

From ethnic cleansing to genocide

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Author

PERSPECTIVE

I am a survivor of Al Nakba of 1948. Since then, for the last 76 years, I spent my life pondering over this tragedy, documenting it, telling people around the world about it, and making plans to reverse it by implementing the Right of Return. Little did I know that a bigger and more bloody event was waiting us in the yearlong campaign of Genocide in Gaza.



A Palestinian man sits on the rubble of a destroyed house after Israeli warplanes in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on November 4, 2023.
● ABED RAHIM KHATIB/DPA

How do these two events compare for someone like me who lived to see both?

Both events lasted a year, at least so far. Al Nakba of 1948 started in March 1948 when the Haganah, the Zionist militia, started to invade Palestine before the state of Israel was declared. It was concluded by signing armistice agreements with Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, who sent forces to save Palestinians but failed. Syria signed the agreement four months later.

It was an uncontested campaign. Haganah forces, consisting of 120,000 soldiers, some of whom were WWII veterans, formed nine brigades and carried out 38 military operations. On the defending side was a motley group of Arab forces, not exceeding 10,000 fighters operating under different commands.

The result is clear. The Zionist forces occupied 20,500 km², or 78% of Palestine, depopulated 530 cities and villages of its people, and made two-thirds of Palestinian refugees until today.

At the time, Israel had a small air force and negligible navy. It relied on foot soldiers to occupy and gain territory.

Israel lost 6,000 soldiers. It killed 15,000 Palestinians, mainly unarmed villagers, and took a similar number to forced labor camps where they were used as slave labor for years.

The equation between the number of soldiers and the size of occupied territory is

clear. Relatively few soldiers occupied a very large territory against marginal resistance.

Fast forward 76 years. The descendants of the 1948 refugees were crammed in refugee camps in Gaza at a density of 8,000 persons per km². This has now been doubled since October 7. They created a resistance force of about 15,000 fighters as some say. They dug themselves into underground tunnels.

Over 12 months, Israel unleashed its force on them, over half a million soldiers, a formidable tank force, and a lethal advanced air force. Israel pulverized the landscape in the Gaza Strip and killed and injured over 200,000 Palestinians, the majority of whom were women and children. It was a massacre unprecedented in modern history.

The ethnic cleansing of 1948 was elevated into a full Genocide in 2024.

But the defenders never surrendered. They are still fighting.

Israel failed to occupy one kilometer of the land permanently.

The contrast between 1948 and 2024 is bewildering.

In 1948, the Israeli occupation of the land was carried out by soldiers. In 2024, Israeli soldiers were almost absent. If they venture out of tanks, they are hit by resistance fighters, emerging out of the rubble, carrying only their handheld weapons. We saw on TV that if one Israeli soldier was hit, the others ran away. We saw Israe-

li soldiers being dragged to the front in Gaza, refusing to enlist or deserting.

This was the difference between soldiers defending their country even if they were in refugee camps and others who were brought in to occupy another land and kill another people.

Sitting behind computer screens, as Israelis do, selecting a bank of targets, sending drones, or flying deadly F35s may cause unbelievable devastation and indiscriminate deaths among women and children, but it does not gain an inch of land.

The land belongs to the people who die for it, in the face of unbelievable adversity, not only death under the rubble but starvation, disease, and the loss of all means of life.

There is another difference between 1948 and 2024. On May 14, 1948, we were attacked in Al-Ma'in, my birthplace, by 24 Israeli armored vehicles. They destroyed every structure and killed anyone they found. On that day I became a refugee. On that same day, Ben-Gurion declared his settler state of Israel.

Nobody in the West knew about us. There were celebrations of victory in Tel Aviv and New York, hailing the triumph of the minority of fighting Jews defending themselves against the majority of savage Arabs trying to kill them.

Nobody cared about us except the devoted few. I recall members of the American Friends

Service Committee (AFSC or the Quakers) who came to help us. They built the refugee camps, whose names you know today, in Bureij, Nuseirat, Jabalia, and others. One of their officers wrote to his Philadelphia HQ on October 12, 1949, describing the state of mind of the refugees,

Above all else, they desire to go home—back to their lands and villages which, in many cases, are very close. Apparently, they do not hesitate to go back to the changed culture which is growing in Israel. This desire naturally continues to be the strongest demand they make; sixteen months of exile has not diminished it. Without it, they would have nothing for which to live. It is expressed in many ways and forms every day. "Why keep us alive"—is one expression of it. It is as genuine and deep as a man's longing for his home can be. In the minds of refugees, resettlement is not even considered.

But the West did not listen or even wish to know. All the major news agencies were busy declaring the victory of the Righteous Jews. Their Middle East correspondents were invariably Zionists. Talking about Palestinian refugees was an unforgivable sin. No more.

In 2024, young people on hundreds of campuses in the United States and Europe saw the light where justice was to be. They fought against their rulers, their elders, and their providers to speak a word of justice and declare, "Palestine is free from the river to the sea." People around the world heard about us, and saw our tragedy on TV screens. Some dared to speak out, defying the sword on their necks.

It has been an unbelievable historical correction, paid for by the blood of Palestinians. But will this bring to life hundreds of thousands of those killed or bring to life the parents of 18,000 orphans? More importantly, will the blood of victims enforce international law to punish war criminals? Will it give the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice the power to implement their verdicts? Will justice be made and refugees, the true hostages,

return home?

I may not live to see this happen, but I am certain it will happen. For evil, however powerful, has a short life. When justice is made and we, Palestinian refugees, return home, our long struggle will be rewarded and the hundreds of thousands who were murdered will not have died in vain. That is because our grandchildren will live at home once again and the waiting from 1948 and 2024 will be over. Let all free people make this happen.

The article first appeared on *Mondoweiss*.

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I am a survivor of the 1948 Nakba who lived to witness the 2024 genocide. I may not live to see justice be made, but I am certain our long struggle will be rewarded. Our grandchildren will live at home once again.

People attend a pro-Palestinian rally in front of the Danish parliament Christiansborg in central Copenhagen, Denmark, on December 10, 2023.
● EMIL HELMS/EFE



Palestinians bury the bodies of 110 people killed by Israeli attacks in a mass grave in the Khan Younis cemetery, on November 22, 2023.
● MOHAMMED TALATENE/DPA

