

The plot against Gaza

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Global Research, January 17, 2009

17 January 2009

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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Displaced Palestinian families from the northern Gaza Strip who survived an Israeli attack on a UN school where they were seeking refuge, take refuge yet again at a hospital in the Jabilya refugee camp, 17 January 2009. (Wissam Nassar/[MaanImages](#))

Israel has justified its assault on Gaza as entirely defensive, intended only to stop Hamas firing rockets on Israel's southern communities. Although that line has been repeated unwaveringly by officials since Israel launched its attack on 27 December, it bears no basis to reality. Rather, this is a war against the Palestinians of Gaza, and less directly those in the West Bank, designed primarily to crush their political rights and their hopes of statehood.

The most glaring evidence contradicting the Israeli *casus belli* is the six-month ceasefire between Hamas and Israel that preceded the invasion. True, Hamas began firing its rockets as soon as the truce came to an end on 19 December, but Israel had offered plenty of provocation. Not least it broke the ceasefire by staging a raid into Gaza on 4 November that killed six Hamas members. Even more significantly, it maintained and tightened a blockade during the ceasefire period that was starving Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants of food, medicine and fuel. Hamas had expected the blockade lifted in return for an end to the rockets.

A few days before Israel's attack on Gaza, Yuval Diskin, the head of Israel's domestic security service, the Shin Bet, noted Hamas' commitment to the ceasefire and its motives in restarting the rocket fire. "Make no mistake, Hamas is interested in maintaining the truce," he told the cabinet. "It seeks to improve its conditions — a removal of the blockade, receiving a commitment from Israel that it won't attack and extending the lull to the Judea and Samaria area [the West Bank]." In other words, had Israel wanted calm, it could have avoided invading Gaza simply by renegotiating the truce on more reasonable terms.

Israel, however, had little interest in avoiding a confrontation with Hamas, as events since the Islamic group's takeover of Gaza in early 2006 show.

It is widely agreed among the Israeli leadership that Hamas represents a severe threat to Israel's ambition to crush the Palestinians' long-standing demands for a state in the West Bank and Gaza. Unlike Fatah, its chief Palestinian political rival, Hamas has refused to collude with the Israeli occupation and has instead continued its resistance operations. Although Hamas officially wants the return of all the lands the Palestinians were dispossessed of in 1948, at the establishment of Israel, it has shown signs of increasing

pragmatism since its election victory, as Diskin's comments above highlight. Hamas leaders have repeatedly suggested that a long-term, possibly indefinite, truce with Israel is possible. Such a truce would amount to recognition of Israel and remove most of the obstacles to the partition of historic Palestine into two states: a Jewish state and a Palestinian one.

Rather than engaging with Hamas and cultivating its moderate wing, Israel has been preparing for an "all-out war," as Ehud Barak, the defense minister, has referred to the current offensive. In fact, Barak began preparing the attack on Gaza at least six months ago, as he has admitted, and probably much earlier.

Barak and the military stayed their hand in Gaza chiefly while other strategies were tested. The most significant was an approach espoused in the immediate wake of Hamas' victory in 2006. Dov Weisglass, former prime minister Ariel Sharon's fixer in Washington, gave it clearest expression. Israel's policy, he said, would be "like an appointment with a dietician. The Palestinians will get a lot thinner, but won't die."

John Wolfensohn, envoy to the Quartet of the United States, the United Nations, Europe and Russia through most of 2005, has pointed out that the US and Israel reneged on understandings controlling the border crossings into Gaza from the moment of Israel's disengagement in summer 2005. In an interview with the Israeli media, he attributed the rapid destruction of the Gazan economy to this policy. However, although the blockade began when Fatah was still in charge of the tiny enclave, the goal of Weisglass' "diet" was to intensify the suffering of Gaza's civilians. The rationale was that, by starving them, they could be both reduced to abject poverty and encouraged to rise up and overthrow Hamas.

But it seems the Israeli army was far from convinced a "diet" would produce the desired result and started devising a more aggressive strategy. It was voiced last year by Israel's deputy defense minister, Matan Vilnai. He observed that, if Hamas continued firing rockets into Israel (in an attempt, though he failed to mention it, to break the blockade), the Palestinians "will bring upon themselves a bigger shoah because we will use all our might to defend ourselves." The Hebrew word "Shoah" has come to refer exclusively to the Holocaust.

Though his disturbing comment was quickly disowned, Vilnai is no maverick. He is a former major general in the army who maintains close ties to the senior command. He is also a friend of his boss, Ehud Barak, the Labor leader and Israel's most decorated soldier. The reference to the "shoah" offered a brief insight into the reasoning behind a series of policies he and Barak began unveiling from summer 2007.

It was then that hopes of engineering an uprising against Hamas faded. The diet regime had patently failed, as had a Fatah coup attempt underwritten by the United States. Hamas struck a pre-emptive blow against Fatah, forcing its leaders to flee to the West Bank. In retaliation the Israeli government declared Gaza a "hostile entity." Barak and Vilnai used Gaza's new status as the pretext for expanding the blockade of food and medicines to include electricity, a policy that was progressively tightened. At the same time they argued that Israel should consider cutting off "all responsibility" for Gaza. The intention of Barak's blockade, however, was different from the Weisglass version. It was designed to soften up Gazan society, including Hamas fighters, for Israel's coming invasion.

Far from being threatened by the intensifying blockade, Hamas turned it to its advantage.

Although Israel controls two of the land borders and patrols the coast, there is fourth short land border shared with Egypt, close by the town of Rafah. There Gaza's entrepreneurs developed a network of smuggling tunnels that were soon commandeered by Hamas. The tunnels ensured both that basic supplies continued to get through, and that Hamas armed itself for the attack it expected from Israel.

From March 2008 Barak and Vilnai began pushing their military strategy harder. New political formulations agreed by the government suggested the whole population of Gaza were to be considered complicit in Hamas actions, and therefore liable for retaliatory military action. In the words of the daily *Jerusalem Post* newspaper, Israeli policy makers took the view that "it would be pointless for Israel to topple Hamas because the population [of Gaza] is Hamas."

At this point, Barak and Vilnai announced they were working on a way to justify in law the army directing artillery fire and air strikes at civilian neighborhoods of Gaza, as has been occurring throughout the current Gaza campaign. Vilnai, meanwhile, proposed declaring areas of the tiny enclave "combat zones" in which the army would have free rein and from which civilians would be expected to flee — again a tactic that has been implemented over the past three weeks.

Although Israel is determined to crush Hamas politically and militarily, so far it has been loathe to topple it. Israel withdrew from Gaza precisely because the demographic, military and economic costs of directly policing its refugee camps were considered too high. It will not be easily dragged back in.

Other options are either unpalatable or unfeasible. A Fatah government riding in on the back of Israeli tanks would lack legitimacy, and no regime at all — anarchy — risks losing forces more implacably opposed to a Jewish state than Hamas, including al-Qaeda. Placing Gaza under a peacekeeping force faces other hurdles: not least, the question of which countries would be prepared to take on such a dangerous burden.

Instead Israel is planning to resort to its favorite diplomatic maneuver: unilateralism. It wants a solution that passes over the heads of Hamas and the Palestinians. Or as Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister, put it: "There is no intention here of creating a diplomatic agreement with Hamas. We need diplomatic agreements against Hamas." The formula currently being sought for a ceasefire will face opposition from Israel unless it helps achieve several goals.

Israel's first is to seal off Gaza properly this time. Egypt, although profoundly uncomfortable at having an Islamic group ruling next door, is under too much domestic pressure to crack down on the tunneling. Israel therefore wants to bring in American and European experts to do the job. They will ensure that the blockade cannot be broken and that Hamas cannot rearm with the the help of outside actors like Iran. At best, Hamas can hope to limp on as nominal ruler of Gaza, on Israeli sufferance.

The second goal has been well articulated by the Harvard scholar Sara Roy, who has been arguing for some time that Israel is, in her words, "de-developing" Gaza. The blockade has been integral to achieving that objective, and is the reason Israel wants it strengthened. In the longer term, she believes, Gazans will come to be "seen merely as a humanitarian problem, beggars who have no political identity and therefore can have no political claims."

In addition, Gazans living close to the enclave's northern and southern borders may be

progressively “herded” into central Gaza — as envisioned in Vilnai’s plan last year. That process may already be under way, with Israeli leafletting campaigns warning inhabitants of these areas to flee. Israel wants to empty both the Rafah area, so that it can monitor more easily any attempts at tunneling, and the northern part because this is the location of the rocket launches that are hitting major Israeli cities such as Ashkelon and Ashdod and may one day reach Tel Aviv.

The third and related goal, as Barak and Vilnai proposed more than a year ago, is to cut off all Israeli responsibility for Gaza — though not oversight of what is allowed in. Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian analyst, believes that in this scenario Israel will insist that humanitarian supplies into Gaza pass only through the Egyptian crossing, thereby also undercutting Hamas’ role. Already Israel is preparing to hand over responsibility for supplying Gaza’s electricity to Egypt — a special plant is under construction close by in the Sinai.

Slowly, the hope is, Gaza’s physical and political separation from the West Bank will be cemented, with the enclave effectively being seen as a province of Egypt. Its inhabitants will lose their connection to the wider Palestinian people and eventually Cairo may grow bold enough to crack down on Hamas as brutally as it does its own Islamists.

The regime of Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank, meanwhile, will be further isolated and weakened, improving Israel’s chances of forcing it to sign a deal annexing East Jerusalem and large swaths of the West Bank on which the Jewish settlements sit.

The fourth goal relates to wider regional issues. The chief obstacle to the implementation of Israel’s plan is the growing power of Iran and its possible pursuit of nuclear weapons. Israel’s official concern — that Tehran wants to attack Israel — is simple mischief-making. Rather Israel is worried that, if Iran becomes a regional superpower, Israeli diktats in the Middle East and in Washington will not go unchallenged.

In particular, a strong Iran will be able to aid Hizballah and Hamas, and further fan the flames of popular Muslim sentiment in favor of a just settlement for the Palestinians. That could threaten Israel’s plans for the annexation of much of the West Bank, and possibly win the Palestinians statehood. None of this can be allowed to pass by Israel.

It is therefore seeking to isolate Tehran, severing all ties between it and Hamas, just as it earlier tried — and failed — to do the same between Iran and Hizballah. It wants the Palestinians beholden instead to the “moderate” block in the Arab world, meaning the Sunni dictatorships like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia that in turn depend on Washington for their security.

The prospects of Israel achieving all or even some of these goals seems improbable. Too often Israeli meddling in its neighbors’ affairs has ended in unintended consequences, or “blowback.” It is a lesson Israel has been all too slow to learn.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are [Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East](#) (Pluto Press) and [Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair](#) (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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