

Israel in Gaza: a critical view

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Israel's core messages, listed below, argue for the justice of its invasion of Gaza in late December, 2008, cast Israel as the victim and endeavor that its "war on Hamas" not be seen against the background of prolonged occupation, closure and sanctions, but of the broader Western "War on Terror." The alternative view presented below argues otherwise. As Israelis committed to human rights, international law and a just peace as the only way out of our interminable and bloody conflict with the Palestinians, we contend that security cannot be achieved unilaterally, especially as Israel shows no signs of fully relinquishing its 41 year Occupation so that a truly sovereign and viable Palestinian may emerge. In that context, Israel's attack on Gaza can be considered merely another attempt to render its Occupation permanent by destroying any source of effective resistance. The immediate pretext of Israel's attack, rocket fire from Gaza into Israel, does not explain the disproportionality of its attack, especially given the unrelenting sanctions, attacks and assassinations carried out by Israel throughout the cease-fire. Indeed, we argue that Israel could have avoided all attacks upon it over the last twenty years, as well as the rise of Hamas to power, if it had accepted the PLO's offer of a two-state solution proffered already in 1988 and has entered into negotiations in good faith. Instead, Israel, the strong party in the conflict and the sole Occupying Power, chose to dramatically increase its settler population, construct a permanent infrastructure of separation and control, remove "Greater Jerusalem" from Palestine and encircle the West Bank with its expanded borders: that of the Separation Barrier incorporating Israel's major settlement blocs and the "security border" of the Jordan River. Israel is not a victim; it is the active perpetrator of a permanent apartheid regime over all of Israel/Palestine. It is toward that goal that Gaza is being violently pacified today, Israel's killing with impunity scores of Palestinian civilians constituting nothing less than State Terrorism.

The following pages present the essential elements of the Israeli government's framing of its assault on Gaza, followed by a critical re-framing that introduces context, policies and aims which the government's version purposely omits.

- **Israeli PR: Like all countries, it has a right and duty to defend its citizens.**

An alternative framing: To pursue offensive policies of prolonged occupation as well as sanctions, boycotts and closures which rob another people of its rights, aspirations and very livelihood, and to then refuse to truly engage with that people's elected leaders (a policy preceding Hamas's rise to power), is what puts your own people at risk. To expect your citizens to live in security while a million and a half subjugated people just a few kilometers away live in misery is both unrealistic and presumptive. Israel will only be able to defend its citizens – which is indeed its duty – if it addresses the causes of their insecurity, which is a 41 year-old occupation which the oppressed will resist, by "legitimate" means or not.

- **Israeli PR: Israel had no choice but to attack in response to the barrage of 8,500 Hamas rockets fired from Gaza into Israel over the past eight years that have killed 20 Israeli civilians.**

An alternative framing: Israel had a choice. In the past three years alone Israel – together with the US, Europe and Japan – imposed an inhumane siege of Gaza while conducting a campaign of targeted assassinations and attacks *throughout the cease-fire* that left 1,700 Palestinians dead. This war is no “response:” it is merely a more deadly round of the tit-for-tat arising out of a political vacuum. Hamas firings on Israel were for the most part, if not exclusively, responses to Israeli actions either not reported in the press or discounted as legitimate unilateral action – such as assassinating leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian organizations, often with a high toll in civilian casualties. To present the “barrage” as an independent variable disassociated from wider Israeli policies that led to them is disingenuous. Indeed, had there been a genuine political process which offered the Palestinians hope for self-determination, the rocket firings could have been avoided altogether.

- ***Israeli PR: Hamas is a terrorist organization that refuses to recognize Israel or enter into a political process.***

An alternative framing: “Terrorist” is a problematic term. States always use it to delegitimize and demonize non-state actors who resist their oppressive policies, as apartheid South Africa did, for example, with the ANC. The term assumes that states, bad as they may be, have the right to employ military force as they see fit. If, however, we take “terrorism” to mean the killing, harming or intimidation of non-combatant civilian populations, then states are far more terroristic, kill far more innocent civilians, than do non-state groups. In the eight years since the second Intifada broke out (September 2000), almost 500 Israeli civilians have been killed by Palestinians while almost 5000 Palestinians have died at the hands of Israelis. All attacks on civilians are unacceptable, no matter how just the cause. Yet it is only the Palestinians to whom the term “terrorist” is applied.

An alternative framing: Presenting Hamas as merely a “terrorist organization” removes the political element from their struggle and presents them as a criminal organization. This not only distorts reality in a fundamental way but, by preventing negotiations, it ensures the perpetuation of mutual suffering. Hamas has its military wing – though nothing compared to the Israeli army – but it is essentially a grassroots religious-political movement that democratically won the Palestinian elections in 2006 and earned the right to establish a government – which was denied it by Israel, the US...and the Fatah part of the Palestinian Authority. It *does* deny Israel’s legitimacy, as any colonized people would, and there is no reason why it should accept the loss of 78% (or more) of its historic homeland. But Hamas has agreed, as a signatory to the “Prisoners’ Document” and in repeated public pronouncements, to respect the outcome of negotiations of other Palestinian parties (like Fatah) with Israel, if they result in a complete withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. So despite its militant and scary image, despite the fact that it will not legitimize what it considers another people’s colonization of its homeland, Hamas does accept, as a practical political matter, a two-state solution. Given the fact that negotiations with Israel since the Madrid Conference of 1991 have yielded nothing – indeed, Israel’s massive settlement enterprise has perhaps eliminated the possibility of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel – Hamas’s resort to armed resistance is understandable. *All* attacks on civilians are prohibited in international law. In this regard both Hamas and Israel engage in terrorism, with the later taking by far the greatest of civilian dead, injured and traumatized.

- ***Israeli PR: There is no occupation – in general, but specifically in Gaza. Israel ended its occupation of Gaza in 2005 with the “disengagement.” Gaza could have flourished as the basis of a Palestinian state, but its inhabitants chose conflict.***

An alternative framing: Israel claims there has never been an occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza; instead, these are “disputed” territories with no clear claimant – and certainly not the Palestinians who, in Israel’s view, do not constitute a people with rights of self-determination in the Land of Israel and who never exercised sovereignty over any part of Palestine. This position is rejected utterly by the international community. Indeed, the Road Map initiative uses the term “occupation” explicitly. Neither does

it accept Israel's claim that the occupation of Gaza *really* ended with "disengagement" in 2005, since occupation is defined in international law as exercising effective control of a foreign territory, which Israel obviously does over Gaza.

To then argue that Gaza could have developed under these conditions is unfair and unreasonable. Neither Israeli control exerted over Gaza since 1967 nor the economic closure imposed upon it in 1989 ever ceased, even if Israel removed its settlers and army. Gazans were never allowed to open their sea or air ports, nor were any conditions conducive to economic development allowed to develop. And then, in early 2006, less than six months after "disengagement," Gaza was sanctioned and hermetically isolated by Israel and the international community as punishment for voting the wrong way. John Dugard, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, wrote that this was the first time in history the oppressed was sanctioned and the Occupying Power freed of any responsibility. Economic development, not to mention a political process which might have prevented the violence on both sides, was actively prevented by both Israel and its international supporters, which share responsibility for the present tragedy in Gaza.

Let us also remember Israel's special responsibility towards the people of Gaza. These "civilians" are, for the most part, refugees driven from their homes in Israel in 1948 and their descendants, people dying and suffering at the hands of Israel for the past 41, if not 60, years. This adds a particular poignancy to the assault – yet *another* assault.

- ***Israeli PR: Only Hamas violated the cease-fire, and thus it carries full responsibility.***

An alternative framing: Israel and Hamas agreed to a truce (through Egypt) by which Israel would allow the opening of the Gazan border crossings (at least partially) in return for a end to rocket fire on Israel. Hamas largely, though not entirely, kept its part of the bargain; Israel almost never did. Killings of Palestinians from the air continued, and on the American election day in early November it attacked the tunnels (which functioned as alternative means of supplying Gaza in the absence of open borders, which would have allowed control over the movement of arms), killing a number of Hamas people. In response Hamas launched rockets and...the truce began breaking down.

- ***Israeli PR: There is no humanitarian crisis; Israel is only attacking the "infrastructure of terror."***

Alternative View: Being the elected government, all the infrastructure, from traffic cops to schools to military installations, "belong" to Hamas. It is clear that Israeli attacks go beyond "the infrastructure of terror." Gazan sources claim that some 5000 homes have been demolished and the Islamic University has been severely damaged. According to the UN OCHA report of January. 5, the tenth day of the war:

- ✓ "More than a million Gazans still have no electricity or water, and thousands of people have fled their homes for safe shelter;
- ✓ Gaza's water and sewage system is on the verge of collapse, 75% of Gaza's electricity has been cut off;
- ✓ The sewage situation is highly dangerous, posing serious risks of the spread of water-borne disease;
- ✓ Hospitals are unable to provide adequate intensive care to the high number of casualties. There is also an urgent need for more neuro-, vascular-, orthopedic- and open heart surgeons.

- ***Israeli PR: Israel only targets Hamas fighters.***

An alternative framing: Who's a "Hamas fighter?" The graduating class of traffic cops that was slaughtered in the first aerial attack on Gaza? Professors and students who attend the "Hamas" Islamic University? Family members of Hamas military figures? People who voted for Hamas? Attacking a grassroots political-religious-

social movement engaged in military resistance to occupation in densely crowded urban settings makes it either impossible or inconvenient for an invading army to distinguish between civilians and fighters.

- ***Israeli PR: Civilians may die, but it's because Hamas hides its fighters and weapons factories among ordinary people.***

An alternative framing: Gaza being such a barren, exposed and tiny area (360 sq.km./223 sq. miles, half the size of London), separating civilian from military areas, though desirable, is impossible, especially since, in concept, Hamas is a people's militia. It's worth noting, however, that Israel's military headquarters are located in the center of Tel Aviv, the military headquarters over the West Bank are in the densely populated Neveh Ya'akov neighborhood of Jerusalem, Israel's center for biological and chemical warfare is located in the town of Ness Tziona, close to Tel Aviv, its main weapons development centers or in Haifa, and most settlements in the West Bank have military camps embedded within them – or vice versa.

Hamas, of course, as both a government and a military organization, carries responsibility for protecting the civilian population and keeping the fighting away from them. In a situation where this is impossible, as in Gaza, an invading force like Israel should avoid engagement, or engage only when legitimate military and political aims (such as defense) are genuinely endangered – which is not the case here. Israel has political and negotiating options that can end both the immediate threat of rockets and the longer-term conflict, but it chooses not to use them.

A terrifying development: According to the Israeli press, Israel has decided to ignore the distinction between civilians and combatants which lies at the root of international laws of warfare. Citing what the IDF calls the "Georgia rules," the two military correspondents of *Ha'aretz* (Jan. 6 and 7) explain:

[IDF Chief of Staff Gabi] Ashkenazi had said in earlier discussions that use of major fire power would be inevitable even in the most densely populated areas. The Israeli solution was thus to be very aggressive to protect the lives of the soldiers as much as possible. These are 'Georgia rules,' which are not so far from the methods Russia used in its conflict last summer. The result is the killing of dozens of non-combatant Palestinians. The Gaza medical teams might not have reached all of them yet. When an Israeli force gets into an entanglement, as in Sajaiyeh last night, massive fire into built-up areas is initiated to cover the extraction. In other cases, a chain of explosions is initiated from a distance to set off Hamas booby-traps. It is a method that leaves a swath of destruction taking in entire streets, and does not distinguish military targets from the homes of civilians....

The incident in which some 40 Palestinian civilians were killed when Israel Defense Forces mortar shells hit an UNRWA school in the Jabalya refugee camp Tuesday surprised no one who has been following events in Gaza in recent days. Senior officers admit that the IDF has been using enormous firepower. "For us, being cautious means being aggressive," explained one. "From the minute we entered, we've acted like we're at war. That creates enormous damage on the ground ... I just hope those who have fled the area of Gaza City in which we are operating will describe the shock. Maybe someone there will sober up before it continues."

What the officer did not say explicitly was that this is deliberate policy. Following the trauma of the war in Lebanon in 2006, the army realized that heavy IDF casualties would erode public (and especially political) support for the war and limit its ability to achieve its goals. Therefore, it is using aggressive tactics to save soldiers' lives. And the cabinet took this into account when it approved the ground operation last Friday, so it has no reason to change its mind now.

Nor is it likely that Tuesday's incident, with its large number of civilian deaths, will result in an immediate cease-fire.... Until Tuesday's incident, the world appeared relatively indifferent to Palestinian civilian casualties. On Monday, 31 members of the Samouny family were killed when a shell hit their house in

Gaza City; that same day, 13 members of the Al-Daiya family were killed by another Israeli bomb. Yet international media coverage of these incidents was comparatively restrained.

This is an absolutely unacceptable development in modern warfare – particularly urban warfare which involves and entraps large populations of civilians – and must be condemned and rejected by the international community. If the Israeli-Georgian “rules” become a *de facto* norm of warfare, the entire edifice of human rights and international law which has been constructed over the past 60 years will collapse and we will enter into a new age of barbarism. Again, *All* attacks on civilians must be opposed, whether sanctioned or not by military doctrine.

- ***Israeli PR: Hamas is a global problem, part of Islamist fundamentalism together with Iran and Hezbollah.***

An alternative framing: Hamas was allowed by Israel to develop as a political force in Occupied Palestine in the late 1980s in order to counterbalance the secular PLO, which Israel regarded then as its real enemy but today considers a “moderate” force which should be supported in order to counterbalance Hamas(!). It has roots in the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, but is a particularly Palestinian phenomenon that arose in response to increasing Israeli repression, the loss of Palestinian land, rights and honor, and the corruption and high-handedness of the ruling Fatah party. It cannot be conflated with the Shi’ite Hezbollah (which emerged in Lebanon only in the wake of the 1982 war), al-Qaida (which has a completely different global agenda and ideology) or Iran (in which the theocrats were an organized but quite small political force until the U.S. overthrew Iran’s democracy in 1954 and installed the repressive regime of the Shah – for whom Israel trained his dreaded SAVAK security police, noted for their widespread torture of “dissidents”). Painting Hamas as part of a global conspiracy when it’s a product of the Occupation itself is disingenuous and a gross distortion of history. Indeed, as the history of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Iranian clerics shows, Israel itself had played a significant role in the rise of political Islam.

An alternative framing: have to get beyond such simplistic and self-serving terms as “terrorists” and “terrorism” – especially since the Western politicians that use them refuse to apply them to themselves, as in the case of Israel in Gaza. It will do no good to dismiss Hamas as a “terrorist organization.” The issues, grievances and demands upon which it arose must be addressed. From the point of view of its voters, who include many who do not share Hamas’s religious or political agenda, Hamas is a quintessential liberation movement, a *Palestinian* liberation movement. Attempts by Israel to delegitimize Hamas and disassociate it from the Palestinian people, even to have the gall to suggest that the carnage created by Israel in Gaza will benefit the people by “releasing them from Hamas’s grip,” only serve – as they are intended to do – to neutralize Hamas as an effective source of resistance to Israel’s Occupation.

- ***Israeli PR: In attacking Hamas in Gaza, Israel is only doing its part in the West’s War on Terror.***

An alternative framing: This brings us to why Israel actually attacked Gaza and why the slaughter has gone on far beyond Israel’s declared goal of ending the rocket fire through negotiations. Immediate causes played their role, to be sure. Public pressure to end the rocket fire, especially in an election period, could not be ignored, nor the need to assert national pride. But this does not explain the immense scale of the operation; the rocket firings were the immediate trigger (and Hamas may have erred in its brinksmanship), but not the true reasons, which were several.

First, the invasion of Gaza was an exercise in pacification. On one level, it is an attempt to destroy Hamas as a political force, the only effective Palestinian resistance to Israel’s ability, through the Annapolis Process, of imposing an apartheid regime on Palestine. On another level it seeks to pacify the Palestinian people by delivering “a message:” If you keep resisting, this is what is waiting for you. You have no hope to force Israel to withdraw from its settlements and expanded borders. Second, it is an attempt to resuscitate Israel’s image

as an effective ally in the War on Terror after the humiliation of the Second Lebanon War in 2006. This is crucial for Israel's security politics, especially vis-à-vis the US, and the Palestinians are paying the price for Hezbollah's success. Third, it is an exercise in urban warfare, an opportunity to field-test new weaponry and tactics of counterinsurgency in dense urban environments that can be exported – both as part of Israel's security politics (earning its place with the Big Boys at the table of the War Against Terror) and as part of its economic export strategy (60% of Israeli export firms deal in security). “Tested in Gaza” (or Nablus or Fluja) is one of Israel's most effective marketing pitches.

Gaza demonstrates in microcosm the lengths Israel is prepared to go in pursuing its broader regional and global agendas. In fact, Israel is desperate to get past the Occupation. The Saudi Initiative, endorsed by the Arab League, essentially offers Israel integration into the Middle East, meaning assuming a role as one of the regional powers, its foreign policy goals similar to those of the “moderate” Arab states. But because of public opinion, they can only do so if the Palestinians sign off on an agreement with Israel that they can live with. Hence Israel's courting of PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian President Mubarak's outspoken support for Israel's action in Gaza (with mild criticism of its excesses). And hence Israel's readiness to offer Abbas yet another “generous offer – short, however, of dismantling its major settlement blocs, relinquishing control over “greater” Jerusalem or giving up control of the border with Jordan, for which no Israeli government has a mandate. Caught between the necessity of maintaining its settlements and its desire to assume a role as one of regional hegemony, Israel is trying to find a way to finesse its way through, which is why Abbas and Mubarak are being viewed as collaborators in the eyes of many Palestinians and other Arabs, and why Hamas's presence is considered so important by them.

So there are high stakes involved in the Israeli-Hamas war, which diminish the seemingly decisive role the firing of rockets into Israel had. We do not believe that Israel can either impose an apartheid regime on the Palestinian people nor sustain its Occupation. If anything, as is becoming obvious, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emblematic as it is throughout the entire Muslim world and beyond (among, for example, progressives civil society on every continent), will impact negatively on European and especially American efforts to stabilize the global system, and in particular the volatile Middle East where the US remains bogged down. It is our role as proponents of human rights, international law, decolonization, the integrity of cultures and a just peace in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere to highlight the injustice and unsustainability of Israel's Occupation both on the ground and globally, the quicker to bring it to an end. May the suffering of the both peoples in this war on Gaza, one oppressed and the other held hostage to an image of the Palestinians as “permanent enemies,” be the last straw. A just peace in Palestine will relieve a major obstacle towards global justice.

- ***Israeli PR:* Israel, acting as any life-loving nation would, has a right to be a normal country living in peace and security.**

An alternative framing: By now you should be empowered to provide a critical response of your own.