



HURLING TOWARDS A POINT OF NO RETURN: PALESTINE UNDER SIEGE

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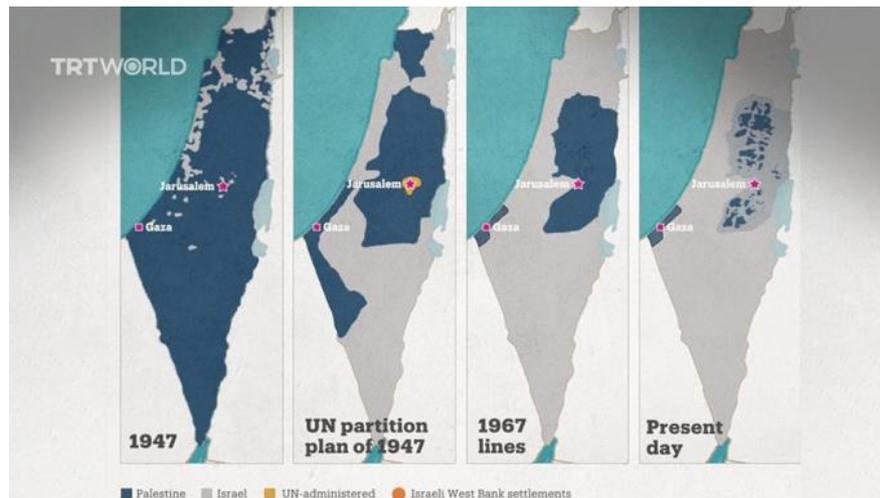
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On May 7, 2021, the last Friday of Ramazan, one of the most revered moments of a month whose sanctity in itself enjoins that peace prevail — Israeli forces indiscriminately fired rubber bullets and stun grenades on Palestinian worshippers in Al Aqsa Mosque, injuring more than 200 people. Despite this, hundreds of believers returned to Al Aqsa’s dome the following day to mark the ‘Night of Power’, begging the question of how many decades of oppression have prepared them for this display of resilience.

The recent unrest stems from forced Palestinian evictions taking place in the Sheikh Jarrah district of East Jerusalem since 1972, in what is the continuation of Israel’s greater project of settler-colonialism. Sheikh Jarrah is a small neighborhood in East Jerusalem, home to 28 Palestinian refugee families that were ethnically evicted from their original homes during the 1948 Nakba. An agreement between Jordan and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in 1956 specified that these families would be allotted land in Sheikh Jarrah. However, a ruling by an Israeli court in October 2020 set to forcibly remove 12 Palestinian families from the neighborhood, with the confidence that they would hand over their holdings to Israeli settlers. They were given until May 2021 to evacuate. Consequently, 550 Palestinians face the threat of displacement.



(Source: TRT)

Legal Viewpoint

Israel's building of settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is illegal under international law. The establishment and expansion of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, violates Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which mandates Israel to protect the population under occupation as well as prohibits the settlement of Israelis into occupied territories.¹ The illegality of these settlements is repeatedly reaffirmed by the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions, the UN and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). According to UN Resolution 2334, Israeli settlements constitute “a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the vision of two States living side-by-side in peace and security, within internationally recognized borders.”² In addition to being violations of international humanitarian law, according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, significant acts mandatory for the establishment of settlements amount to war offences.³

¹ “Status of Settlements Under International Law,” *Amnesty International*.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/>

² “Israel’s Settlements Have No Legal Validity, Constitute Flagrant Violation of International Law, Security Council Reaffirms,” *United Nations*, December 23, 2016.
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>

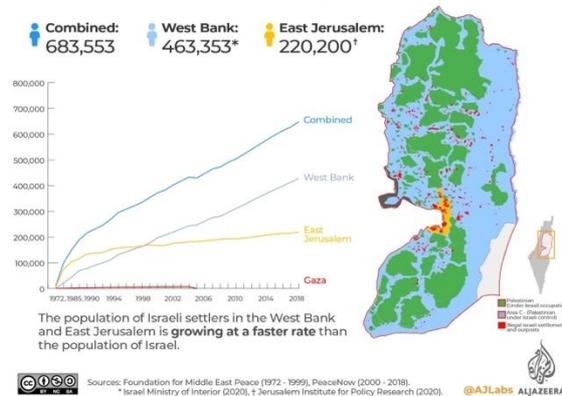
³ “Status of Settlements Under International Law,” *Amnesty International*.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/>

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

Illegal Israeli settlements

Settlements are Jewish communities built on Palestinian land.

There are between 600,000 - 750,000 Israeli settlers living in at least 250 settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Israeli settlements are illegal under international law.



(Source: Al Jazeera)

Current Situation

What is being termed as a real-estate dispute is essentially emblematic of the greater Israeli apartheid to completely wipe out Palestine. It should be kept in mind that according to international law, Israeli courts do not have the jurisdiction to settle civilians in occupied Palestinian territory.

While Israel has said that it is targeting Hamas's military facilities in self-defence following rocket attacks by Palestinian factions, Hamas says its actions have been in response to Israel's policy of the forced displacement of Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem and the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque by Israeli forces.

The intensity of violence in Palestine has risen to its highest level in years as Israel pounded the Gaza Strip with air strikes and artillery, flattening residential buildings and leaving ever-increasing carnage. With Israeli troops amassed at Gaza's border, tensions continue to soar.

More than 72,000 internally displaced people are facing extremely difficult conditions due to shortage of food, water and electricity. Concurrently, there are also concerns regarding the ongoing coronavirus crisis in the territory given that the only Covid testing facility has been made inoperable due to an Israeli raid. At least 219 Palestinians, including at least 63 children, have been killed in Gaza since the start of the Israeli bombardment. The death toll also continues to surge in the West Bank and Occupied East Jerusalem.⁴

⁴ "Netanyahu 'determined' to continue Gaza bombardment: Live," *Al Jazeera*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/19/ceasefire-elusive-as-israel-continues-to-pound-gaza-live>



(Source: Al Jazeera)

Despite three United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meetings, the United Nations (UN) has been unable to adopt a joint statement to halt the violence after the US blocked the measure.⁵

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that Israel is pursuing vigorous preclusion against Gaza's Hamas rulers and has said Israel hopes to restore calm "quickly".⁶ Despite US President Biden said that he expected that Israel would comply with de-escalation as a precursor to a cease-fire, Prime Minister Netanyahu blatantly stated that his country would continue on the current trajectory till their objectives were achieved.⁷ He even took to twitter to thank the 25 countries that have supported Israel- conspicuously missing out India which caused a rift between Indians on social media.⁸ Hamas officials have said that they would continue to maintain their resistance till the end of the occupation.

⁵ "Israel-Palestine: US blocks UN statement for third time in a week," *Al Jazeera*, May 17, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/17/no-us-action-after-third-uns-c-meeting-on-israel-palestine>

⁶ "The Latest: US opposes UN resolution for Gaza cease-fire," *Associated Press*, May 19, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-israel-israel-palestinian-conflict-business-government-and-politics-479bd6f033ae398736299e91667a21f0>

⁷ "Netanyahu 'determined' to continue Gaza bombardment: Live," *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/19/ceasefire-elusive-as-israel-continues-to-pound-gaza-live>

⁸ "Benjamin Netanyahu Ignores India While Thanking 25 Nations For Supporting Israel," *Eurasian Times*, May 16, 2021. <https://eurasianimes.com/benjamin-netanyahu-ignores-india-while-thanking-25-nations-for-supporting-israel/>



(Source: Twitter)

Trying to Change the Narrative through Social Media

In contemporary times, social media platforms have become the new battleground for online activism, fueled by a new generation of tech-savvy youth that take naturally to content creation and engagement. At the moment, western media is successfully keeping its domestic audience unaware of the actual on-ground situation. With the aim of changing the narrative, while simultaneously suppressing the existing one, Israel is blatantly using networks of fake accounts and bots to swing public opinion its way. Facebook-owned Instagram has come under heavy fire for removing content related to Palestine that are posted from around the world. Many stories, highlights and archives touching upon the conflict have disappeared due to what Instagram describes as a glitch.⁹



(Source: Google)

⁹ "Users on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok decry censorship of Israel posts," *Fox Business*, May 14, 2021. <https://www.foxbusiness.com/technology/instagram-twitter-tiktok-israel-censorship-claims>

World Reaction

Protests all over the world have been taking place denouncing Israel's continuing attacks on Gaza. Russia has made it clear to Israel that more civilian casualties in Gaza are unacceptable while China has called upon the US to take up a just position and support the UNSC is easing the situation. Many countries including Turkey have said that it is high time Israel stop trying to subjugate the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. France is said to be working with Egypt and Jordan on a ceasefire resolution.¹⁰

Countries which include the United States, Germany, Czech Republic and Slovenia concur with Israel. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has held three emergency meetings which have ended with no concrete outcome after the United States keeps blocking the UNSC from issuing a joint declaration urging an end to the conflict. The US viewpoint is that a joint declaration would be "counterproductive"¹¹ and that Israel has a right to self-defense. On May 20, 2021, France proposed another draft UNSC resolution but has been met with opposition from the US, since the latter believes this would interfere with the Biden administration's efforts to end the hostilities.¹²

However, within the US administration there are splits on this stance. On May 19, US Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Talib and Marc Pocan issued a resolution opposing the sale of \$735m in US weapons to the Israeli government.¹³ While in India, pro-government activists have thrown their weight behind Israel, interestingly, India's permanent representative to the United Nations, T.S. Tirumurti, has said that India condemned "all acts of violence, especially rocket attacks from Gaza."¹⁴

¹⁰ "World reaction to Israel's continuing attacks in Gaza," *Al Jazeera*, May 15, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/15/world-reacts-as-violence-in-gaza-escalates>

¹¹ "UN Hampered By US Veto Rights Over Palestine, Indonesia Asks The OIC To Push For A Ceasefire," *VOI*, May 19, 2021.

<https://voi.id/en/news/52416/un-hampered-by-us-veto-rights-over-palestine-indonesia-asks-the-oic-to-push-for-a-ceasefire>

¹² "US says it opposes UN resolution calling for Gaza cease-fire," *ABC News*, May 20, 2021.

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/us-opposes-resolution-calling-gaza-cease-fire-77791153>

¹³ "AOC and progressive Democrats issue resolution to block US arms sales to Israel," *Independent* May 19, 2021.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/aoc-israel-arm-sales-biden-b1850323.html>

¹⁴ "Modi Walks a Political Tightrope With Israel," *Foreign Policy*, May 18, 2021.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/18/israel-palestinian-modi-india-tightrope/>

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has demanded a probe into the allegations of war crimes committed by Israel. During the emergency meeting on May 16, Turkey – backed by Pakistan – recommended that an "international protection mechanism" for Palestine's civilians.¹⁵

UN secretary-general, Antonio Guterres, has appealed to the international community to ensure adequate funding for UN's humanitarian operations in Gaza.¹⁶ UNRWA is also pleading for immediate assistance for especially internally displaced people. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) summit on May 20, is being considered as a last resort to come to a ceasefire resolution.

Pakistan's Stance

Pakistan has always maintained its support for the people of Palestine. Prime Minister Imran Khan strongly denounced the ongoing massacre in Gaza strip by the Israeli forces on social media. He has also been in touch with various heads of states regarding the ongoing situation as well as seeking a just solution to the conflict. Concurrently, the Prime Minister has also approved Covid19 assistance and medical aid to be sent to Palestine.¹⁷ Similarly, there have already been a number of demonstrations by the Pakistani civil society. Pakistani humanitarian Faisal Edhi has announced that he will personally be taking part in relief efforts in Palestine via his foundation.¹⁸ On May 21, 2021, Pakistan marked Palestine Solidarity Day.

The Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi is currently on a diplomatic mission to bring the international community's attention to the worsening situation in Palestine. He attended the emergency meeting of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York on May 20, 2021 where he stated that Israel had mounted a "relentless onslaught" on the people of Palestine and hoped the UNGA would play its role to develop a consensus that leads to an end to atrocities in Palestine.¹⁹

¹⁵ "Turkey proposes 'protection force' for Palestine in emergency OIC meet," *TRT*, May 16, 2021. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-proposes-protection-force-for-palestine-in-emergency-oic-meet-46749>

¹⁶ "Senseless Cycle of Bloodshed, Destruction between Israel, Palestinians in Gaza Must Stop Now, Secretary-General Tells Security Council," *United Nations*, May 16, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14521.doc.htm>

¹⁷ "Pakistan to send medical aid to Palestinians hit by Israeli aggression," *Express Tribune*, May 18, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2300405/pakistan-to-send-medical-aid-to-palestinians-hit-by-israeli-aggression>

¹⁸ "Faisal Edhi seeks visa for Palestine to help people there," *The News*, May 17, 2021. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/835955-faisal-edhi-seeks-visa-for-palestine-to-help-people-there>

¹⁹ "FM Qureshi concludes Ankara visit, departs for New York," *Express Tribune*, May 19, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2300620/fm-qureshi-concludes-ankara-visit-departs-for-new-york>

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Meeting Takeaways

The UN General Assembly's 67th plenary meeting on Middle East, Palestine was held on May 20, 2021. At the UNGA, Israel's representative maintained that his country has a right to protect itself from a designated terrorist organization like Hamas. The United States delegate lay emphasis on how the US was working for peace in the Middle East, sideways reaffirming Israel's right to protect itself and condemning Hamas's rocket launches.²⁰

Countries which included Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia and Tunisia called for an immediate cessation of all forms of violence, and a probe into the allegations of war crimes committed by Israel. There were also appeals to ensure adequate funding for the UN's humanitarian operations in Gaza. Moreover, there were also calls for an international conference to secure a peaceful settlement as well as the setting up of an international protection mechanism for the Palestinians.²¹

On the same day as the UNGA, Israel's security cabinet and Hamas agreed to an un-conditional ceasefire to halt fighting which prompted Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied territories to celebrate. However, hours later, fresh clashes broke out between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police after the latter stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and fired tear gas at Palestinians after Friday prayers.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that Palestinians have received one impediment after the next. Social media is full of haunting images of the death and destruction taking place. But as always mere rhetoric (and in case of the United States, 'both-side-ism') will not translate into anything functional until the powers that be, especially the Muslim ummah, hammer down and present a united stance that ensures the rights of the Palestinians. The announcement of this ceasefire does not erase the violence and does not ensure accountability. As things stand currently, the situation in Palestine seems to be worsening. Israelis have all but nearly wiped-out Palestinian existence.

²⁰ "Gaza Children Living in 'Hell on Earth' Secretary-General Tells General Assembly, as Calls for End to Violence Crescendo, News of Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Breaks," *United Nations*, May 20, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12325.doc.htm>

²¹ Ibid.