

The massacre in Gaza puts the Mubarak regime in serious trouble

By [Alberto Cruz](#)

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It is with the approval of reactionary Arab regimes, mainly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, that has made the Israeli massacre in Gaza possible. more than the Western and US support Israel depends on.(1) In this case, the sequence of events is very relevant and primary responsibility has to be attributed to the reactionary Arab regimes, not to Israel's traditional allies.

Since Hezbollah's victory in the war against Israel of summer 2006, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and some Gulf countries have argued that they had to do everything possible to halt the progress of "non-State actors" - read Hezbollah and Hamas - from consolidating in the Arab world. So just as they did in the case of the war in Lebanon, when the Zionist aggression against Gaza happened, the first thing they did was to applaud it. Then, when the war went from bad to worse for the Zionists, some began to backtrack and offer careful comments to the effect that the bad guys (in 2006 Hezbollah, now Hamas) might not really be so bad and they began to criticize the "excessive" Zionist massacre.

Of them all, Egypt is the one that must shoulder most blame. On December 25th, two days before the Israeli invasion of Gaza, Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, visited Cairo and met with President Hosni Mubarak. There Livni told Mubarak of the attack on Gaza and got Mubarak's approval(2) for a "rapid, surgical operation" aimed at overthrowing Hamas and clearing the way for the return of Mahmoud Abbas and his men. If one can believe the Arab press - and in this case - one has to, since the Western Press hides it - Livni told Mubarak that everything would be over in three days. It seems the Arab Press are right, because at the time, between the 27th and 30th of December, 400 members of the Palestinian security forces loyal to Abbas (3) turned up in Egypt at Al-Arish, in the Sinai, under the command of Mohammad Dahlan ready to take over the Strip after what they reckoned would be the swift defeat of Hamas.

However, what had been painted a cakewalk turned into a calvary. The initial Israeli brutality was insufficient to overthrow Hamas who, by means of intelligent tactics, managed to reverse the course of the battle. Just the fact that it is resisting is reaping political gains. As the Israeli aggression continues and urban warfare begins, Hamas will shortly reap gains in the military sphere too. At the same time they are causing serious problems, not for the Zionists' Western patrons but for the reactionary Arab regimes. As a US reporter noted with some surprise "a torrent of popular anger is putting pressure on America's allies in the Arab world and seems to be worsening divisions in the region...the biggest criticisms have been aimed at Egypt which is broadly seen by the Arab Street as the main supporter of the Israeli campaign." (4) Above all, for not opening the Rafah crossing.

It is a reality. Mubarak, who stayed silent at the initial aggression, had to come out in public on January 2nd, six days after it started, so as to “clarify” Egypt’s position. He said that Gaza and the West Bank “are one country” and that the Rafah crossing – Gaza’s only frontier with non-Israeli territory – will open only under the conditions of a 2005 agreement. Strangely, Egypt is not a signatory to that agreement and, since the agreement was prior to the Palestinian elections of 2006, won cleanly and democratically by Hamas, it is already out of date. Especially since it stated that the frontier crossing was to be monitored by forces of the Palestinian Authority, that is to say, Abbas, and the European Union. (5) At the same time as that clarification, Egypt earmarked a sum of US\$35 million for an information campaign in the Egyptian and Arab communications media to counteract criticism and “explain” the official position. But it was already too late.

Gaza is making the Mubarak regime shakier than ever before. On December 29th 2008, an attempted mutiny took place in a police academy with 6000 students when they were ordered to reinforce police at the Rafah crossing. They refused, which is believed to have led to the arrest of various medium ranking officers and police.(6) On December 30th, the demonstrations in support of the Palestinians in Gaza became massive and have continued without interruption in places like Assiut, Minya, Daqaliya, Fayoum and Alexandria (7), and also in the universities in Cairo and Ain Ahms. The Muslim Brotherhood and the left wing of the Kefaya Movement have worked together on them, reinforcing a tacit alliance that has been developing since before the Lebanon War of 2006.

The slogans of the demonstrations have been twofold. On the one hand “To stop the Gaza Holocaust”, on the other “Gaza, forgive us”, referring to the inability of the Egyptian popular movement to reverse the policy of the government. And as the demonstrations spread, armed threats are beginning to appear. Said Mohamed Anwar Sadat, nephew of the former President of the country who was assassinated a few years later, is spokesperson for a protest campaign against Mubarak’s position on the massacre in Gaza. He has said publicly that Egyptian youth are “furious” with the government position and that means that there is going to be no other choice than to carry out “armed action against the gas installations and pipelines supplying gas to Israel”. (8)

As well as the demonstrations in support of Gaza and against the massacre, a popular campaign is in progress demanding the Egyptian government immediately stops supplying gas to Israel. The Egyptian regime and Israel signed an agreement in 2005 by which Egypt supplies Israel 7 million cubic metres of natural gas at a price 12 times less than the international market price. (9) The Egyptian gas flows from a pipeline in the city of El Arish (in the northern Sinai, very close to the Gaza Strip) and goes to the port of Ashkelon to the north of the Gaza Strip.

The situation is so delicate for the Mubarak regime as to have been one of the reasons that Egypt appears as one of the leaders of a plan co-sponsored with France to achieve a ceasefire satisfactory to the Israelis and in part too to Hamas. No one talks about overthrowing Hamas in Egypt. The language is much softer. So much so that Mubarak has had to order his Foreign Minister to call the ambassadors of the permanent members of the UN Security Council to express Egypt’s “unhappiness” at the delay in approving a ceasefire resolution. (10) Clearly there was no hurry in reaching one, until January 4th, nine days after the beginning of the Israeli aggression.

Egypt’s stymied mediation

Another factor has been the fading away of Egypt's role as mediator or even as a sponsor of agreements. This had already happened in May 2008 when Hezbollah militants and their Resistance Front allies took control of Beirut in just 4 days. It was not Egypt which brokered a deal between the factions, but Qatar. (11) Now the situation is the same.

Syria, Qatar and Turkey are sponsoring a ceasefire agreement which, contrary to the one proposed by Egypt and France does have the approval of Hamas. That agreement, which is not reported in the West, nor in the reactionary Arab regimes, sets out five points: a ceasefire by both sides, immediate withdrawal by Israel, a return to the truce signed in June 2008 between Hamas and Israel, the formation of a special commission to open the crossings into the Gaza Strip and an international donor conference for the reconstruction of Gaza. (12)

De facto, the Israeli massacre in Gaza has managed to divide the Arab world in a way now practically irreversible. On one side are Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia Saudita, Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and the forces that support Mahmoud Abbas on the West Bank. On the other side are Syria, Lebanon, Qatar, Yemen, Libya, Mauritania (despite its having diplomatic relations with Israel), Sudan, Algeria, Djibouti, Somalia and the Comoros Islands.

Of these countries, Algeria, Yemen and Qatar began distancing themselves from the other bloc in an Arab League meeting, in May 2008, dealing with the situation in Lebanon after the takeover of Beirut by Hezbollah and its allies. That marked closer ties between them and Syria since they were not in agreement with the repeated refrain of the pro-Western reactionary Arab regimes about Iranian interference in the area and the strategy of containing "Shi'ite expansion". The Gaza massacre makes it difficult to continue that refrain since Hamas is Sunni. But now the reactionary regimes are saying that Hamas has become "an Iranian pawn".

But to this split one has to add the one in the non-Arab Islamic world. Here it is worth mentioning Turkey. Its agreement to sponsor the alternative plan supported by Hamas indicates that its strategic alliance with Israel is cracking and that something is changing in the Arab and Islamic regimes regarded as "moderates" and as closer to Israel and the West. After the Gaza massacre, nothing will stay the same.

The resistance of Gaza's inhabitants and the intelligent strategy of Hamas has taken the reactionary Arab regimes by surprise. They have to face their peoples given that their survival depends on it. Arab Press editorials are very clear in this regard, although the surest analysis is perhaps that of the Lebanese "Daily Star" from January 9th, "Gaza is the tip of the iceberg in terms of the danger for Arab States." (13) And it points out, "non-State agents are going to gain more influence (among Arab people) at the expense of disgraced governments and an inert Arab leadership."

It is possible Hamas may accept the French-Egyptian plan or it may not. It will depend on the correlation of forces on the battlefield and until now, despite the dead and wounded, that is not unfavourable for Hamas. In this case, for the Palestinian political-military movement, to resist is to win. The next few days will see for sure who will turn out the victor for the Arabs. It will depend on where the next summit meeting is held and whether or not Hamas is present.

Notes:

- (1) Alberto Cruz, "La connivencia árabe con la matanza de Gaza"
<http://www.nodo50.org/cepid/spip.php?article355>
- (2) Al-Akhbar (Líbano), January 10th 2009.
- (3) As-Safir (Líbano), January 4th 2009.
- (4) The New York Times, January 3rd 2009.
- (5) Haaretz (Israel), January 3rd 2009.
- (6) Sawt Al-Omah (Egipto), December 30th 2008.
- (7) Al-Ahram (Egipto), January 9th 2009.
- (8) Al Jazeera, January 9th 2009.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Al-Ahram Weekly, January 8th-14th 2009.
- (11) Alberto Cruz, "Condoleezza Rice tenía razón: nace un nuevo Oriente Medio"
<http://www.nodo50.org/cepid/spip.php?article154>
- (12) Al-Quds Al-Arabi (Britain), January 9th 2009.
- (13) The Daily Star, January 9th 2009.

Alberto Cruz is a journalist, writer and political analyst specializing in international relations
- albercruz@eresmas.com

Centro de Estudios Políticos para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Desarrollo
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