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The Nakba Continues



Palestinians leaving Haifa as Jewish forces enter the city – Public Domain

As my grief and outrage mount at the predictable escalations of violence in Israel/Palestine, I once again marvel at the chasms of misunderstanding and miscalculations in describing events as they unfold and the script that frames most mainstream media reporting. (Recently, *The New York Times* is a notable exception.)

The both-sides-have-their reasons-but-Israel-is-the-victim stories follow an expected pattern. Israeli Jews, still living in the shadow of the Holocaust, return to their rightful homes and then fight for every inch of what is justly theirs. They are repeatedly faced with intractable Arab terrorists who attack innocent civilians and must be crushed with all the might the Israeli military has at its disposal. Never Again! Add “barely human” Hamas

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and Iranian militants, and armed and aggressive ultra-Orthodox Jews and settlers abetted by Israeli soldiers defending God's promises and marching defiantly through Jerusalem yelling "Death to the Arabs!" and we have the narrative in place. The United Nations, a host of human rights groups, and the International Court protest, suggesting various crimes against humanity, while Israelis wring their hands and cry foul. Victim again. The US remains remarkably silent given that much of the weaponry is ours. Could both sides just de-escalate, please?

What is different this time?

While there have been uprisings of Palestinian citizens in Israel against land confiscations and other violations, as well as in support of Palestinians suffering in the territories (Land Day in 1976 comes to mind), now Palestinians in Acre, Haifa, Jaffe, Lod, Nazareth, and Ramle are protesting loudly and vigorously. The mayor of Lod may call this "Kristallnacht" but Palestinian citizens have reached a breaking point, unable to tolerate the 72 year history of racist and exclusionary policies by the Israeli government, its most recent attacks in Jerusalem, and ever-increasing rightward, tending toward fascistic, political parties.

The Israeli government may have miscalculated, although it is entirely possible that the wily Netanyahu thinks that a war would rally the fractured Israeli populace and improve his chances of reappearing Houdini-like as a viable candidate and of course staying out of prison. I suspect that most Israeli politicians believe that anything that causes a rift in the dysfunctional Hamas/ Palestinian Authority relationship and provides an excuse to assassinate a few Hamas leaders is also good for Israel. Israel has already thrown a monkey wrench into the now cancelled Palestinian elections by denying East Jerusalemites the right to vote, thus increasing the distress of the already pandemic stressed occupied Palestinian population.

Although Israeli officials claim the usual Hamas-plot-to-destroy-Israel scenario which I would argue is an egregious attempt at distraction, the reasons for the current eruptions of rage are much more understandable as another spike in the ongoing Nakba that started well before 1948.

The families in the Sheikh Jarrar neighborhood in East Jerusalem were expelled by Israeli soldiers from their homes in Haifa and Jaffa in 1948. Twenty-eight families were settled in Sheikh Jarrar in the 1950s by the Jordanian government in coordination with UNRWA. They moved into houses built by wealthy Palestinian families who had escaped the crowded winding streets of the Old City in the early 20th century as well as into newly

built homes. The area was named for the personal physician of the Islamic general Saladin, who settled there when Muslim armies captured the city from Christian crusaders in 1187.

In the 1960s, the families made a deal with Jordan (who controlled the area until 1967) to become owners of their homes; they received official land deeds in return for renouncing their refugee status with its international protections. The Jordanian government has repeatedly provided documents proving Palestinian ownership of their properties. After the '67 War, the Israeli government developed a settlement plan for the area, called the Holy Basin, which involves building a string of settler units and parks around the Old City and the removal of Palestinian homes using outright confiscation and endless tortured legal battles. Employing Israeli laws that allow Jews to reclaim ownership of land lost in 1948 as well as a host of forged documents, settlers have challenged Palestinian ownership and repeatedly won in Israeli courts. For the Israeli government to call this merely a “real-estate dispute” is unfathomably dishonest. Needless to say, Palestinians who have lost homes and property in West Jerusalem or anywhere in Israel for that matter have no such legal remedy. Twenty-thousand Palestinian homes are currently at risk for demolition in the city.

As Palestinians faced new evictions, tensions mounted, Ramadan was coming to a close, and the Israeli government chose this moment to block Palestinians from outside Jerusalem from entering the Al Aqsa Mosque on one of their most sacred religious holidays. Violence erupted further on Jerusalem Day, a raucous nationalistic celebration of the Israeli capture of the city in 1967, pouring acid into the already seething wound. Israeli police stormed Al Aqsa, firing rubber tipped bullets, stun grenades, and tear gas at praying Palestinians and others (not surprisingly) throwing stones, (the weapon of choice for the disenfranchised, enraged, and humiliated). Three hundred thirty Palestinians were injured. It is not surprising that Hamas felt obligated to respond to these repeated provocations. I have to wonder if the provocations were indeed deliberate. Over the past few days, hundreds of rockets from Hamas have hit several Israeli cities, killing seven, and Israeli forces have repeatedly bombed the Strip, killing over 113, with 530 wounded. More death and destruction will undoubtedly follow as Israeli forces prepare for a land invasion, children will die, the tragic numbers in Israel will be dwarfed by the magnitude of horrifying death in Gaza. Mothers and fathers will weep and young men will vow vengeance. We know this story. The Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz stated “Israel is not preparing for a ceasefire. There is currently no end date for the operation.” Hamas

leader Ismail Haniyeh announced that the rocket attacks would continue until Israel stopped “all scenes of terrorism and aggression in Jerusalem and al-Aqsa mosque”.

Now protests have erupted in the West Bank in Hebron, Jenin, Nablus, Qalqilya, and Tulkarem.

The thing to remember is that this is not a battle between two equal parties; this is a struggle between one of the strongest military powers in the world, backed by the US, bent on dis inheriting and humiliating a dispossessed people. This is a frightful example of ongoing violent settler colonialism, of the inability of the world to see Palestinians as equally human, traumatized, and deserving as their powerful Jewish Israeli neighbors and occupiers. If the international community does not force Israel to deal with the root causes of this disaster, the tragedy will repeat itself over and over again. The narrative of Jewish liberation and entitlement has been poisoned by decades of racist, unjust policies that have been called by many a slow genocide for Palestine. No one wins.

It is up to the international media, governments, human rights and grassroots organizations, and communities all over the world to make this story different this time.

Alice Rothchild is a physician, author, and filmmaker who has focused her interest in human rights and social justice on the Israel/Palestine conflict since 1997. She practiced ob-gyn for almost 40 years. Until her recent retirement she served as Assistant Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Harvard Medical School. She writes and lectures widely, is the author of Broken Promises, Broken Dreams: Stories of Jewish and Palestinian Trauma and Resilience, and On the Brink: Israel and Palestine on the Eve of the 2014 Gaza Invasion. She directed a documentary film, Voices Across the Divide and is active in Jewish Voice for Peace.

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