

Hamas, Israel, Gaza and Violent Resistance

The Historical and Political Framework of the Current Crisis

By [Alan Nasser](#)

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Israel's stated reasons for its declaration of "all-out war" against the population of Gaza are the latest variation on a theme it put forward following the 2006 electoral victory of Hamas in Gaza. In February of that year Israel issued an official set of demands. Israel requires that Hamas recognize Israel's permanent right to exist, forswear violence and accept the validity of previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Israel claims that Hamas's failure to meet these demands explains and justifies its aerial blitz on the people of Gaza.

In fact, Israel's aggression has little to do with Hamas's response to these demands, which are, as we shall see, disingenuous.

Israel contends that the need to defeat Hamas is the core issue motivating its current air attacks. This claim is especially difficult for Americans to evaluate. The US media routinely echo official Israeli demonization of the objectives and actions of Hamas.

Understanding Hamas's history and current position on the key issues is essential to appreciating what is really at stake in the escalating crisis in Israel and Palestine.

The aim of what follows is simply to situate Hamas in the context of the occupation and Palestinians' response to it. Let us begin with Hamas's origins, and then move on to examine each of Israel's 2006 demands.

The Emergence of Hamas In Israel

Hamas descended directly from an earlier Islamic movement concerned primarily with the provision of education, health care, food aid and other social services to Palestinians suffering under the Israeli occupation.

This group was funded by the Saudi monarchy and... the government of Israel! The latter provided the movement with land, buildings and no small measure of encouragement.

Israel's rationale was simple: the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), at the time the chief representative of Palestinians' interests, was overtly political and secular, with a few socialists in its highest ranks. The organization aimed to organize Palestinians into a force capable of ending the occupation. The Israeli leadership sought to shift Palestians' loyalty from the secular, political PLO to the religious, non-political predecessor of Hamas.

The Israelis imagined that the provision of extensive social services and religion to Palestinians would de-politicize them by relieving their suffering and disinclining them to nationalist, anti-occupation resistance.

Thus, Israeli occupation authorities forcibly exiled pacifist Christian Palestinian activists who encouraged non-violent resistance, but permitted radical Islamic groups to hold gatherings, publish newspapers and have their own uncensored radio station.

Unsurprisingly, the religious social service groups were to become increasingly politicized. They witnessed the escalating brutality of the occupation and the ineffectiveness of charitable activity alone in undermining enforced apartheid. They continued their social service activities, but coalesced in 1987 to form Hamas, an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, The Islamic Resistance Movement.

Hamas's new political self-definition as representing Resistance to the occupation both sealed their fate in the eyes of the Israelis, and boosted their appeal to Palestinians.

In 1992 Israel expelled hundreds of Hamas members. Very few were accused of violent crimes. The UN Security Council unanimously declared the expulsions a violation of international law and called for the return of the exiles. But the incoming Clinton administration blocked the enforcement of the resolution.

The result was that the exiles became heroes, and Hamas's reputation and political strength among Palestinians grew significantly. Still, in 1993 Hamas had the support of only 15 percent of Palestinians. What accounts for the growth of Palestinian support for Hamas since then?

Israel and The Palestinian Authority Kill Palestinians' Hope

In the years following the 1993 Oslo Agreement between the PLO and Israel it became clear that nothing was being done to advance the formation of a viable Palestinian state. Hamas pointed out that the Agreement was, by Israeli design, open-ended, in stages, calculatedly vague and non-committal, and with no guarantees regarding key issues like settlements, land and water, the status of Jerusalem and the return of refugees.

Moreover, even as the Oslo negotiations proceeded, and lasting for years thereafter, Israel continued to build settlements at an accelerated pace. The settlement blocs were positioned in such a way as to create "facts on the ground" which would make it impossible to designate an area that could constitute a viable Palestinian state.

The Israeli-born Haifa University history professor Ilan Pappé has accurately described the Oslo Accords as a trick to allow Israel to continue to build settlements such as to corral Palestinians in South African-style bantustans.

All this culminated, at Camp David in 2000, in Barak's "generous offer", a striking vindication of Pappé's accusation: a Palestinian "state" with no territorial continuity, divided by settlement blocs, bypass roads and roadblocks, with Israeli control of the entire border. The area permitted to Palestinians would include 69 settlement blocs, housing 85% of all Israeli settlers. Palestinians would have to travel 50 miles from one town to another, with many pointless delays at checkpoints and roadblocks, in order to traverse a real distance of 5 miles.

And during the entire process, Israel continued to expand its colonization of the West Bank, doubling the number of settlers in the ten years following the signing of the Accords.

This was a slap in the face to Palestinians, who had agreed, through the PLO, to accept a

mere 22 percent of the land that was theirs before 1948. Conceding 78 percent of the land was an historical Palestinian compromise.

Since the Oslo and Camp David meetings the condition of Palestinians continued to deteriorate. It became increasingly clear that the PLO and its successor, the Palestinian Authority (PA), were not merely inept at negotiation, but that the PA and its leader Yasir Arafat were steeped in corruption, with much of the Authority's funds lavished on cronies while Arafat spent much of his time living in luxury far from Palestine. The last straw was the PA's decision to assign its police to assist the occupation authorities in the suppression of Palestinian resistance.

In contrast, Hamas was perceived by Palestinians as honest and genuinely responsive to their interests. Hamas unremittently critiqued the PA's ineptitude and corruption. But its approach was not merely negative: as we shall see below, Hamas proposed policies and bargaining points that were constructive, realistic and which did not threaten Israel's right to exist.

These developments were the beginning of mounting Palestinian support for Hamas.

The mainstream media tend to portray Palestinians' 2006 electoral choice of Hamas as a show of support for political violence as a means of resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. Indeed, the media routinely equate Hamas with mindless violence in the service of the destruction of Israel. None of these allegations against Hamas and the Palestinian people is true. Let us examine the general question of the political violence of stateless people, before moving on the specifics of Hamas's position with respect to the current crisis in Gaza.

Preliminary Questions: Statelessness and Legitimate Violence

The Palestinian resort to violence has no connection to the question of Israel's right to exist. That Palestinian resistance to the occupation sometimes takes violent forms does not bespeak a desire to annihilate Israel. In the case of the Palestinians, the resort to violence cannot be understood apart from an appreciation of the peculiar liabilities of statelessness.

The mainstream media make no effort to communicate to the general public the uniquely debilitating effects of statelessness. Statelessness is not merely to be without "a land of one's own." Max Weber's definition of the state is what is most relevant here: the state is the political institution that monopolizes the legitimate use of violence.

The state may rightfully employ violence as a means of addressing injustices done to its citizens. If someone kills your child, you may not imprison her in your attic as punishment. Instead, you report the perceived injustice to the state authorities, who then adjudicate your complaint through the justice system. A moment's reflection reveals that a stateless people are a people who lack any legitimate means of defending themselves from injustice.

A stateless people are structurally helpless in the face of injustice. For if modernity limits the violent response to injustice to state intervention, then statelessness mandates the passivity of the stateless. The latter are turned into involuntary pacifists. Statelessness disallows to Palestinians the only kinds of resistance appropriate to the instruments of oppression they face, namely forceful, aggressive resistance. For the entity that oppresses Palestinians is a racist and colonialist state that has made it clear, as we shall see below, that it will negotiate none of the demands of its subject population, and that it has a strong penchant

for the ongoing and superfluous use of its own instruments of destruction.

Bitter experience has taught Palestinians that non-violent or civil resistance/disobedience is in fact ineffective. Non-violent peace activists like Rachel Corrie (American), Tom Hurndall (British), and Gil Nima'ati (Israeli) met with death by IDF forces who knew exactly what they were doing.

In spite of all this, the statelessness of Palestinians dictates that they may not "take matters into their own hands." For Palestinians to take the measures that would normally be taken by a State whose citizens are treated by an enemy power as Palestinians are treated by Israel is termed "terrorism." Lacking a state to protect their interests, Palestinians find themselves in the following unenviable position: irrespective of what is done to them, the only legitimate responses are passivity or reliance on the kindness of strangers. And the response of the "international community" to Palestinians' plight makes it clear that the former are in effect strangers to them, and not at all kind strangers. Illegitimate response, then, becomes the only alternative to embracing defeat.

Note the peculiarity of the the use of 'illegitimate' in this context. To call private or non-state violence "illegitimate" is to imply that State action is available. But in the remarkable case of an oppressed people without a state, the normal distinction between legitimate and illegitimate action has no application.

While the violence of stateless resistance movements is by definition illegitimate, i.e. not legally effected by a state, it is an open question whether such violence is justified. It is clear to the majority of the world's populations that violent resistance to Israeli apartheid is as justified as was the sometimes violent resistance of South African blacks to the apartheid regime of their oppressors.

The question for us in connection with the Gaza crisis is whether Hamas is prepared to forswear violence short of the elimination of the state of Israel. In other words: Is Hamas open to a non-violent resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict? We shall see in what follows that Hamas is indeed open to such a resolution.

Is Hamas Committed To The Destruction Of Israel?

Hamas's earliest founding statements indeed denied Israel's right to exist. As we shall see, Hamas has abandoned this absolutist stance. The organization's growing support led it to assume a renewed sense of responsibility for those who brought it to power. The Palestinian community was largely secular and never embraced the absolutism of Islamic fundamentalism. In spite of continuous Israeli terror it continued to endorse the two-state solution.

Hamas has taken a firm stance against a call by al-Qaeda to pursue a violent jihad aimed at snatching all of Palestine from Israel. Hamas responded, in March 2006, that

"Our battle is against the Israeli occupation and our only concern is to restore our rights and serve our people."

In the elections that brought Hamas to power in Gaza in 2006, Hamas's "pragmatists" prevailed over the minority hard-liners, many of whom have turned into moderates. Hamas has always been responsive to its constituency. It knows that its electoral victory was due not to religious extremism, but to Hamas's platform of honest, effective and clean

government and improved social services.

In a post-election opinion poll only 1 percent of Palestinians said that Hamas should impose Islamic law on Palestine, while 73 percent supported a two-state solution as part of a peace accord with Israel. Hamas responded with a reaffirmation of its own support of a two-state solution.

Henry Siegman, former Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress and former director of the U.S. Middle East Project of the Council of Foreign Relations, was assured by an influential member of Hamas's Political Committee that Hamas does not rule out official recognition of Israel, but that Hamas will not renounce its belief that Palestine is a religious endowment assigned by God to Muslims. However, the official added that this theological belief does not preclude accommodations to temporal realities and international law. This includes, he emphasized, recognition of Israel's statehood.

This position has a precise parallel on Israel's side. Religious Jews believe that God promised all of Palestine to the Jewish people. But they are prepared to defer the implementation of this religious claim to the time following the appearance of the messiah.

In other words, in the real world, the religious convictions of both Hamas and religious Jews are consistent with a practical and secular resolution of their conflict.

The Israeli leadership is full aware of all this. Its real objection to Hamas is that the organization embodies more genuinely than any previous Palestinian leadership resistance to the occupation and savvy negotiations toward an independent Palestinian state.

Why Doesn't Hamas Now "Recognize" Israel?

The recognition issue is a red herring. It's Geopolitics 101: Hamas's recognition of Israel would signify its acceptance of Israel's non-recognition of a Palestinian state. Hamas has made it clear that were Israel to offer a genuine two-state solution with a return to its 1967 borders, and this were ratified by a majority of Palestinians, Hamas would find this acceptable. That would lead to official recognition of Israel.

What matters is official recognition, which can only be done by a sovereign state. Hamas can no more "recognize" Israel than Likud can recognize Spain. And, in the case of Israel, what is to be recognized? Israel refuses to declare its official borders.

Is Hamas Committed To Political Violence?

Even the Israeli press has reported that Hamas offered Israel, shortly after its 2006 electoral victory, an extended cease-fire and de facto acceptance of two states if only Israel would return to its 1967 borders.

Rather than seize this opportunity to test Hamas's good faith, Israel chose to punish Gaza's entire population with a blockade in order to pressure the people to renounce the results of the election.

In fact Hamas has repeatedly held to cease fires, which Israel has routinely violated. The connection between Israeli violations of cease-fires and suicide bombings is instructive. (A fuller treatment of this issue has been provided in two important articles by the Middle East scholar Steve Niva at www.counterpunch.org/niva08272003.html , and

www.counterpunch.org/niva03242004.html

There is a virtually infallible predictor of a suicide bombing: an Israeli assassination of a senior commander or military leader of a militant group. This predictor is most reliable when the assassinations take place while these groups are negotiating for a truce on attacks on Israelis, or when the assassinations break longstanding cease-fires by Palestinian groups.

This pattern became more frequent and predictable after Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister in February 2001. He escalated the assassination campaign against leading Palestinian militants.

Sharon deliberately chose periods during which anti-occupation groups were either negotiating or actually upholding cease-fires on attacks on Israeli civilians.

Here is only a selection from many examples:

- Two months into a Hamas cease-fire, Israel assassinated two leading Hamas commanders in Nablus on July 31 2001. Less than two weeks later there was a Hamas suicide bombing in a pizzeria in Jerusalem.
- While Hamas was adhering to an agreement not to attack targets inside Israel following the 9/11 attacks, Israel assassinated senior Hamas leader Mahmud Abu Hanoud on November 23 2001. One week later there were Hamas suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa.
- In the middle of a cease-fire declared by all the militant groups in late December, Israel assassinated leading Hamas militant Raed Karmi on January 14, 2002. Less than 2 weeks later there was a suicide bombing retaliation.
- In July 2002 there were widespread reports that a unilateral cease-fire declaration by Hamas would be announced on July 23rd. On that day, just before the anticipated announcement of the cease-fire, Israel assassinated the senior Hamas military leader Salah Shehadeh by an air attack on a crowded apartment block in Gaza City. Among those killed were 15 civilians, 11 of them children. Less than 2 weeks later Hamas retaliated with a suicide bombing.
- On 03/22/04 Sharon had the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin, assassinated. The predictable followed.

Israeli Journalists Denounce Israel's Complicity in Suicide Bombings

Some of Israel's most prestigious political commentators have suggested that Israel is responsible for at least some Palestinian violence. This position cannot even be formulated in the standard language of the US media, which consistently defines Israeli violence as "retaliation," and Palestinian violence as "attacks."

In an article (November 25 2001) in Israel's most widely read newspaper Yediot Aharanot, Alex Fishman, the newspaper's conservative military commentator noted that

"Whoever decided upon the liquidation of Abu Hanoud knew in advance that [a terrorist attack inside of Israel] would be the price. The subject was extensively discussed both by Israel's military echelon and its political one, before it was decided to carry out the liquidation."

Writing in Ha'aretz (January 21, 2002) the journalist Danny Rubinstein pointed out that

"Israel's assassinations today generate far more damage than the benefits they are supposed to bring...it can be said explicitly this time that Karmi's assassination has already and directly cost the lives of the ten Israelis who died in last week's murderous terrorist attacks."

Rubinstein's use of "directly" here is an assertion that Israel shares some of the responsibility for the suicide bombings.

An editorial in Ha'aretz (August 2, 2002) following the assassination of Shehada, declared that

"In short, any four-year-old child who examined this pattern of events would conclude that this government, whether consciously or not, is simply not interested in the cessation of the terrorist attacks, for they constitute its *raison d'être*".

Hamas spelled out the chilling implication of all this immediately following the killing of Yassin:

"Today Ariel Sharon ordered the killing of hundreds of Zionists in every street, city and centimeter of the occupied lands."

For years, Israel disingenuously insisted that the suicide attacks were the main obstacle to negotiations. Since the most recent truce that began last summer, Hamas Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh removed that obstacle by bringing about the complete cessation of suicide bombings. Predictably, this made no difference to Israel, which responded by denying Gazans electrical power, medicine, medical equipment and food.

The question, then, is not merely whether Israel has a direct interest in perpetuating Palestinian terrorist attacks, but whether Israel has any intention whatever to make even the slightest concession to Palestinians toward the establishment of the two-state solution.

Israel's Intentions: A Just Settlement, Or Ethnic Cleansing?

Ephraim Halevy, the former head of Israel's intelligence agency Mossad, reported on December 23 that Hamas

"[is] ready and willing to see the establishment of a Palestinian state in the temporary borders of 1967... [Hamas is prepared] to adopt a path that could lead them far from their original goals...Israel, for reasons of its own, did not want to turn the ceasefire into the start of a diplomatic process with Hamas."

Halevy might be unaware of Israel's "reasons of its own" for sabotaging negotiations aimed at the establishment of a Palestinian state, but not for lack of frank statements from Israel's leadership. On November 14, 1998, Ariel Sharon declared that

"It is the duty of Israeli leaders to explain to public opinion, clearly and courageously, a number of certain facts that are forgotten with time. The first of these is that there is no Zionism, colonization or Jewish state without the eviction of the Arabs and the expropriation of their lands."

In 2005 Dov Weisglass, Sharon's senior advisor, said of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza:

"The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians...this whole package that is called the Palestinian state has been removed from our agenda indefinitely."

Lest it be thought that this position was peculiar to the rabid Sharon, here is what Ehud Olmert said in an address to a Joint Session of the US Congress on May 24, 2006:

"I believed and to this day still believe, in our people's eternal and historic right to this entire land."

Israel's Real Motivations

What Israel fears is not terrorism but Palestinian independence. Israel will not permit a sovereign Palestinian government to emerge on land it intends to hold -and probably expand- as its own. The Palestinian Authority was and is in Israel's pocket. Hamas never will be Israel's pawn. Therefore, it must be eradicated. This is the main reason for the current blitzkrieg against Gaza. But it is not the only one.

Israeli elections are coming in February. Before the siege Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud was ahead in the polls. The blitz is a demonstration of toughness, a gesture of which politicians are known to avail themselves in election times. Tzipi Livni and Ehud Barak have placed themselves in the spotlight cheering the bombardment since the attacks began, hoping to enhance Kadima's and Labor's electoral fortunes. And indeed Labor's polls are up 50 percent in the last six days.

Finally, Israel has not won a war in 27 years. To add insult to injury, the IDF suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. As Mark Heller, chief research associate at the Institute For National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, said on Monday:

"Nobody's afraid of us today, the way they used to be... a big reason for this operation [is] to restore credibility in Israel's ability to deter enemies."

The irony, of course, is that the current sociocide will swell the ranks of Hamas and its sympathizers, much as Israel's Lebanon fiasco bolstered the prestige of Hezbollah. But it is only global activism in solidarity with the Palestinian people that will defeat Israel's colonialist designs and lethal hubris.

Alan Nasser is professor emeritus of Political Economy at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wa. His articles have appeared in The Nation, Monthly Review, Commonweal, Common Dreams, Global Research and a number of professional journals in economics, philosophy, law and psychology.

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