

Israel's War against Hamas

Rhetoric and Reality

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Israel's war on Gaza lasted 22 days and claimed the lives of over 1,200 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. The only way to make sense of this senseless war is through understanding the historical context. The State of Israel was established in May 1948 on the basis of a UN resolution. Nevertheless, it involved a monumental injustice to the Palestinians. British officials bitterly resented American partisanship on behalf of the infant state. On 2 June 1948, Sir John Troutbeck wrote to the foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, that the Americans were responsible for the creation of a gangster state headed by 'an utterly unscrupulous set of leaders'. I used to think that this judgment was too harsh, but Israel's vicious assault on the people of Gaza, and the Bush administration's complicity in this assault, have reopened the question.

I write as someone who served loyally in the Israeli army in the mid-1960s, and who has never questioned the legitimacy of the state of Israel within its pre-1967 borders. What I utterly reject is the Zionist colonial project beyond the Green Line. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in the aftermath of the June 1967 war, had very little to do with security and everything to do with territorial expansionism. The aim was to establish Greater Israel through permanent political, economic and military control over the Palestinian territories. And the result has been one of the most prolonged and brutal military occupations of modern times.

Four decades of Israeli control did incalculable damage to the economy of the Gaza Strip. With a large population of 1948

refugees crammed into a tiny strip of land, with no infrastructure or natural resources, Gaza's prospects were never bright. Gaza, however, is not simply a case of economic under-development, but a uniquely cruel case of deliberate de-development. To use the Biblical phrase, Israel turned the people of Gaza into the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, into a source of cheap labour and a captive market for Israeli goods. The development of local industry was actively impeded so as to make it impossible for the Palestinians to end their subordination to Israel and to establish the economic underpinnings essential for real political independence.

Gaza is a classic case of colonial exploitation in the post-colonial era. The building of civilian Jewish settlements on occupied Arab territories began in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War. These settlements are both illegal and an insurmountable obstacle to peace. They are at once the instrument of exploitation and the symbol of the hated occupation. In Gaza, the Jewish settlers numbered only 8,000 in 2005, compared with 1.4 million local residents. Yet the settlers controlled 25% of the territory, 40% of the arable land, and a large share of the desperately scarce water resources. Cheek by jowl with these foreign intruders, the majority of the local population lived in abject poverty and unimaginable misery. Eighty per cent of them still subsist on less than \$2 a day and rely for food rations on UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency. The living conditions in the strip remain an affront to civilized values, a powerful precipitant to resistance, and a fertile breeding ground for political extremism.

In August 2005, a Likud government headed by Ariel Sharon staged a unilateral Israeli pullout from Gaza, withdrawing all 8,000 settlers and destroying the houses they had left behind. Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement, conducted an effective campaign to drive the Israelis out of Gaza. The withdrawal was a victory for Hamas, and a humiliation for the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). To the world, Sharon presented the move as a contribution to peace, based on a two-state solution. But in the year after the withdrawal, another 12,000 Israelis settled on the West Bank, further reducing the scope for an independent and territorially contiguous Palestinian state. Land-grabbing and peace-making are simply incompatible. Israel had a choice and it chose land over peace.

The real purpose behind the move was to redraw unilaterally the borders of Greater Israel by incorporating the main settlement blocs on the West Bank to the state of Israel. Withdrawal from Gaza was thus not a prelude to a peace deal with the Palestinian Authority, but a prelude to further Zionist expansion on the West Bank. It was a unilateral Israeli move

undertaken in what was seen, mistakenly in my view, as an Israeli national interest. Anchored in a fundamental rejection of the Palestinian national identity, the withdrawal from Gaza was part of a long-term effort to deny the Palestinian people any independent political existence on their land.

Israel's settlers were withdrawn, but Israeli soldiers continued to control all access to the Gaza Strip by land, sea and air. Gaza was converted overnight into an open-air prison. From this point on, the Israeli air force enjoyed unrestricted freedom to drop bombs, to make sonic booms by flying low and breaking the sound barrier, and to terrorize the inhabitants of this prison.

Israel likes to portray itself as an island of democracy in a sea of authoritarianism. Yet Israel has never in its entire history done anything to promote democracy on the Arab side, and has done a great deal to undermine it. Israel has a long history of secret collaboration with reactionary Arab regimes to suppress Palestinian nationalism. Despite all the handicaps, the Palestinian people succeeded in building the only genuine democracy in the Arab world, with the possible exception of Lebanon and Morocco. In January 2006, free and fair elections for the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority brought to power a Hamas-led government. Israel, however, refused to recognize the democratically elected government, claiming that Hamas is purely and simply a terrorist organization.

America and the European Union shamelessly joined Israel in ostracizing and demonizing the Hamas government, and in trying to bring it down by withholding tax revenues and foreign aid. A surreal situation thus developed with a significant part of the international community imposing economic sanctions not against the occupier but against the occupied, not against the oppressor but against the oppressed.

As so often in the tragic history of Palestine, the victims were blamed for their own misfortunes. Israel's propaganda machine persistently purveyed the notion that the Palestinians are terrorists, that they reject coexistence with the Jewish state, that their nationalism is little more than anti-Semitism, that Hamas is just a bunch of religious fanatics, and that Islam is incompatible with democracy. But the simple truth is that the Palestinian people are a normal people with normal aspirations. They are no better but they are no worse than any other national group. What they aspire to, above all, is a piece of land to call their own, on which to live in freedom and dignity.

Like other radical movements, Hamas began to moderate its political programme following its rise to power. It persisted in its refusal to

recognize the Jewish state. But, from the ideological rejectionism of its charter, and its call for an Islamic state over the whole of mandatory Palestine, it began to move towards pragmatic accommodation to a two-state solution. Its spokesmen said many times that they would accept a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, and offered a long-term truce on that basis. In March 2007, Hamas and Fatah formed a national unity government that was ready to negotiate a long-term truce with Israel. Israel, however, refused to deal with a government that included Hamas. It rejected all negotiations with the political leadership of Hamas, and preferred to try to smash its military wing instead.

At the same time Israel continued to play the old game of divide and rule between rival Palestinian factions. In the late 1980s, it had supported the nascent Hamas in order to weaken Fatah, the secular nationalist movement led by Yasser Arafat. Now it began to encourage the corrupt and pliant Fatah leaders to overthrow their religious political rivals and recapture power. Aggressive American neoconservatives participated in the sinister plot to instigate a Palestinian civil war. Their meddling was a major factor in the collapse of the national unity government, and in driving Hamas to seize power in Gaza in June 2007 to pre-empt a Fatah coup.

The war unleashed by Israel on Gaza on 27 December 2008 was the culmination of a series of clashes and confrontations with the Hamas government. In a broader sense, however, it is a war between Israel and the Palestinian people, because the people had elected the party to power. The declared aim of the war was to weaken Hamas, and to intensify the pressure until its leaders agreed to a new ceasefire on Israel's terms. The undeclared aims were to drive Hamas out of power, and to ensure that the Palestinians in Gaza are seen by the world simply as a humanitarian problem, and thus to derail their struggle for independence and statehood.

The timing of the war was determined by political expediency. A general election was scheduled for 10 February 2009 and, in the lead-up to the election, all the main contenders were looking for an opportunity to prove their toughness. The army top brass had been champing at the bit to deliver a crushing blow to Hamas in order to remove the stain left on their reputation by the failure of the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in July 2006. Israel's cynical leaders could also count on the apathy and impotence of pro-western Arab regimes, and on blind support from President Bush in the twilight of his term in the White House. Bush readily obliged by putting all the blame for the crisis on Hamas, vetoing proposals at the UN Security Council for an immediate ceasefire, and issuing Israel with a free pass to mount a ground invasion of Gaza.

As always, mighty Israel claims to be the victim of Palestinian aggression, but the sheer asymmetry of power between the two sides leaves little room for doubt as to who is the real victim. This is indeed a conflict between David and Goliath, but the Biblical image has been inverted – a small and defenceless Palestinian David faces a heavily armed, merciless and overbearing Israeli Goliath. The resort to brute military force is accompanied, as always, by the shrill rhetoric of victimhood, and a farrago of self-pity overlaid with self-righteousness. In Hebrew this is known as the syndrome of *yorim ve-bokhim*, ‘shooting and crying’.

To be sure, Hamas is not an entirely innocent party in this conflict. Denied the fruit of its electoral victory and confronted with an unscrupulous adversary, it resorted to the weapon of the weak – terror. Militants from Hamas and Islamic Jihad kept launching Qassam rocket attacks against Israeli settlements near the border with Gaza, until Egypt brokered a six-month ceasefire last June. The damage caused by these primitive rockets is minimal, but the psychological impact is immense, prompting the public to demand protection from its government. Under the circumstances, Israel had the right to act in self-defence, but its response to the pinpricks of primitive rocket attacks was totally disproportionate. The figures speak for themselves. In the three years after the withdrawal from Gaza, 11 Israelis were killed by rocket fire. On the other hand, in 2005-7 alone, the Israeli Defence Force killed 1,290 Palestinians in Gaza, including 222 children. The IDF developed a culture of impunity, which extended to the killing of international volunteers such as Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall.

Killing civilians is a gross violation of international humanitarian law. This law applies to Israel as much as it does to Hamas, but Israel’s entire record is one of unbridled and unremitting brutality towards the inhabitants of Gaza. Following the Hamas seizure of power, Israel clamped an economic blockade on Gaza, closing all the border crossings and allowing no movement between Gaza and the West Bank. Even after Egypt brokered a ceasefire in June 2008, Israel refused to lift the blockade. Israel prevented any exports from leaving the strip, in clear violation of a 2005 accord, leading to a sharp drop in employment opportunities. Officially, 49.1% of the population is unemployed.

At the same time, Israel restricted drastically the number of trucks carrying food, fuel, cooking-gas canisters, spare parts for water and sanitation plants, and medical supplies into Gaza. It is difficult to see how starving and freezing the civilians of Gaza could protect the people on the

Israeli side of the border. Even if it did, it would still be immoral, a form of collective punishment that is strictly forbidden by international humanitarian law. The purpose of the blockade was to undermine Hamas, and to strengthen the position of the discredited Fatah leaders on the West Bank.

The brutality of Israel's soldiers, and the inhumanity of its leaders, were fully matched by the mendacity of its spokesmen. Eight months before launching the so-called Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli government established a National Information Directorate. The core messages of this directorate to the media were that Hamas broke the ceasefire agreements; that Israel's objective was the defence of its population; and that Israel's forces were instructed to take the utmost care not to hurt innocent civilians. Israel's spin doctors were remarkably successful in getting this message across. But, in essence, their propaganda was a pack of lies.

A wide gap separated the reality of Israel's actions from the rhetoric of its spokesmen. In the first place, it was not Hamas but the IDF that broke the ceasefire. It did so on 4 November 2008, by launching a raid into Gaza that killed six Hamas fighters on the flimsy excuse that they were digging a tunnel. It is a little known but crucial fact that Hamas enforced the ceasefire very effectively on its side, until Israel sabotaged it. The first four months of the ceasefire were in fact a stunning success. A graph on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs proved this beyond the shadow of any doubt. The graph showed that the average monthly number of rockets in the preceding period of 2008 was 179, and that this number dropped dramatically to an average of three per month from July to October. Once the offensive got under way, the graph was removed from the website to erase the memory of the ceasefire that had so effectively curtailed the rocket attacks on Israeli civilians.

The lesson that these official figures teach us is a simple one: if Israel wants calm on its southern border, the way to get it is through indirect talks with the political leaders of Hamas, rather than through military confrontation. They also show that the Hamas leaders have a solid reputation for observing agreements, whereas Israel's leaders do not.

Secondly, Israel's objective was not just the protection of its population from Qassam rocket attacks, but also the eventual overthrow of the Hamas government in Gaza by turning the people against their rulers. Thirdly, far from taking care to spare civilians, Israel was guilty of indiscriminate aerial bombardment, and of an eighteen-month-old blockade that brought the inhabitants of Gaza, now 1.5 million, to the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe.

The Biblical injunction of an eye for an eye is savage enough. But Israel's insane offensive against Gaza seems to follow the logic of an eye for an eyelash. After eight days of bombing, with a death toll of more than 400 Palestinians and four Israelis, the gung-ho cabinet ordered a land invasion of Gaza. This was phase two of Operation Cast Lead.

Columns of Israeli tanks and ground forces crossed the border into northern Gaza. Their mission was to destroy the rocket launch facilities, to hit Hamas offices and command and control centres, and to kill leading figures in both the political and military wings of the movement. The aim was to 'behead' the organization, without getting entangled in a prolonged occupation. Israeli officials were reluctant to admit that the attack was intended to force Hamas from power, out of concern that it would undermine the international support they had won by portraying the assault as a purely defensive measure to stop the Hamas rockets. But there was growing confidence in the upper echelons of the defence establishment that the assault will cripple Hamas and eventually drive it out of power.

Intelligence chiefs told the cabinet that Hamas was fatally weakened by the destruction of a large part of the physical infrastructure of administration, including the parliament building and many government offices. The cabinet instructions to the IDF, however, stopped short of calling specifically for the overthrow of the Hamas administration. 'We are not in the regime change business' remarked one official.

The intelligence services also told the cabinet that the Israeli bombardment was turning popular opinion against Hamas. But this assessment was probably coloured by a large dose of wishful thinking. In the short term, at any rate, the trapped, terrified, and terrorized people of Gaza rallied behind their embattled government. The people at the receiving end were shocked by the scale, the ferocity, and the indiscriminate nature of the Israeli attack. Israeli spokesmen repeatedly proclaimed their concern to spare innocent civilians. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated at the outset that Israel would use the iron fist with Hamas, but treat the civilian population with velvet gloves. But in view of the death and destruction that the IDF rained down on Gaza, his words rang rather hollow. Throughout the war, the number of civilian casualties kept escalating. This was no accident. It was the direct result of applying a new IDF doctrine which sought to avoid losses among its soldiers by the ruthless destruction of everything in their path.

The Palestinian Bureau of Statistics estimated after the first two weeks of fighting that of Gaza's 143,437 buildings, 4,000 were totally destroyed and 16,000 were partially destroyed, including 13 mosques, 18 schools and

universities, and 30 security buildings. John Ging, the head of the UN relief agency in Gaza, accused Israel of destroying public buildings vital to the administration and governance of Gaza. 'The whole infrastructure of the future state of Palestine is being destroyed', he said. 'Blowing up the parliament building. That's the parliament of Palestine. That's not a Hamas building'.

One of the most deplorable aspects of this desperately unequal conflict is the war crimes committed by the Israeli forces. Those who sent soldiers to conduct intensive warfare in the most densely populated area on earth must have known that the result would be a bloodbath, the killing and maiming of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire. In waging this savage war, the Israeli soldiers committed not one or two but a large number of war crimes. The list includes the bombing of the UN school in the Jabaliya refugee camp, and the massacre of 44 people who sheltered there; herding a hundred civilians into a house in the village of Zeitoun, south-east of Gaza City, and then bombing and killing a third of them; the dropping of white phosphorus bombs; the use of civilians as human shields; and firing on mobile clinics, ambulances, and medical personnel. Navi Pillay, the UN high commissioner for human rights, told the BBC that the incident in Zeitoun 'appeared to have all the elements of a war crime' and called for an independent and transparent investigation. These war crimes alone sweep away any moral or legal justification for the war.

In this war Israel had violent tactics but no coherent strategy. Its strategy was both utterly unacceptable and self-defeating. The strategy of seeking military solutions to what are essentially political problems had been tried and failed in Lebanon, and it was doomed to fail again in Gaza, too. No amount of military escalation can break the spirit of Hamas. Despite all the death and destruction that Israel has inflicted on them, the Hamas fighters kept up their resistance, and they kept firing their rockets. This is a movement that glorifies victimhood and martyrdom. There is simply no military solution to the conflict between the two communities. The problem with Israel's concept of security is that it denies even the most elementary security to the other community. The only way for Israel to achieve security is not through shooting but through talks with Hamas, which has repeatedly declared its readiness to negotiate a long-term ceasefire with the Jewish state within its pre-1967 borders for 20, 30, or even 50 years. Israel has rejected this offer for the same reason it spurned the Arab League peace plan of 2002, which is still on the table: it involves concessions and compromises.

Israel's war in Gaza ended with a unilateral ceasefire and a declaration

of victory. But despite its military success, the war constituted a massive moral defeat for the Israelis. Hamas ended the war bruised and battered but still in power, still defiant, holding the moral high ground. The war inadvertently weakened Fatah, and boosted the credentials of Hamas as a leader of the movement of the resistance to Israeli aggression. Israel damaged not only its own interests through the unrestrained use of force but those of the West as well. Engendering such high levels of anger throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds was neither in its interest nor in that of its allies.

As Fawaz Gerges pointed out in his article ‘Hamas Rising’ in *The Nation* on 17 January, the assault on Gaza is radicalizing mainstream Muslim opinion. The images shown by Arab and Muslim television stations of dead children and distraught parents kept fuelling rage against Israel and its superpower patron. Israel’s inhumanity effectively silenced critics of Hamas, and legitimized the radical resistance movement in the eyes of many previously sceptical Palestinians and Muslims. More than any previous Arab-Israeli war, this one undermined the legitimacy of the pro-Western regimes such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia in the eyes of many of their citizens. The main beneficiaries are Iran, Syria, and the advocates of jihad against the Jewish state such as al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden.

This brief review of Israel’s record over the past four decades, and especially during the three weeks since 27 December, makes it difficult to resist the conclusion that it has become a rogue state with ‘an utterly unscrupulous set of leaders’. A rogue state habitually violates international law, possesses weapons of mass destruction, and practises terrorism – the use of violence against civilians for political purposes. Israel fulfils all of these three criteria; the cap fits and it must wear it. Israel’s real aim is not peaceful coexistence with its Palestinian neighbours, but military domination. It keeps compounding the mistakes of the past with new and more disastrous ones. In Gaza it went too far: it sowed the wind and it will surely reap the whirlwind.

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