

## Understanding Gaza and Hamas

*Fact-sheet from Sept. 2019, by JWE President  
Helena Cobban, a long-time columnist for The Christian  
Science Monitor who has studied and written about Gaza and Hamas for more than 30 years.*

**More info is on our website, [www.justworldeducational.org](http://www.justworldeducational.org), especially at:  
[bit.ly/Gr8MarchRet](http://bit.ly/Gr8MarchRet)**

Every week since March 30, 2018, many thousands of Gaza Palestinians have mounted mass, creative nonviolent protests along the fence with Israel. These protests, named the **#GreatMarchOfReturn**, aim to stress to the world that Palestinians whose families were in 1947-48 ethnically cleansed from their homes and farms in what became Israel in '48 **still have the right afforded to them under international law to return to those homes.**

The Gaza Strip has been the main location of these protests because some 75% of its 2 million residents are refugees from the Arab-Israeli war of 1947-48, or their descendants. Also, the socio-economic situation in the Strip is catastrophic, due to the tight siege that Israel has imposed on it non-stop since 2007 and the many large-scale military assaults Israel has waged against it in those years. UN agencies have long warned that Gaza will be "unliveable" by 2020. For most Gaza Palestinians, it already is. (See the video that Sen. Bernie Sanders made in 2018, in which five Gaza Palestinians describe their lives. It's at: <http://bit.ly/2sRdZ0v>.)

The vast majority of participants in the #GreatMarchOfReturn have engaged only in nonviolent activities. The most violent thing that some participants in the march have done is throw stones toward the fence with Israel or send over kites with burning rags attached.

From the beginning, Israel responded by stationing snipers at the fence with very "liberal" orders to shoot at protesters and to use tear-gas dispensed from drones. A UN Human Rights Council fact-finding mission reported that between March 30 and December 31, **Israeli security forces had killed 189 protesters and afflicted 6,106 with gunshot wounds, many very serious.** On the Israeli side, four soldiers were reported injured. (Download UN report at [bit.ly/UN-rept-GMR](http://bit.ly/UN-rept-GMR).)

The Israeli government and its sympathizers the US media have described these incidents as "violent clashes", in which Palestinians have "lost their lives." This is not true. As the UN report makes clear, **these are unarmed protesters killed in cold blood by Israel's US-supported military.** (Many means of non-lethal crowd control exist, but Israel has chosen not to use them.)

This myth about "violent clashes" is only one of many that PM Netanyahu and his supporters have used to distract attention from what has been happening in Gaza. Here, we examine some of these myths more closely.

### **Myth #1: "The line between Gaza and Israel is a border and any country has a right to defend its border."**

#### **Facts:**

- This map marks the boundaries between the Gaza Strip and Southern Israel. The dashed line on it is part of the temporary Armistice Line agreed between Israel and neighboring Arab states in 1949. The only border on this map is the one between Mandate-era Palestine and Egypt, drawn with dots and dashes.



- The UN's 1947 Partition Plan had allotted all the areas shown pink to a Palestinian Arab state, and the areas shown blue to the Jewish state. In 1947-48, the Jewish/Israeli fighters took much of the land the UN had allotted to the Arab state

and ethnically cleansed some 750,000 indigenous Palestinians from the areas they controlled. Many of those expelled found refuge in Gaza.

- c. In 1948, the UN promised the Palestinian refugees they could return to their homes if they committed to live at peace with their neighbors, or they could take compensation instead. For 70 years, Israel has prevented return and refused compensation.
- d. Meantime, all governments in Israel have refused to conclude a final peace treaty with the Palestinian Arabs and to demarcate any final border with them. (Note, though, that the Palestinians' Right of Return is not dependent on attainment of a peace treaty.)

### **Myth #2: "Israel left Gaza in 2005, so Gaza is not 'occupied territory'."**

#### **Facts:**

- a. In 2005, Israel evacuated its settlers and soldiers from inside the territory of the Gaza Strip. But it retained total control over the Strip's land, sea, and air boundaries; over all movement of goods or people in or out of it; and over the population registry of its people. For these reasons, the U.N. and all major governments (including ours) judge that Israel is still "occupying" the Strip.
- b. As the "occupying power" in Gaza, Israel has important responsibilities under the 4th Geneva Convention for the welfare (or indeed, the flourishing) of the Strip's two million residents, as it has since this occupation started back in 1967.
- c. Some Israeli spokespeople claim that with the 1993 creation of the "Palestinian Authority", Israel passed responsibility for the welfare of the residents of Gaza and the West Bank to the PA. But under international law, Israel is still the "occupying power", and thus has overall responsibility for the residents' welfare. It cannot pass the buck to the PA.
- d. One key provision of the 4th Geneva Convention is that the occupying power may not inflict collective punishment on residents of occupied territories. In Gaza, Israel has repeatedly and openly done so.
- e. Another provision of international law is that residents of an occupied territory have the right

to resist a foreign military occupation in any legitimate way they choose, including through the appropriately targeted use of force. This makes the decision the activists and political factions in Gaza took in March 2018 to set aside their weapons and use nonviolent mass organizing all the more notable.

### **Myth #3: "Participants in the #GreatMarchOfReturn were incited or organized to be there by Hamas, so they could serve as its human shields."**

#### **Facts:**

- a. The #GreatMarchOfReturn project was started by a non-Hamas civil society activist called Ahmed Abu Artema, who has written widely about his role in it. As the project gained momentum, Hamas and the other political factions in Gaza joined in.
- b. If the participants in the march were "human shields", what were they human shields for? The armed factions in Gaza have conducted almost no military activity since March 30, 2018. What they have conducted was nearly all done in response to attacks Israel launched on their military bases—which as the UN report noted are located far from the protests.
- c. In numerous interviews and articles, protest participants have stressed that their motivation in knowingly risking their lives by protesting has been a deep commitment to restoring the Palestinians' long-promised rights, including the Right to Return.
- d. Palestinian EMT Razan al-Najjar, shown here, was one of three Palestinian medical workers killed at the March by Israeli snipers. (The UN found that 73 were injured.) The Israelis later tried, quite unacceptably, to besmirch Razan's memory by editing a video of her and mis-translating her words in it.



**Myth #4: “Most of those killed by Israel in the protests have been Hamas members and are therefore legitimate targets.”**

**Facts:**

- a. Israeli spokespeople have produced no credible evidence for this claim. If responsible journalists report the claim, they should also demand the evidence. Few do.
- b. But even if some of those killed were identified as Hamas supporters, activists, or even “fighters”, this still would not make them valid military targets. The Geneva Conventions are clear that when a combatant is “*hors de combat*”, that is, when he or she takes off their uniform, puts down their weapon, and is no longer engaged in military action, they are no longer a valid military target.
- c. (In Israel, many members of the military serve as reservists a few weeks a year; and while they’re serving they take regular weekly breaks from duty. When they take off their uniforms and are off-duty, they are similarly *hors de combat* and not legitimate targets.)

**Myth #5: “Hamas is evil, violent, and oppressive to Palestinians and seeks the destruction of Israel and the genocide of Israeli Jews.”**

**Facts:**

- a. Hamas has a complex history. During the 1990s it used suicide bombings against civilian targets in Israel—that is, terrorism—to try to end the “Oslo” peace process. (They failed.) But since its formation in 1987 Hamas has always also done a lot of civilian mass organizing, and has provided much-needed social services to Palestinians hard pressed by the Occupation.
- b. Over the years, Hamas’s stance evolved. The last time it claimed responsibility for a suicide attack was in April 2008. In the past, it used to call for the end of the Israeli state but by the mid-2000’s its leaders started to express acceptance of the “two-state solution” as part of a possibly lengthy “*hudna*” (truce) with Israel.
- c. Because of Hamas’s support of the *hudna*, in 2005 the Bush administration and the Israeli government agreed it could take part in the

January 2006 elections for the PA’s Legislative Council and negotiated the terms by which it could do so.

- d. Hamas’s decision to run in the 2006 elections marked a turning point in its history. The peaceful and well-organized way it took part was noted by observers from the Carter Center and the EU. It won those elections. (The campaign run by its major Palestinian opponent, Fateh, was very disorganized. But many voters also disapproved of the way Fateh had conducted the negotiations with Israel.)
- e. Hamas’s win in the 2006 elections brought the wrath of Washington and Israel. Israeli leaders threatened non-aligned Palestinian legislators they would be killed if they participated in a Hamas-led government. Washington, Israel, and Fateh also prepared a violent coup to overthrow the Hamas-led government established in Gaza. This was documented by David Rose, in *Vanity Fair*, at: <http://bit.ly/2JJOF6c>.
- f. In June 2007, as that anti-Hamas plot neared its launch, Hamas cracked down on the Fateh plotters inside Gaza, committing rights violations as it did so. Israel helped survivors of the failed plot to retreat to the West Bank—and started planning for a long-term siege of Gaza to “starve” its people into submission, instead. (Israel, the US, and Fateh have also committed grave rights violations.)
- g. The siege of Gaza that Israel has maintained since 2007, with Washington’s full backing, is a clear form of collective punishment against the Strip’s population, and thus illegal under international law.
- h. Since 2007, in addition to besieging Gaza, Israel has launched three major military assaults and many smaller military forays against it. Those assaults killed more than 4,000 people, wounded thousands more, and destroyed thousands of homes, schools, and factories. Israel’s goal may have been to turn the people of Gaza against the Hamas leaders. If so, it failed miserably.
- i. Hamas has a resilient leadership and a disciplined cadre of fighters and civilian members. But Hamas is not the only political force in Gaza. At funerals for people whom Israel has killed during the protests, the flags of Fateh, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and other factions are seen alongside Hamas flags. (In the tent camps that support the march, it is mainly Palestinian flags that are displayed.)

- j. Meantime, until now, Hamas leaders have maintained their support for the two-state formula, though they—like many other Palestinian political leaders—have become impatient to see implementation of the Palestinians’ Right of Return.
- k. It is now very hard to see how a two-state solution could be implemented, given that Israel has planted > 650,000 settlers in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and has diced the Palestinian areas there into tiny cantons. Opinion among Palestinians has swung strongly back toward support for an older Palestinian goal: creation of a single democratic state in all of pre-1948 Palestine with equal civil status for all.
- l. A “one-state” outcome would mean the end of Israel, constituted as it currently is as a state that grants institutional privilege to Jewish people from anywhere in the world at the expense of the rights of the indigenous Palestinians. But, as with the end of Apartheid in South Africa, ending Israel’s system of institutionalized privilege would not mean a genocide of Israel’s current Jewish population. It would mean the end of their institutionalized privilege.
- m. Intellectuals in Hamas and the other Palestinian movements discuss these questions about “two-state” or “one-state” goals. But the Hamas leadership still supports the *hudna* version of the two-state goal.
- n. In Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel, personal and family law is administered by state-authorized religious bodies that are very socially conservative. Most Gaza Palestinians are Sunni Muslims. Within this context, Hamas has always paid attention to the social and political development of women. Four of the Hamas legislators elected in 2006 were women. One of them, Jamila Shanty, has long been active in organizing women’s participation in nonviolent protests.
- o. Throughout the time Hamas has been in charge in Gaza, it has given special protection to key Christian sites like the ancient church of St. Porphyrius, and to Gaza’s small Christian community.
- p. Hamas has not been tolerant of homosexuality. (But most US jurisdictions retained anti-gay legislation until recently, and Israel’s laws, religious authorities, and much of its society are also very oppressive of gay people.)

**Myth #7: “Palestinians in Gaza deserve to be punished because they voted for or otherwise supported Hamas.”**

**Facts:**

- a. This argument is just plain un-democratic! Nobody deserves to be punished simply because of their political views or voting record! Hamas’s participation in the 2006 elections was actively encouraged by the US administration. Why should the people who voted for it then have been punished ever since?
- b. It is also not the case that all Gaza Palestinians support Hamas! Many other parties are publicly active in Gaza, and many Gaza Palestinians are sick of all the parties and don’t support any of them.
- c. Remember, too, that in the West Bank Israel has incarcerated many of the legislators elected in 2006 (from Hamas and other parties) for long periods. Israel cannot hide its hostility to all forms of Palestinian democracy.

**Myth #6: “Hamas is backward and oppresses women, gays, and others.”**

**Facts:**

- a. Hamas is a political movement motivated by people of religious belief, like the Christian Democratic Party in Germany. Within Islam, Hamas adopts a generally modernizing position—very different from that of the Al-Qaeda or ISIS-affiliated movements active in various countries.

*This fact-sheet was produced by Just World Educational, a feisty non-profit providing educational resources that critically examine the United States’ role in the world. To learn more about our work, visit [www.JustWorldEducational.org](http://www.JustWorldEducational.org), “Like” us on Facebook, or follow us on Twitter: @JustWorldEd.*

*You can order more copies of this factsheet by emailing us at: [Factsheet@JustWorldEducational.org](mailto:Factsheet@JustWorldEducational.org).*