

Israel's Gaza Invasion and the Barbarism of War

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Israel's invasion and devastation of the Gaza Strip is one more illustration of that nation's barbaric behavior toward weaker peoples and nations. Far from the small beleaguered land represented in its own propaganda and that of its US supporters, nuclearly-armed Israel's war machine is unmatched in the region, allowing it to attack its neighbors with impunity. As Palestinian activist Mustafa Barghouti noted as the attacks began: "Israel is the fifth largest military force in the world" ("Palestine's Guernica and the Myths of Israeli Victimhood, *Huffington Post* 12/29/08). Proof of that impunity was seen in the 100:1 disparity in the death toll for the Gaza invasion: 13 Israelis and over 1300 Palestinians killed. Among the former, the majority were military; among the latter, the majority were civilians, 400 of them children. All of this met with strong public support inside Israel, with the peace movement almost completely marginalized. Moreover, in the elections that followed the Gaza war, Israeli voters moved even further to the Right, suggesting that most thought the latest invasion had not been brutal enough.

As the renowned Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell put it: "We repress political problems in order to put them on a national security footing. Increasingly, we live in an atmosphere exacerbated by nationalism and chauvinism. The drift to the right is evident. Henceforth, we have confidence only in strong-arm tactics" (*Le Monde*, 2/10/09). Sternhell, the author of an important study of the intellectual origins of European fascism, has personally faced the national chauvinism about which he speaks. Last September, he was wounded by a pipe bomb placed outside his Jerusalem home by Jewish extremists.

Israel's siege of Gaza, a clear violation of international law, is the immediate cause of the latest conflict, although its underlying cause lies in Israel's refusal to allow the creation of a viable Palestinian state. The siege of Gaza, which strangled its economy and also severely limited access to food, water, electricity, and other basic human needs, has gone on since 2006, when the Islamist Hamas movement won the Palestinian elections in Gaza. As Professor Salah Abdel-Jawad of Bir Zeit University on the West Bank noted in an interview concerning the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, "Israel has never let the people of

Gaza live in peace. It has never given them the means necessary for true independence, whether economic or social' (*Le Monde*, 1/6/09). In 2007, Hamas seized total power in Gaza from its more secular rival, the Palestinian Authority. Hamas, which has in the past massacred Israeli civilians in terrorist attacks inside Israel, has also refused to recognize Israel's right to exist. In recent years, however, Hamas has implicitly¹¹ but never explicitly¹² moved away from this policy by agreeing to the possibility of a 20 or 30-year truce with Israel. For its part, Israel has seized upon Hamas's rejectionism in order to cordon off the entire Gaza Strip, carrying out what amounts to a collective punishment upon its 1.4 million inhabitants. In response, militants within Gaza have occasionally fired a few rockets into neighboring parts of Israel in scattershot fashion.

But on the whole, the highly disciplined and authoritarian Hamas held to a six-month truce arrived at with Israel in July 2008. This stalemate¹³ with Israel's blockade and Hamas's occasional rocket fire¹⁴ began to unravel in November 2008. Israel openly violated the truce when it carried out an incursion into Gaza on November 4, killing six Hamas fighters. After this, rocket attacks from Gaza into southern Israel increased to pre-truce levels. Still, most foreign observers thought the truce would be renegotiated, as could be seen by numerous articles in the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and the *Guardian*. All of these observers misjudged Israeli intransigence and aggressiveness, however.

Atrocities and War Crimes

On December 27, Israel launched air strikes without warning on densely populated Gaza, killing nearly 300 people on the first day. Even the staunchly pro-Israel *New York Times* wrote that day, "There was a shocking quality to Saturday's attacks, which began in broad daylight as police cadets were graduating, women were shopping at the outdoor market, and children were emerging from school." Among those killed in this surprise attack were 15 police cadets at a graduation ceremony. Plans for the attack on the police cadets had been opposed even by the legal department of the Israeli army as a direct attack on civilians. In launching these attacks on December 27, Israel took advantage of a green light from both the Bush administration and regional powers like Egypt.

On January 3, Israel moved to ground attacks, treating civilians in densely populated Gaza as utterly expendable. As the *New York Times* reported on January 11, the Israelis approached "their incursion as a war, not a police operation¹⁵. Officers say that means infantry units are going in 'heavy.' If they draw fire, they return it with heavy firepower. If they are told to reach an objective they first call in artillery or airpower and use tank fire¹⁶. As the commander of an elite combat engineering unit, Yahalom [stated]: 'We are very violent. We do not balk at any means to protect the lives of our soldiers'."

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

- On January 6, Israeli forces shelled the United Nations School in the Jabaliya refugee camp, where 1674 people had sought shelter. United Nations officials, who denied Israeli claims that Palestinian fighters had been based at the school, reported that 40 people were killed, many of them children.

- Israeli planes struck the Islamic University of Gaza six separate times, destroying a number of key buildings, among them the one that housed the science lab. Israel claimed, without clear evidence, that weapons were being manufactured at the university. This university serves 20,000 students, some of who were among 7 Fulbright Scholars invited in 2008 to the US, but banned from leaving Gaza by Israel.

- The story of one family hit by indiscriminate shelling shocked even Israeli public opinion. On January 16, Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish watched helplessly at his home in the Jabaliya refugee camp as Israeli shells rained down, killing 3 of his daughters and a niece. Abuelaish, who works at a hospital in Israel, has devoted his life to reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. During the attack, he was able to telephone an Israeli television station, where he reported what was happening. After this, the shelling finally stopped long enough for a rescue. As usual, the Israeli military claimed they had received hostile fire from the house. A devoted humanist, Abuelaish vows to continue his medical work in Israel.

- Israel also took advantage of the latest weaponry, apparently including the Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME), created in 2000 for the US Air Force at University of California's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. Using tungsten, this weapon sends hundreds of tiny pieces of shrapnel within a small radius, carving up human beings but leaving their surroundings intact. Survivors run the additional danger of cancer from exposure to tungsten. A few DIME weapons may have been used by Israel in Lebanon in 2006, but in the Gaza war they have been used hundreds of times. It is unclear whether the US gave Israel the actual DIME weapons or the plans for them. In any case, the Gaza war has proved to be a macabre testing ground for them.

- Israel has also used white phosphorus, a chemical that inflicts terrible burns. It claims to be using white phosphorus shells only as smokescreens, but these shells have hit hospitals and UN relief agencies, causing huge fires. White phosphorus is banned from military use in civilian areas under international law.

Hamas has a degree of responsibility for these horrors. Its scattershot rocket attacks on Israel towns are themselves war crimes, albeit on a much smaller scale than the Israeli attacks. Hamas also used schools, hospitals, and mosques as points from which to fire

back at Israelis. In addition, Hamas used the crisis to repress members of the PLO in Gaza. Finally, its leaders sent hundreds of lightly armed Palestinian youth up against the Israeli war machine, promising them paradise were they to be “martyred” in the struggle, which many indeed were.

Global Impact

As the carnage in Gaza mounted, the silence of the US, including the newly elected Barack Obama, was deafening. The Europeans said a bit more, but took no action, even at the United Nations. Arab powers allied with the US were equally silent. One of them, Egypt, immediately sealed its border, thus denying terrified Gazans a refuge. When Egyptian students took to the streets, they naturally condemned their government as well as Israel, leading to a crackdown that further discredited the nearly moribund Mubarak regime, in power since 1981.

For its part, Iran once was again able to put itself forward as the leading advocate of the Palestinian cause on the international level. Inside Iran, independent Iranian women’s groups also took to the streets, in addition to orchestrated pro-government demonstrators. On January 11, when Mothers for Peace demonstrated against the war outside the Palestinian embassy in Tehran, they were attacked by security police, who shouted, “Death to Peace Seekers and Compromisers.” The regime also shut down the offices of Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, who had signed a joint statement by the Nobel Women’s Initiative that stated: “Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are trapped like fish in a barrel as Israeli air strikes continue endlessly”: An Iranian student organization allied with the reform movement, in a long article attacking Israel’s invasion, also condemned “the way in which terrorist groups take refuge in kindergartens and hospitals to attack the other side”: As a result, the government shut down the large reformist newspaper Kargozan for having quoted a sentence from the student statement. While the Iranian and Egyptian governments took seemingly opposite stances toward the war, they were united in their repression of independent protest movements.

Such protests have also gripped the US and Western Europe. Britain has seen the largest and most sustained protests. On January 3, tens of thousands took to the streets of London to protest the invasion. As night fell, confrontations with police occurred outside the Israeli Embassy, with many hurling shoes as a gesture of contempt. On January 26, after the war ended, the street protests were reorganized, this time because BBC (public) and Skye (Murdoch owned) refused to run an appeal for donations for Gaza from the Disasters Emergency Committee, an organization representing 11 relief agencies, including the Red Cross, Oxfam, and World Vision. By early February, students were occupying universities

across Britain. The students are demanding that their universities divest from the arms trade, provide scholarships for Palestinian students, pledge unused books and computers to Palestine, and condemn the attack on Gaza. Some small victories are being won, but the most interesting thing is the form of this movement. Wes Streeting of the National Union of Students told *The Independent* of Feb. 8: “What we’ve seen over the Gaza issue is a resurgence of a particular type of protest: the occupation. It’s a long time since we’ve seen student occupations on such a scale.” Many of these protests do not favor a total boycott of Israeli civil society — its universities, academic associations, and sports teams, for example — but rather targeted divestment from corporations tied to the Israeli war machine. In this way, they distinguish between the people of Israel and its government.

On Jan. 10, at the height of the war, 120,000 demonstrated across France with slogans protesting the “Gaza massacre.” Over 50,000 marched in Paris alone. While protests in the US were on a smaller scale, an unusually large demonstration comprising thousands stretched across six city blocks below Times Square in New York on January 3. There were also weekly demonstrations at the Federal Building in West Los Angeles, organized by Jews for Peace. At Hampshire College in Massachusetts, a long-fought struggle bore fruit just after the Gaza war, when college officials voted on Feb. 7 to divest from companies providing military support for the Israeli occupation. This struggle was led by Students for Justice in Palestine, which advocates targeted sanctions against specific corporations — Caterpillar, United Technologies, General Electric, ITT Corporation, Motorola, and Terex — that provide the Israeli military equipment and services for the occupied territories. Alan Dershowitz, a rabid member of the Israel Lobby who orchestrated the firing of Professor Norman Finkelstein from DePaul University in 2006, has threatened to start a campaign for divestment from Hampshire College. It remains to be seen if this will deter Hampshire, which was the first college in the country to divest from South Africa’s apartheid regime.

Gaza also set off controversy at the elite Davos Summit of global political and economic leaders. After Israeli President Shimon Peres gave a long-winded defense of military aggression, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey walked out angrily. Turkey is Israel’s closest ally in the region, and the Turkish military conducts joint exercises with Israel. A bell seemed to be tolling for Israel when Erdogan, a moderate Islamist not known for attacking Israel, asked Peres: “I think you must feel a bit guilty. You have killed people. I remember the infants who died on the beaches” (*Le Monde*, 1/31/09). The Davos moderator, an American, cut him off, whereupon Erdogan staged his dramatic walkout. Erdogan was greeted by a crowd of thousands upon his return to Istanbul. It is doubtful that Turkish-Israeli relations will be the same after this. At a broader level, this incident

showed how the Arab-Israeli conflict threatens the stability of the world economic system, itself in deep economic crisis as well.

Future Prospects

While Israel's official pronouncements referred to ending the rocket attacks or making Hamas pay a price for them, its real goals were (1) to recover a sense of initiative and military prowess after Israel's tacit defeat in the 2006 Lebanon war by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement; (2) to undermine Hamas by destroying its political infrastructure and by making life unbearable for the civilian population, which supposedly would turn them against Hamas. As Israeli peace activist Michel Warschawski told an interviewer: "They speak of 'weakening,' of 'marking' their minds 'with a hot iron,' in short, to terrorize the population to the point that it accepts that measures be taken to stop the rocket fire" (*Le Monde*, 1/8/09). This is an old Israeli tactic, tried first in Lebanon against the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1980s, and later on in various contexts — the attacks on and besieging of PLO founder Yasir Arafat in 2004, the aforementioned Lebanon war of 2006, or the aforementioned siege of Gaza of 2006-08.

At most, this tactic has succeeded in undermining a particular expression of Palestinian or Arab nationalism, as in the case of the long-declining PLO. But the result of the latter was an increase in the power and influence of the fundamentalist and rejectionist Hamas. All indications are that Hamas has gained rather than lost support from the recent invasion as well. But even if Hamas were to lose support, it is not very likely that its replacement would be a more compliant Palestinian leadership. An even more rejectionist and fundamentalist movement would be more likely to emerge. One example of a tendency waiting in the wings is the openly pro-Al Qaeda Fatah al-Islam, which became active within Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 2007.

Despite the rise of Hamas, more secular and progressive voices still hold a majority within the Palestinian nation. Hamas has never won more than about a third of the votes in any Palestinian national election, although its support is growing. Among those more secular and progressive voices are Mustafa Barghouti, quoted above, or Sari Nusseibeh, President of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, who has opposed both the Israeli occupation and narrow forms of Palestinian nationalism. Perhaps most important of these voices is Marwan Barghouti, the immensely popular resistance leader who now sits in an Israeli prison.

At the same time, Israeli intransigence, military aggression, and war crimes are — along with the even larger manifestations of the same policies on the part of the US war machine

⌚ the biggest recruiters for the global fundamentalist and jihadist movement. Of course, some within the Israeli military and political establishment may actually prefer a fundamentalist and rejectionist political leadership within the Palestinian movement. For that would help to buttress Israel's frequent claim ⌚ even as it launches attack after attack ⌚ that it is really for peace, for a two-state solution, but that it has no reliable negotiating partner.

Israel also refers to the "existential threat" posed by Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, with it and its supporters repeating this ad infinitum in the US media. Yet at the same time, there is almost complete silence about Israel's actually existing nuclear arsenal and the fact that its own leadership is increasingly influenced by Jewish fundamentalists who see retention of Jerusalem and of the entire West Bank as a sacred duty. In fact, Israel is much more secure from attack than in previous decades. Until 1982, Israel faced armies based in neighboring states. Beginning with the Lebanon war of 1982, its target became "terrorists," which at that time meant the PLO. The Lebanon war was also marked Israeli complicity in a horrendous war crime, the massacres of Palestinian civilians at the Shatila and Sabra refugee camps of Beirut. The general who allowed those massacres to take place, Ariel Sharon, far from being prosecuted, was later elected Prime Minister.

Israel has committed major war crimes in the recent Gaza war. Moreover, with its wall along the West Bank, its ever-increasing settlements there, and its blockade and siege of Gaza, Israel has confined the Palestinian people within what amounts to a ghetto. This is not only a major violation of human rights, but also a betrayal of the historical legacy of the Jewish people, whose very identity is caught up with the word "ghetto," a term first applied to the Jews of Venice as they were confined behind walls in 1516.