

Setting the Stage to Commit a Massacre in Gaza

Excerpt from Ilan Pappé's book, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories*

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*Fifty years after the Six-Day War, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip shows no end in sight. Acclaimed historian Ilan Pappé provides a comprehensive and damning account of the occupation in his new book, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories*, based on groundbreaking archival research and eyewitness accounts.*

Ilan Pappé contends that Israel was preparing for a massive assault on Gaza since at least 2004. The following excerpt describes the militarization of Israeli policy towards Gaza leading up to the massacre of 2008-2009 known in Israel as Operation Cast Lead.

2004: The Dummy City

In 2004 the Israeli army began building a dummy Arab city in the Negev Desert. It was the size of a real city, with streets (all of them given names), mosques, public buildings and cars. Built at a cost of \$45 million, this phantom city became a fake Gaza in the winter of 2006, after Hezbollah fought Israel to a standstill in the north, so that the Israeli army could prepare to fight a 'better war' against Hamas in the south.

When the Israeli Chief of General Staff, Dan Halutz, visited the site after the Lebanon war, he told the press that soldiers 'were preparing for the scenario that will unfold in the dense neighbourhood of Gaza City.' A week into the bombardment of Gaza, Ehud Barak attended a rehearsal for the ground war. Foreign television crews filmed him as he watched ground troops conquer the mock city, storming the empty houses and no doubt killing the 'terrorists' hiding in them.

In 2009 the Israeli NGO Breaking the Silence published a report of its members', reserve soldiers' and other soldiers' preparation for Operation Cast Lead, when the attack on the dummy city was replaced by an assault on the real Gaza. The gist of the testimonies was that the soldiers had orders to attack Gaza as if they were attacking a massive enemy stronghold: this became clear from the firepower employed, the absence of any orders or procedures about acting properly within a civilian environment, and the synchronized effort from land, sea and air. Among the worst practices they rehearsed were the senseless demolition of houses, the spraying of civilians with phosphorus shells, the killing of innocent civilians by light weaponry and obeying orders from their commanders generally to act with no moral compass.

“You feel like an infantile child with a magnifying glass that torments ants, you burn them,” one soldier testified.

In short, they practised the total destruction of the real city as they trained in the mock city.

This was the new version of the maximum security prison that awaited the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, as the Israeli government and its security policymakers realized that the open-prison model, which was meant to enclose the people of the Strip under a collaborative rule of the PA, had been foiled by the people themselves. The retaliation that came in the form of besieging and blockading the Strip into surrendering to the preferred Israeli model had not worked either. The Palestinian political groups in the Strip, led by Hamas, decided to retaliate by launching occasional barrages of primitive missiles so that the world, and Israel, would not forget them and their life within a hermetically closed prison.

This is how the Israeli fiasco unfolded in 2005, which turned into what I have referred to elsewhere as the incremental genocide of Palestine. The Israelis referred to their first operation against Gaza as ‘First Rain’; it was more a rain of fire from the sky than of blessed water from above.

2005: The First Rain

The militarization of the Israeli policy towards the Gaza strip began in 2005. That year Gaza became an official military target from the Israeli point of view, as if it were a huge enemy base rather than a place of civilian habitation. Gaza is a city like any other in the world, and yet for the Israelis it became a dummy city for soldiers to experiment with the most recent and advanced weapons.

This policy was enabled by the Israeli government’s decision to evict the Jewish settlers who had colonized the Gaza Strip since 1967. The settlers were allegedly moved as part of what the government described as a unilateral policy of disengagement, the argument being that since there was no progress in the peace talks with the Palestinians, it was up to Israel to determine how its borders with the Palestinian areas would ultimately look. In essence, Prime Minister Sharon was willing to turn the Strip into a West Bank Area A and in turn strengthen Israel’s grip on the West Bank (and in evicting the Gazan settlers against their will, it would create an alleged trauma that would absolve Israel from ever repeating it again).

But things did not turn out as expected. The eviction of the settlers was followed by a Hamas takeover, first in democratic elections, then in a pre-emptive coup staged to avert an American-backed seizure by Fatah. The immediate Israeli response was to impose an economic blockade on the Gaza Strip, to which Hamas retaliated by firing missiles at the nearest town to the Strip, Sderot. This gave Israel the pretext to use its air force, artillery and gunships. Israel claimed it was firing at the launching areas of the missiles, but in practice this meant anywhere and everywhere in the Strip.

Creating the prison and throwing the key into the sea, as UN Special Rapporteur John Dugard has put it, was an action against which the Palestinians in Gaza reacted with force in September 2005. They were determined to show that at the very least they were still part of the West Bank and Palestine. That same month they launched the first significant barrage

(in number only, not quality) of missiles into the western Negev — as so often, these resulted in damage to some properties but very rarely in human casualties. The events of that month deserve to be mentioned in detail, because the early Hamas response before September had been the sporadic trickle of missiles. The launching in September 2005 was in response to an Israeli campaign of mass arrests of Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists in the Tul Karem area; one could not escape the impression at the time that the army was looking to trigger a Hamas response. Indeed, when it came, it was a harsh policy of massive killings, the first of its kind, code-named 'First Rain.'

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the nature of that operation. The discourse that accompanied it was one of punishment and it resembled the punitive measures inflicted in the more distant past by colonial powers, and more recently by dictatorships, against rebellious imprisoned or banished communities. A frightening show of aggression by the oppressor ended with large numbers of dead and wounded among the victims. In Operation First Rain, supersonic flights took place over Gaza to terrorize the entire population, followed by the heavy bombardment of vast areas from the sea, sky and land. The logic, the Israeli army explained, was to create pressure in order to weaken the Gaza community's support for the rocket launchers. As everyone expected, the Israelis included, the operation only increased support for the rocket launchers and gave impetus to their next attempts.

In hindsight, and especially given the Israeli military commanders' explanation that the army had long been preparing the 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead, it is possible that the real purpose of that particular operation was experimental. And if the Israeli generals wanted to know how such operations would be received at home, in the region and in the wider world, it seems that the quick answer was 'very well'; namely, no governments showed any interest in the scores of dead and hundreds of wounded Palestinians left behind after First Rain subsided.

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