.

The Nakba did not end in 1948. It is an ongoing process of marginalization and erasure. Although Israelis may deny their history, the people of Gaza Camp cling to their memories of Palestine like a lifeline. The children have absorbed the stories of their elders to their very core. If you ask them where they are from, they'll tell you, “I am from Beersheba, I am Palestinian.” The connection to home is how they claim their dignity.