

The Palestinians: The World's Continuing Humanitarian Crisis

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The Palestinian people - numbering some 16 million worldwide - represent the longest-lasting modern humanitarian crisis: longer than that suffered by the peoples of Indochina (from 1945 to 1989), longer than that suffered by the peoples of South Asia (the result of the India-Pakistan partition of the 1940s), and certainly longer than that suffered by the people of Syria - from 2011 to 2018. While it may be true that the Palestinian humanitarian crisis is much less deep than that suffered by the people of China (the result of the Great Famine, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s - which took millions of lives), there is a marked and startling difference between the two: the Chinese humanitarian crisis was self-imposed, while the Palestinian humanitarian crisis is a result of geo-political choice. The humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian case is, in fact, accountable to the inability of the international community to resolve the world's longest term geo-political division - the partition of Palestine in 1948 into a state set aside for the world's Jews, and one set aside for the region's Arabs. The humanitarian crisis now is a direct outgrowth of that decision - with upwards of two million Gaza Palestinian suffering under a harsh siege that has lasted from 2007. The crisis is the direct and purposeful result of an economic blockade imposed by Israel, and supported by Israel's most important ally, the United States. The Gaza tragedy provides daily grist for American media commentators, as Israeli and Palestinian partisans wrestle with who is at fault for the siege, and what can be done to end it. The Israeli's view themselves as victims of Gaza's intransigent Islamist parties, while the Palestinians contend that Islamist terrorism is not terrorism at all - but self-defense, a direct outgrowth of Israeli policies. A review of recent history might inform this argument: more than 70 percent of Gaza residents are refugees (or descendants of refugees) from Israel itself, having fled the 1948 war that expanded and extended Israel's original boundaries. The camps, and the conurbations surrounding them, make Gaza (in the words of Palestinian leaders), "the largest open air prison in the world." Indeed (and especially for those who have seen them), the camps, in themselves, represent a humanitarian crisis, housing the world's poorest population in an area of 365 square kilometers. The current unemployment rates stands at an astounding 47 percent. The conditions in Gaza defy description, but have actually been exacerbated by a series of Israeli interventions, the most recent of which (in 2014) resulted in the deaths of over 2400 Palestinians, of which some 60 percent were women and children and the destruction of nearly 40 percent of Palestinian housing. Gaza's infrastructure was obliterated, with the result that the areas ground water was polluted. The Israelis suffered too - 67 soldiers, and no civilians. The wars left Gaza prostrate: cut off from the outside world, malnutrition and disease now stalk Gaza's refugee camps, a ticking bomb that could easily lead to a pandemic of enormous proportions. The lack of potable, clean water will only deepen the crisis. Gaza's sole desalination plant is unworkable and its electric power grid works at less than 30 percent capacity. Gazan power is carefully restricted, to four hours of electricity per family per day. But what is most startling about this crisis is that it is entirely preventable. Even a modest easing of Israel's blockade would have enormous possible consequences, as was the case for a short time in 2012 and early 2013. In that period, fully 1000 truckloads of food, water and other essentials were transferred through Gaza's crossings with Egypt and Israel - providing a short-lived economic boom in the region and lowering unemployment almost immediately by some 20 percent. The same could happen now, except for a lack of international political will. It may be that the same kind of humanitarian crisis will soon be stalking the West Bank, where Israeli settlements continue to intrude on Palestinian agricultural and water resources, displacing thousands of Palestinian families and uprooting centuries-old olive

plant resources that have formed the foundation of Palestinian livelihoods. The continuation of Israel's occupation policies in the West Bank (Israel conquered the area in 1967, and have always viewed it as "contested") is in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions governing imprisoned populations - and operative UN resolutions (most particularly UN resolutions 242 and 338), that have called for an Israeli withdrawal from the region. Unabating Israeli settlement activities have moved forward with a regime of separate and unequal treatment of West Bank Israelis and West Bank Palestinians - with the result that two societies now live in a class-driven structure, with Palestinians serving as a kind-of stand-in for peoples who suffered the same Apartheid-drive system in the American south and in South Africa. That Palestinians under occupation in the West Bank suffer from the most arbitrary of laws and regulations under the Israeli Occupying authorities is no longer in question - and is recognized by the vast majority of the world's nation, excepting for the United States. Palestinians are forced endure constant security checks, traversing dangerous checkpoints and arbitrary searches and seizures. Palestinians live under Israeli military law, with Israel's military prisons now filled with Palestinian men, women and even children. Israel's "Administrative Law" is solely applied by the Israeli Occupying authorities on the Palestinians, while a separate set of judicial guidance's serve settler interest, making the West Bank a seething powder keg of political radicalism and widespread Palestinian radicalism. Palestinians are not simply regularly detained and imprisoned without due process - the suspension of rights is permanent, and dates from 1967. This set of circumstances has defied international mediation. But a resolution is, in fact, in reach. Barring a highly unlikely political resolution of this conflict, and the permanent settling of claims on both sides, the international community can begin triaging the region's economic problems - setting aside the political questions for a later date. In practical terms, this means ending the siege and blockade of Gaza, and applying the same kinds of humanitarian solutions in the West Bank. The free flow of essential items, food, fuel, and water would begin a process of lowering the political temperature among the Palestinian population, providing a political time out from the current crisis. The international community might not be able to produce a political resolution to a division that has plagued the world since 1948 - but certainly the international community has the political will to put in place a humanitarian strategy that will ease immediate suffering. The only thing standing in the way of this, it seems, is the unwillingness of all of us to acknowledge what is happening - even as it is before our very eyes. The world need not be oblivious, or to quote the Jewish French Philosopher Maxim Rodinson, it need not continue to suffer from "a lazy conscience." Indeed: the sleep of reason produces monsters. Waking up to the reality of the current humanitarian crisis, and doing something about it, will not resolve the ongoing Palestinian tragedy, but it will confirm our complicity in it - and so, finally, help to end it.

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