

Destroying Gaza, Delaying Palestine

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We watch in horror as Israel unleashes yet another war on the dispossessed and weak. Hundreds are killed (mostly police and civilians, not trained militants), thousands are injured, and a million and a half are terrorized, punished for defying the will of their besiegers and refusing to submit. Again the media colludes and sells a barbaric aggression on a basically defenseless and deprived population as a war between two sides, mystifying fundamental inequalities of power through words like “disproportionate response” and “ceasefire.” Again “shock and awe” is bandied about as military currency, as if it worked the first time round in Iraq, or the second in Lebanon 2006. Again we hear a cocksure military commander say that the targeted area will be sent back decades in time, as if Israel has complete control over historical temporality: “In attacking Hamas’ regime in the Gaza Strip, the Israel Defense Forces will try to ‘send Gaza decades into the past’ in terms of weapon capabilities while achieving ‘the maximum number of enemy casualties and keeping Israel Defense Forces casualties at a minimum,’ GOC Southern Command Yoav Galant said.”

Israel has tried to habituate the world that killing Arabs is normal, an unexceptional daily event in the time of “the war on terror,” and that there is always a justifiable reason to do so. Why? Because Arabs always seem to lack something: goodwill toward their oppressors, peaceful intentions, or, simply, reasonableness, moderation, and humanity. The American elite is certainly convinced of that. Witness their behavior in Iraq, or even Afghanistan and Somalia: a bipartisan consensus that long-term direct or proxy American involvement (read imperialism) is not in question. National sovereignty and self-determination are only for the West. The Israeli elite makes its living off such racist assumptions: the Palestinians thus need to be taught yet another lesson by their colonial masters. As Tom Segev has put it:

“Israel is striking at the Palestinians to ‘teach them a lesson.’ That is a basic assumption that has accompanied the Zionist enterprise since its inception: We are the representatives of progress and enlightenment, sophisticated rationality and morality, while the Arabs are a primitive, violent rabble, ignorant children who must be educated and taught wisdom — via, of course, the carrot-and-stick method, just as the drover does with his donkey.”

Why, after 60 years to the Nakba, does Israel still find it impossible to understand that Palestinians will not give up their struggle for freedom and independence? Will another brutal crack at the dispossessed enemy work this time round when all the others have failed? On the one hand, it seems irrational for Israel to continue on this route of ongoing violence against the indigenous Palestinians who refuse to submit. Force has only bred more resistance and increasingly more violent struggle. On the other hand, however, it makes perfect colonial sense. The rational core of Israeli policy is the ongoing delay of Palestinian national aspirations. Since it has been proven historically impossible to force Palestinians to think of themselves as something other than a people with a national cause, Israel has used force to crush Palestinian national organization every time it takes shape. And, short of

getting rid of all Palestinians in one go (through mass expulsion or a holocaust), Israel persistently and systematically depletes their capabilities, capacities, and efforts to realise their national and human rights and regain expropriated lands. By bombing and destroying, Israel tries to manage the contradiction at the heart of its colonial enterprise: its hunger for Palestinian land and satiation from the (dispensable) Palestinian people. According to this logic, there are always far too many Palestinians and far too little lands to satisfy Israeli lebensraum anxieties. Benny Morris has recently shed more tears about how beleaguered Israel feels, and how he only expects repetitions of Gaza in the future, marking out Palestinian demography as a main existential threat for Israel:

If present trends persist, Arabs could constitute the majority of Israel's citizens by 2040 or 2050. Already, within five to 10 years, Palestinians (Israeli Arabs coupled with those who live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip) will form the majority population of Palestine (the land lying between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean)."

He concludes with:

"Israel's sense of the walls closing in on it has this past week led to one violent reaction. Given the new realities, it would not be surprising if more powerful explosions were to follow."

Ethnically cleansing another people seems to be Morris' way of dealing with Israel's colonial contradiction. The New York Times, of course, obliges by generously granting space and giving voice to advocates of further crimes in the future. "Pre-emptive strike" has just taken on another meaning: ideologically justifying yet-to-occur future crimes.

Will Israel succeed in its current campaign? If the aim is destroying Hamas, then clearly not. Hamas is even more popular than it was before. President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas' American path of endless negotiations, as checkpoints increase, settlements grow, and settlers go on even more violent rampages against Palestinians, is even more discredited. As the Financial Times put it this week, Abbas "might emerge as the biggest political casualty of the conflict," especially since he publicly blamed Hamas for the current escalation thus angering even his own Fatah supporters: "Even before the Gaza attacks, Mr Abbas and the Palestinian Authority were seen by many Palestinians as weak, ineffectual and far too compliant in their approach toward Israel." Even worse, the PA has stamped on popular protests and demonstrations in the West Bank, jointly policing the streets with the Israeli army in many places even as the slaughter in Gaza continues. That, as well as continuing security coordination with Israel, which leads to countless arrests and assassinations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives in the West Bank, and hundreds of political prisoners held by the PA, are serious stumbling blocks in the face of Palestinian reconciliation let alone unity. How much longer will Abbas allow American and Israeli vetoes to determine Palestinian political behaviour?

Hamas, then, will surely grow, as will other more radical groups like Hizb al-Tahrir and al-Qaida type organizations like Jaish al-Islam. On the first day of the attacks, Hamas' exiled leader Khaled Mishal stated several times in a long interview on Al-Jazeera that this is a "historic moment" in Palestinian history, emphasising that the enemy is powerful enough to decide the beginning of the invasion but can no longer determine its end/outcome (as happened in Lebanon 2006). Sumud (steadfastness) coupled with resistance and iron determination and discipline characterise Hamas' response to Israel's action. Mishal also

called for a third Intifada, but one with a two-pronged strategy this time round: violent against Israel, peaceful internally (against the PA). The warning is clear. The PA may well become a target of, and no longer a vehicle for, Hamas' political aspirations. The longer Abbas (whose official presidential term expires next week) refuses to accommodate with Hamas, the more likely it'll become that the third Intifada will be a Hamas organised-one, aiming for political hegemony in the West Bank and not only in Gaza. Israel will try to crush it, of course, but may only end up burying its own Palestinian subcontractors instead. Like in Somalia and Afghanistan, the more you attack fundamentalists the more they seem to grow in numbers and in radicalisation. This is the flipside of an Israeli induced anarchy. If Sderot doesn't have peace and quiet today, Tel-Aviv won't tomorrow. Israel's state terror will thus only fuel its victims' counter-terror. If Hamas knows that it can never defeat Israel, it also knows that it can try to force on it what Sheikh Ahmad Yassin once called "symmetry of fear": your civilians will live in fear and insecurity, and will die, like ours do. If democratic electoral victories lead to boycott and siege, near starvation and massacres, high rates of unemployment and even higher rates of poverty and food dependency, and illegal collective punishment, then what else can dehumanised and desperate Gazans do? The promise of a "life in death" may again come to alleviate a "death in life."

The most heartening aspect of this horrendous week is the fact that hundreds of thousands of Arabs across the Arab world, from Morocco to Yemen (including Palestinians in Israel, who've been arrested and interned in their hundreds as a result), have come out to protest against the Israeli attacks, demanding that Arab regimes cut their links with Israel and that Egypt open its border-crossing with Gaza. Protest focused against Egypt also because of reports that Egyptian diplomats deceived Hamas officials into believing that an Israeli attack is not imminent. Again in Arab history, the links between Palestinian and Arab welfare and mass mobilization against Western-backed regimes are clearly seen and acted on. Palestine may yet again become an Arab cause, as Palestinians seem more helpless and divided in the face of Israel's killing machines. To state, as Mubarak of Egypt has, that opening Rafah will only lead to further Palestinian polarisation and fragmentation between the West Bank and Gaza is to believe that Palestinians somehow belong to Israel and should never benefit from their links and affiliations as Arabs. Why shouldn't Egypt help provide Gaza with all its electricity, infrastructural and civil needs? How can living in dignity threaten Palestinian institutional-political unity? Arab popular sentiment demands that cooperation, mutual help against common enemies, and region-wide organisation on a mass level become the norm not the exception.

Mass Palestinian and Arab mobilization and organisation is the only way forward. Active political participation can guarantee that what Palestinians are fighting for today is what they will be getting tomorrow, without being fooled or lied to by one elite group or another (as happened in Oslo). It is true that since Israel has the 4th most powerful army in the world, and is stacked with hundreds of nuclear warheads, no armed struggle by Palestinians can ever defeat Israel militarily. But popular mass struggle like the first year of the first Intifada can certainly defeat it politically. It can also create better conditions for Palestinians to achieve their much needed independence, national freedom, and sovereignty.

Gaza should become yet another lesson for Israel in Palestine's will to freedom. Let's make sure it will. •

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