

“Gaza: How have we gotten here?”, Prof. Gadi Algazi, Tel Aviv University, 27.7.2025

Introduction

Hello everyone, and welcome to *Eyes on Gaza*. We are entering the sixth week of our daily gatherings, a forum that combines protest with learning. It seems that the growing demonstrations against the widespread and inhumane starvation in Gaza are beginning to have an effect, even if too little and too late. Many of us spent the weekend at various rallies and protests, and today a symbolic three-day hunger strike was launched by the “High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel”, with a sit-in in Jaffa that many of us are also joining in one way or another. I would also like to acknowledge the modest yet important contribution of all of us here—raising the conversation, amplifying our voices, and making a clear, unequivocal call to end the slaughter, killing, and erasure of Gaza.

Today we are hosting Professor Gadi Algazi, a historian from Tel Aviv University, a veteran political activist and a prominent public intellectual. We asked him to help us confront the unimaginable and to try to understand how we arrived at this moment. Gadi will speak for eight minutes, after which we will leave time for a short discussion. As always, I remind everyone that if you would like to pose a question, please write it in the chat, and I will read it aloud at the end of his talk. Gadi, thank you very much for joining us. The floor is yours.

Lecture

Thank you. Greetings to you all. I will try not to speak for too long—there are rules. But let me begin by noting that the very question I was asked to address—*how did we get here?*—carries something despairing, even teleological. It asks us to explain the path, but not to suggest how to get out of it. Still, it is worth looking at, and I will try to summarize my argument as simply as possible. The truth is this: with Gaza, there has been war since 1948. Seventy-five years of war. At times low-intensity, at times with ceasefires, sometimes with fences, sometimes with bombings. But Gaza is the harshest, most shocking embodiment of the conflict—of where we are, and of the Palestinian tragedy. Why? Because “the Gaza Strip” as we know it—the very term “strip,” that absurd word—is a direct creation of 1948. From that moment, within historic Palestine—call it the Land of Israel, call it Palestine, it does not matter—there arose the largest refugee camp in its territory. Larger than Jenin, larger than any other Palestinian refugee concentration. Roughly two-thirds of Gaza’s population were refugees from the southern half of the country, alongside one-third of the original inhabitants. Gaza is 1948—1948 staring us in the face. And what is unfolding before our eyes today is an attempt to erase it, to erase 1948—not by confronting the Nakba, but by intensifying it.

There is no doubt that what we see now is in many ways much worse than anything that came before. The scale of destruction not only annihilates the future—making it appear almost impossible—it also reduces the past to a mere footnote. What does it matter that in 1956 there were two massacres in Gaza? What does it matter that Ariel Sharon’s soldiers roamed the streets with whips, beating people and corralling them with barbed wire? But of course, this is not a helpful way to look at it. The path that brought us here is precisely what we must confront if we are to imagine a way out.

Since 1948, Israel has wrestled with the question of what to do with this open wound. One option has been to conquer Gaza and control it militarily. But that requires Israel to manage the lives of hundreds of thousands of voiceless refugees—something Israel never wanted to do. A second option has been to build a prison: to lock Gaza in, to seal it by various means. This was tried in the 1970s. A third, tempting option has been to make the people disappear.

And here there were both far-reaching and absurd attempts. Schemes to hand out money, to send people to Argentina, even inquiries as to whether Palestinian laborers might be accepted as *Gastarbeiter*, “guest workers”, in Germany in the 1960s. But there were also much harsher measures: attempts to expel tens of thousands. In fact, at least 50,000 were expelled during and after June 1967. After the war, Israel found itself ruling Gaza and quickly faced a fierce guerrilla war led by classic resistance groups rooted in the refugee camps. A brutal war, one that also targeted civilians—but a war unlike anything in the West Bank. Because in Gaza, people remembered the 1956 occupation. They had no illusions. And because resistance there had a deep social base in the refugee camps. It took Israel four years of harsh military campaigns to suppress it—this was Ariel Sharon’s work, and it ended in 1972.

And then it began again: new ideas of how to “get rid” of Gaza’s people, 80,000. 100,000. 120,000. Talks of 150,000. All of these attempts failed. Israel shifted between two approaches: normalization—allowing Gazan laborers to work in Israel, “integration” as it was called, with the sons and grandsons of 1948 refugees literally building Tel Aviv. Or, alternatively, sealing Gaza in. Sharon did this by fencing it off, by creating the “Rafah Salient,” by establishing [the city of] Yamit—meant to form a southern chain alongside the “Gaza envelope” built after 1950. Another option was to let Gaza rot. To let people drown in the misery of the Strip. The so-called “Gaza First” plans began in the late 1970s and early 1980s and eventually led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority—an arrangement that, of course, collapsed.

That is, in essence, the story. There were never many options, because the thinking was always about how to dispose of the refugees, or at best, how to manage their misery. Whether called “Gaza First,” “autonomy,” the “Palestinian Authority,” or eventually Hamas rule, the outcome was inevitable: an explosion. A series of explosions. I will not list every military operation, but each one was a renewal of the war—and in each, civilians were the victims. Where we are now is the result of seventy-five years, and especially of the last two decades, in which Israel has intensified its war on Gaza: by starvation, by “counting calories,” by limiting the number of pencils children could use, by absolute control of water and the slow poisoning of livelihoods, and by repeated military assaults. The outcome has been a barbarization—of us and of Gaza’s victims. A barbarization that deepened from one operation to the next, until the present one.

And when we look at what is happening now, it is important to remember: even those who cheer, who cannot imagine anything but Gaza’s erasure—Israelis themselves—they too are products of this process, just as Gazans are. What these endless wars—these “mowing the lawn” operations—have done is to normalize the barbaric killing of women and children, in 2009, in 2010, in 2014, and in the years in between, until the current war. If we take some distance, we must see these countless episodes as part of a single, long, unending war. The fundamental question is therefore not only how to stop the fire now, not only how to halt the carnage by any means possible. The deeper question is: how can we build a different future?

To my mind, such a future can only be built on recognition: recognition of the depth of this long war, recognition of 1948, recognition of refugee rights. Recognition that unless we imagine a human future based on the most basic human rights of others, we cannot expect Palestinians to recognize our rights as Israelis, as Jews. No, not everyone has to remain in Gaza. One can acknowledge their right of return. I know that today this sounds impossible, unthinkable. But still, we must try to imagine what the future could be—other than a war that drags on, erupts again after each break, or escalates into a catastrophe like the one we are living through right now.