

Israel's Real Target is Not Hamas

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All colonial settler states are based on the violent dispossession of the native peoples – and as a result, their fundamental and overriding aim has always been to keep those native peoples as weak as possible. Israel's aim for the Palestinians is no different.

Palestinian statehood is clearly an obstacle to this goal; a Palestinian state would strengthen the Palestinians. Genuine sovereignty would end Israel's current presumed right to steal their land, control their borders, place them under siege, and bomb them at will. That is why Netanyahu's Likud party platform “flatly rejects the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state west of the Jordan river.”; that is why Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated for even suggesting some limited self-governance for the Palestinians; and that is why every proposal for Palestinian statehood, however limited and conditional, has been wilfully sabotaged by successive Israeli governments of all hues.

Within three years of the 1993 Oslo declaration, for example, which promised self-governance for Palestinian areas, foreign minister Ariel Sharon was urging “everyone” to “grab as many hilltops as they can” in order to minimise the size and viability of the area to be administered by Palestinian Authority. The 1999 election of a Labour Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, made no difference, ushering in “a sustained commitment by Israel's government to avoid full compliance with the Oslo agreement”, according to Jimmy Carter, most notably in the form of the greatest increase in illegal Israeli settlements that had yet taken place. The popular story that Barak had made a ‘generous offer’ on Palestinian statehood at negotiations in Taba in 2001, turned out to be a complete myth.

In the 2000s, the stakes were raised by the discovery of 1.4trillion cubic metres of natural gas in Gaza's territorial waters, leading Israel to immediately strengthen its maritime blockade of Gaza to prevent Palestinian access to the reserves. But Palestinian sovereignty over this gas would obviously enormously strengthen the economic position of any future Palestinian state – and thus made the Israelis more determined than ever to prevent such a state from coming into being.

The Saudi peace plan, then, in 2002, turned out to be something of a problem for Israel. Accepted by 22 members of the Arab League, and offering complete normalisation of Israeli-Arab relations in exchange for a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders (just 22% of historic Palestine), it was welcomed by the US, and followed up with a statement by George W. Bush in support of a Palestinian state – the first such statement by any US president. This does not imply that the US is in any way committed to genuine Palestinian sovereignty. What the US seeks is rather a thoroughly compromised entity, devoid of all significant attributes of statehood (border control, airspace control, etc) and dependent on Israel, but which it would *call* a state – and thus would provide the Arab states with a pretext for overt collaboration with Israel. As Jeff Halper has explained, for the US, as for the Saudis, the idea

behind the Saudi peace was actually to strengthen Israel, by facilitating Arab support for Israeli-US action against Iran, and thus establishing solid Israeli hegemony across the entire Middle East. In other words, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states wanted a (feeble) Palestinian state to come into existence, in order to justify the collaboration with Zionism being demanded of them by their US masters. But Israel does not particularly want or perceive the need for Arab support. Indeed, the image of the plucky little victim, besieged by 'hostile enemies' on all sides, is a fundamental plank of the Israeli national psyche, necessary to ensure the continued identification of the population with the militaristic state and its expansionist policies. And more importantly, in the zero-sum game of settler-vs-native politics, *any* Palestinian state, however toothless, represents an intolerable retreat for the Zionists.

This problem - of a growing consensus in support of a Palestinian state - was compounded for Israel in 2003, when the so-called "Quartet" (US, the UN, Russia and the EU) produced their 'roadmap' for peace, based, like the Saudi plan, on the principle of a Palestinian state being a fundamental prerequisite for lasting peace. Whilst the Israelis publicly accepted the 'roadmap', behind the scenes they listed 14 'caveats' and preconditions which rendered it meaningless and unworkable -effectively refusing to make any concessions whatsoever until the Palestinians were completely disarmed and their major organisations dissolved, whilst other caveats stripped any 'state' that might somehow emerge of all major attributes of statehood and sovereignty, just in case.

Since then, there have been various attempts by the US at restarting 'negotiations' on this roadmap, despite Israel's obvious hostility to its declared aim of Palestinian statehood. In the latest round, beginning in July 2013, the Palestinians - who had already conceded the 78% of historic Palestine conquered before 1967 - even agreed to drop their demand that talks should be based on the 1967 borders. Yet none of this made any difference to Israel, who worked hard to scupper the negotiations as best they could. As historian Avi Shlaim put it, "During the nine months of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks orchestrated by secretary of state John Kerry, Netanyahu did not put forward a single constructive proposal and all the while kept expanding Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Kerry and his adviser, General John Allen, drew up a security plan that they thought would enable Israel to withdraw from most of the West Bank. Israel's serial refusnik dismissed it contemptuously as not worth the paper it was written on." After nine months of this futile enterprise in self-humiliation, John Kerry threw in the towel in desperation, saying the two sides would have to work it out between themselves.

Israel's excuse for its reluctance to take negotiations seriously has always rested on two planks: a) Palestinian 'terrorism' and b) Palestinian 'disunity'. Both of these, Israel claims, means it has no 'partner for peace'; no one to negotiate with - either because they are terrorists, or because there is no single entity representing the Palestinian population who they can talk to. In 2006, following the election of Hamas, the US and EU effectively supported this line, and joined forces with Israel in refusing to recognise Hamas as the governing body of the Palestinian Authority. Likewise, when a unity government was formed with Fatah the following year (combining the two parties who together represented 86% of the popular vote), it was not recognised as legitimate by Israel's international backers who instead supported a government led by Salam Fayyad, whose party had gained just 2% in the previous year's election.

However, reaction to the recent unity government announced in April this year was very different. A government of 'technocrats' - comprising not a single Hamas member - was

endorsed by both Fatah and Hamas in an attempt to end the isolation and strangulation of the Gaza strip. As noted in the Independent at the time, this “new government would “adhere to the conditions of the Middle East Quartet [the EU, UN Russia and US], recognise Israel, ratify all signed agreements and renounce violence” according to a “senior Palestinian official” quoted on the Times of Israel site. As such, it was welcomed by both the US and the EU. Israel no longer had ‘Palestinian disunity’ as an excuse for refusing to engage in peace talks. Nor did they have ‘terrorism’ as an excuse, as Hamas had steadfastly stood by the terms of the 2012 ceasefire, not only ceasing their own rocket fire, but also successfully preventing rocket attacks by other Palestinian groups in Gaza. And all this despite continuous violations of the ceasefire by Israel beginning before the ink was even dry – from a refusal to lift the blockade (as required by the ceasefire terms), to continued attacks on Palestinians, killing 4 and maiming nearly 100 within the first three months of the ‘ceasefire’ alone. Even after Israeli attacks were stepped up over the past year, with four Palestinian children shot dead by Israeli forces between December 2013 and May 2014, including a 15 year old shot in the back from 100m, Hamas held their fire.

Netanyahu’s narrative of negotiations being impossible due to Palestinian terrorism and disunity was being increasingly undermined by reality – and crucially, his US-EU backers were not buying it. The Israeli government responded to the unity government by “what can only be described as economic warfare. It prevented the 43,000 civil servants in Gaza from moving from the Hamas payroll to that of the Ramallah government and it tightened siege round Gaza’s borders thereby nullifying the two main benefits of the merger” (Avi Shlaim). Still Hamas held their fire.

What Netanyahu really needed was a provocation against Hamas to which they would be *forced* to respond. Such a response would again allow him to paint them as the bloodthirsty terrorists with whom one can never negotiate, would provide the opportunity for another wave of devastation in Gaza, and would exacerbate tensions within the unity government between Fatah and Hamas.

Nine days after the swearing in of the unity government, on June 11th, the IDF made a raid on Gaza in which they killed a 10 year old boy on a bicycle. But still Hamas held their fire.

The following day, however, the apparent kidnapping of three Israeli settlers in the West Bank provided the opportunity for a provocation on an altogether larger scale. Having blamed the kidnapping on Hamas (without ever producing a scrap of evidence), Netanyahu used it as an excuse for an attack on the entire Hamas leadership in the West Bank, while his economy minister Naftali Bennett announced that “We’re turning the membership card for Hamas into a ticket to hell”. Operation Brother’s Keeper did precisely that, with 335 Hamas leaders arrested (including over 50 who had only just been released under a prisoner exchange scheme), and well over 1000 house raids (which left them looking “like an earthquake had taken place” according to one Palestinian activist). Noam Chomsky notes: “The 18-day rampage....did succeed in undermining the feared unity government, and sharply increasing Israeli repression. According to Israeli military sources, Israeli soldiers arrested 419 Palestinians, including 335 affiliated with Hamas, and killed six Palestinians, also searching thousands of locations and confiscating \$350,000. Israel also conducted dozens of attacks in Gaza, killing 5 Hamas members on July 7. Hamas finally reacted with its first rockets in 19 months, Israeli officials reported, providing Israel with the pretext for Operation Protective Edge on July 8.” Thus having killed eleven Palestinians in under a month, Israel then used retaliatory rocket attacks which killed no one as an excuse to launch

the biggest slaughter of Palestinians in decades.

Operation Protective Edge went on to kill or maim over 12,000 Palestinians over the course of the month that followed. But for Israel, it allowed it to push forward its key aim – prevention the formation of a functioning Palestinian state – on a number of fronts. Firstly, it helped to rekindle tensions between Fatah and Hamas that the unity government had threatened to heal. Fatah’s existing co-operation agreements with Israeli security obliged them to cooperate with the crackdown on Hamas in West Bank that was supposedly a ‘hunt for kidnappers’, which obviously led to suspicion and mistrust between the two parties. Furthermore, as Fadi Elhusseini has pointed out, ““Protective Edge” gave the new Palestinian unity government that irked Israel a heavy blow. Any plans of this new government to implement the reconciliation deal and prepare for national elections have gone by the wayside as priorities have changed in the face of Israeli aggression. Also, Israel bet – as it has always done – on contradictory positions among Palestinians on how to deal with its aggression, increasing the chances for setback in Palestinian reconciliation.” A breakdown in the unity government, of course, would once again provide Israel with the pretext for avoiding negotiations with the Palestinians on the grounds that they are not united.

Secondly, even as it enraged global public opinion, Israel’s blitzkrieg succeeded in getting Western governments back in line behind its ‘Hamas terrorists can never be trusted’ propaganda line: Elhusseini wrote that “Tellingly, whereas most of the actors in the international community started to accept the Palestinian position and reprimand the adamant stands of Israel, which became a quasi-loner state, the rockets fired from Gaza brought them back to the Israeli fold, announcing that Israel has the right to defend itself, regardless of its excessive use of force and the horrifying death toll among the Palestinians.” Indeed, having in April faced a US government supporting the unity government, once the massacre of Gazans (and corresponding rocket fire) was under way, the US Senate instead voted unanimously in support of Israeli aggression against Gaza while condemning “the unprovoked rocket fire at Israel” by Hamas and calling on “Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to dissolve the unity governing arrangement with Hamas and condemn the attacks on Israel.”

Third, the onslaught was an opportunity to destroy as much as possible of the infrastructure that would provide the basis for a Palestinian state. Of course, as the Israelis openly stated, this includes the military defence infrastructure, primitive as it is, but also all the economic infrastructure necessary for a functioning society. Thus, Israeli shelling destroyed Gaza’s only power plant, cutting off electricity for 80% of Gaza’s 1.6 million inhabitants, as well as dozens of wells, reservoirs and water pipelines, according to a recent report by Oxfam. A summary by Middle East Monitor notes that Oxfam “estimate that 15,000 tons of solid waste is rotting on the streets, wastewater pumping stations are on the verge of running out of fuel and many neighbourhoods have been without power for days, due to Israel’s bombing of the only power plant in Gaza. Oxfam said it was working in an environment that has a completely destroyed water infrastructure that prevents people in Gaza from cooking, flushing toilets, or washing hands, emphasising that the huge risk to public health. “Gaza’s infrastructure will take months or years to fully recover,” the head of Oxfam in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel reported.” The head of UNICEF’s field office in Gaza, Pernille Ironside, added that “There is a very limited amount of water available and it is used for drinking which means that there is no enough water for sanitary purposes. We see children who come from shelters infected with scabies, lice and all kinds of infectious diseases. The

worst thing is that most people outside the shelters did not receive water for several weeks now. It is horrible that they have not been able to receive any clean drinking water that is not contaminated by sewage which can lead to diarrhoea and increases child mortality, especially among those under five years old”.

In addition to attacks on water and electricity infrastructure, the private economy has also come under attack. The biggest factory in Gaza, a biscuit factory that had just won the contract to supply the UN in Gaza, was completely obliterated by Israeli shellfire, and even conservative British daily the Telegraph notes that “anecdotal evidence of the systematic destruction of Gaza’s civilian economy and infrastructure is compelling”. The report continues: “Outside central Gaza City, a string of businesses with no obvious links to militant activities lie in ruins after being demolished by missiles or shells. They include a plastics factory, a sponge-making plant and even the headquarters of the territory’s main fruit distribution near the northern town of Beit Hanoun, much of which has been levelled in the Israeli land invasion.

A few miles north of the Alawada plant, the headquarters of the El Majd Industrial and Trading Corporation – producing cardboard boxes, cartons and plastic bags – was reduced to a heap of concrete and twisted metal.

It had taken two direct hits from missiles fired by an Israeli war plane in the early hours of Monday morning, according to Hassan Jihad, 25, the factory caretaker, who survived fortuitously because he had moved to the company’s administrative headquarters outside the main factory for the duration of the conflict.

He too had little doubt about the reason behind the strike. “The Israelis are trying to destroy the economy and paralyse Gaza,” he said. “This is the only factory in the Gaza Strip producing cardboard containers. We don’t have any rockets in the place.”

Roward International, Gaza’s biggest dairy importer and distribution company, met a similar fate on Thursday afternoon. Its plant in the al-Karama neighbourhood was totally flattened by a missile after an Israeli army operator phoned in a warning in time for its 60 workers to be evacuated.

Majdi Abu Hamra, 35, accounts manager in the family-run business, said the firm bought milk from producers in the West Bank, before importing it into Gaza via Israel.

The territory’s main power plant – also on Salaheddin Road, not far from the Alawada factory – went up in flames last Tuesday after being struck by Israeli shells. Israel denied targeting the plant but experts say it is now out of commission for the next year, leaving Gaza virtually without any electricity other than that supplied by generators. The resulting shortage has already affected the water supply, with power now insufficient to pump water to homes located above ground level.

In addition, a public health crisis may be looming after two sewage pumping stations – one in the crowded Zeitoun area, the other near Gaza’s coastal road – were damaged in strikes on neighbouring targets, prompting UN officials to warn that raw sewage could flow onto the streets in the coming days.

Trond Husby, head of the UN’s development programme in Gaza, was non-committal when asked if he believed Israeli forces were deliberately targeting private businesses in Gaza.

But about the effects of the damage, he was unequivocal. "This is a humanitarian disaster," he said. "I was in Somalia for two years, Sierra Leone for five, and also South Sudan and Uganda, and this beats them all for the level of destruction.""

Finally, as many commentators have noted, even if Israel were successful in its stated aim of destroying or weakening Hamas, this would only result in even more militant groups emerging, perhaps even Al Qaeda type groups such as ISIS, gaining support from a traumatised population by promising revenge attacks and uncompromising armed jihad. Whilst many have argued that this would somehow be against Israel's interests, the reverse is likely to be true. Groups such as ISIS have played a key role in facilitating US and British policies in the Middle East in recent years, by weakening independent regional powers (or potential regional powers) such as Libya, Syria and now Iraq. They would likely have the same effect on Palestine, and would certainly set back the prospects for the emergence of a Palestinian state: they would never countenance, for example, unity with Fatah, and would rather serve to provide a permanent pretext for savage Israeli attacks which Western Europe and North America would be obliged to support. Moreover, if Gaza became an ungoverned and ungovernable disaster zone - which is what Israel is in the process of creating - there would of course be no question of its gaining sovereignty over its territory, and even less over its waters and gas reserves. Israel would remain free to bomb at will, just as the US and Britain remain free to bomb at will in the failed states they have created in Somalia, Libya, Yemen and Iraq.

The desire to destroy any potential for Palestinian statehood, then, explains *why* Israel have launched their latest round of bloodletting. But to understand *how* it has become emboldened enough to launch their most destructive attack in decades requires an understanding of the regional context.

The Palestinian struggle for independence rises and falls with the overall Arab struggle for independence. Whilst many commentators have focused on the fall of President Morsi in Egypt to explain Hamas' weakness and relative isolation, in fact the Western-sponsored wars against Libya, Syria and Hezbollah are of greater significance. These wars have respectively destroyed, weakened and preoccupied three of the major independent and anti-Zionist forces in the region, and thus strengthened Israel's ability to act with impunity. As George Friedman explains, "Currently, Israel is as secure as it is ever likely to be....Israel's economy towers over its neighbours....Jordan is locked into a close relation with Israel, Egypt has its peace treaty and Hezbollah is bogged down in Syria. Apart from Gaza, which is a relatively minor threat, Israel's position is difficult to improve." Clearly, the transformation of Libya into a failed state at the hands of Western-sponsored sectarian militias, and the attempt to do the same to Syria, serves the long term Israeli goal of dividing and weakening all its regional foes (real or potential). Recognising this obvious point, an incendiary 1982 journal piece by Israeli academic Oded Yinon (notable not so much for its originality as for its blunt honesty) explicitly called for the region's balkanisation: "*Lebanon's total dissolution into five provinces serves as a precedent for the entire Arab world including Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the Arabian peninsula and is already following that track. The dissolution of Syria and Iraq later on into ethnically or religiously unique areas such as in Lebanon, is Israel's primary target on the Eastern front in the long run, while the dissolution of the military power of those states serves as the primary short term target. ... This state of affairs will be the guarantee for peace and security in the area [sic - he means Israel] in the long run, and that aim is already within our reach today*". He goes on to describe the coming break-up of Iraq with remarkable prescience: "Iraq, rich in

oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other, *is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel's targets*. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria. Iraq is stronger than Syria. In the short run it is Iraqi power which constitutes the greatest threat to Israel....*Every kind of inter-Arab confrontation will assist us in the short run and will shorten the way to the more important aim of breaking up Iraq into denominations as in Syria and in Lebanon*. In Iraq, a division into provinces along ethnic/religious lines as in Syria during Ottoman times is possible. So, three (or more) states will exist around the three major cities: Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, and Shi'ite areas in the south will separate from the Sunni and Kurdish north." Thus, the Western-backed offensive in Syria, and its current spillover into Iraq, directly serves Israeli goals by weakening all potential counterweights to Israeli dominion in the region - and thus directly facilitates Israel's current slaughter.

In this respect, the overthrow of Egyptian President Morsi by the Egyptian army actually strengthened the Arab position, ending the divisive policies which were causing huge religious rifts internally, and ending the prospect of Egypt gratuitously tearing itself apart through direct military involvement in the Syrian civil war. Indeed, Morsi's policies had been well on the way to realising Yinon's dream of a balkanised Egypt. In 1982, he wrote that "Egypt, in its present domestic political picture, is already a corpse, all the more so if we take into account the growing Moslem-Christian rift. *Breaking Egypt down territorially into distinct geographical regions is the political aim of Israel in the Nineteen Eighties on its Western front.*" By thoroughly alienating the country's Christian communities, Morsi was paving the way for precisely such a scenario to unfold. Regardless of Hamas' relationship with Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood organisation, the army's move against Morsi, by ending Egypt's trajectory towards state breakdown and failure, strengthened Egypt's ability to act as a counterweight to Israeli domination in the region - a necessary precondition for any advance on the Palestinian front. As Ali Jarbawi put it after the Egyptian Presidential elections of April this year, "Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's election as the new Egyptian president has given Palestinians a sliver of hope that their cause will return to the forefront of Arab affairs - or that, at least, there will be a slight adjustment in the balance of power with Israel. This has nothing to do with any value judgments about the Egyptian revolution. It is a purely pragmatic stance, based on the fact that Mr. Sisi's election will influence Palestinian affairs" positively, particularly by restoring the stability necessary for Egypt to act as a counterweight to Israeli power, but also by realigning Egypt more towards Russia and thus towards a less dependent relation with the US. Indeed, the desire on the part of Israel to destroy as much as possible of Gaza before Egypt fully regains its strength and independence may well have added urgency to their latest attack.

In sum, despite its current ability to rip thousands of Palestinians to shreds on the flimsiest of pretexts, all is not well for Israel. Even their short term goals have not been met in this latest attack. Despite everything, the unity government has not broken, and Fatah and Hamas are currently presenting a united front in the ceasefire negotiations. Likewise, Hamas has not been defeated, even militarily (let alone politically) by this attack, and has been able to continue its military resistance right up until the beginning of the various ceasefires that have taken place. If Kissinger is right that in asymmetrical warfare, "The conventional army loses if it does not win [whilst] the *guerrilla* wins if he does not lose", then this is not a war that Israel has won. For all its delaying tactics, the Israelis cannot postpone forever Palestinian citizenship in some form or other - and if the Israelis make the creation of a separate Palestinian state impossible, they should not be surprised if demands shift instead to citizenship in a single state comprising the entirety of historic Palestine.

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