

Gaza house fire kills 22: Victims of Israel's war on Palestinians

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A house fire killed 22 Palestinians, including seven children, at a family celebration in the northern neighbourhood of Jabaliya, Gaza, last Thursday night. It was the direct result of the atrocious living conditions created by Israel's criminal 15 year-long blockade that has turned Gaza into an open-air prison for its 2.3 million inhabitants.

The Abu Rayya family were celebrating the return of Maher Abu Rayya, a former deputy minister in the Labour Ministry in Gaza, who had just gained a PhD from Egypt, and the birthday of another family member, when a huge fire ripped through the third floor of their three-story residential building, killing all the celebrants.

Neighbours tried for nearly an hour to break down the front door of the building and the apartment door before firefighters arrived. Bahaa Abu Rayya, a relative of the family, told *Middle East Eye* it took 40 minutes for the Civil Defence crews to arrive at the scene as they were dealing with another incident in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. When they did arrive it was without ladders to reach the third floor, a long enough hose or adequate water supply. They were unable to immediately control the fast-moving fire or evacuate any of the family before they were either burnt alive or succumbed to the fumes.

Shocked and outraged by the fire, thousands came from all over Gaza to attend the funeral on Friday.

Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Israel seized the Gaza Strip that had been controlled by Egypt, the Palestinians were subject to ever increasing suppression under an occupation deemed illegal under international law. Even after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, its *de facto* occupation—its control of its land, sea and order borders—has continued.

For the last 15 years, Israel has subjected Gaza to a strict sea, air and ground siege, after Hamas—the bourgeois clerical group affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood that won a majority in the Palestinian elections in January 2006—forestalled an armed coup by supporters of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) and took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007.

Since then, Israel has placed tight restrictions on the entry of most goods and commodities into the besieged enclave, preventing the supply of much needed equipment for Gaza's hospitals, police and Civil Defence teams as well as construction materials to repair the damage caused by Israel's repeated murderous assaults on the essentially defenceless enclave. It limits the movement of Palestinians in and out of the Strip, frequently refusing permission to seek urgent, life-saving medical treatment outside Gaza.

Israel has been aided and abetted by the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas, which refuses to transfer cash to Gaza, and Egypt's military dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, whose forces control Gaza's southern border. Crucially, its illegal actions are supported by the US, Israel's chief sponsor, and the major European powers. Despite their humanitarian pretensions, all have provided Tel Aviv with the political and diplomatic support at the United Nations that have enabled it to avoid sanctions. This is in sharp contrast to the sanctions imposed on Russia for invading Ukraine. It makes them accomplices in Israel's crimes against the Palestinians.

Israel, as an occupying power with the most advanced military machine in the Middle East, has been given *carte blanche* to inflict unrestricted death, violence and suffering upon refugees trapped in a huge ghetto of its own making. The people of Gaza have suffered the

destruction of their livelihoods as well as repeated bombardments, and military assaults over the last 15 years.

The protracted 2008-09 assault killed 1,400 Palestinians and left much of the territory in ruin. The 2012 operation killed 177 Palestinians and destroyed or damaged numerous public and private premises, while the 50-day assault in 2014 claimed close to 2,200 Palestinian lives, overwhelmingly civilians and destroyed much of the enclave's infrastructure. Israel's bombardment in May 2021 destroyed 1,500 economic establishments, with the World Bank estimating Gaza needed \$485 million to restore it to the penurious state it was in before the war.

Last August, Israel launched a military offensive on Gaza targeting Palestinian Islamic Jihad and its armed branch, the Al-Quds Brigades, killing 49 Palestinians, including 17 children, and wounding more than 360 during its three-day bombardment of the Strip.

Gaza's already desperate economic crisis deepened in 2018 with the US Trump administration's decision to withdraw its \$300 million contribution to the operating budget of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)—the UN agency for Palestinian refugees—that accounted for one third of UNRWA's annual budget of \$1.2 billion.

Electricity is available for just a few hours a day. At least 56 percent of the workforce is unemployed. The health and education systems are dysfunctional. Access to many essential food items is restricted. Most of the water system is contaminated with untreated sewage or salt, while untreated sewage is pumped directly into the sea, polluting the bathing beaches.

Gaza's Civil Defence crews suffer from an acute shortage of safety equipment, making it difficult to respond to calls either speedily or effectively.

According to a preliminary report by the authorities in Gaza, a major factor in the spread of last Thursday night's fire was the storage of gasoline on the premises. This is a widespread practice, given the acute shortage of fuel to power Gaza's sole generator. With power available for a just a few hours a day, the Palestinians have turned to diesel and gas to power their own generators. Neighbours said the Abu Rayya family used a generator that ran on gasoline. There have been numerous similar house fires caused by candles, petrol or gas used for lighting and heating since the onset of

Gaza's power crisis.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz issued a cynical and hypocritical statement saying that "the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories has sent an offer of humanitarian assistance in evacuating the wounded to hospitals... Israel is ready to give injured Gazans medical help to save lives." There were no wounded people to be taken to hospital. All those present died in the fire. He said nothing about supplying Gaza with ladders, firefighter suits, oxygen and other necessary equipment.

The US and NATO never tire of denouncing Russia for "war crimes" in Ukraine and China for committing "crimes against humanity and genocide against Muslim Uyghurs" based on unconfirmed or non-existent evidence. They have, however, remained silent about the fire in Gaza, while the world's corporate press has at best reported it without comment.

Their silence is bound up with Tel Aviv's role as US imperialism's attack dog in the region while giving Washington deniability, and their own policy of normalising wars of conquest, occupation and repression. It signifies that the criminal methods used by Israel in suppressing the Palestinians will be used against the working class and youth that revolt against the ruling elites' dictates internationally.



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