

The Target is Iran: Israel's Latest Gamble May Backfire

By [Muriel Mirak-Weissbach](#)

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The aerial war against Gaza launched by Israel just after Christmas, and the ground offensive, with which it rang in the New Year, were shocking in their brutality, but should constitute no surprise, if viewed from the standpoint of long-term Israeli strategic aims. The Israelis have argued that the offensive was launched in response to eight years' of relentless attacks by Hamas rockets into Israel. But then, one asks: why now? Why should they wait eight years?

Perhaps the massive military onslaught, which has killed over 800 Palestinians and wounded thousands, has nothing to do with Kassam rockets. Perhaps it is not a tactical military operation by Israel, but a strategic decision on the part of Israel's Anglo-American backers, whose ultimate aim is war against Iran. Perhaps the military calculations in Tel Aviv are that continued massive pounding of Gaza by air and in house-to-house fighting, will take such a ghastly toll on the Palestinian civilian population, that Iran, touted as the backer of Hamas, will be forced to move into the conflict. Perhaps that is precisely the reaction Israel desires, in order to justify launching its war against the Islamic Republic, a war which has been on the drawing boards of the Israelis and their neocon sponsors for many years.

If that is the name of the game, it may well be that it will backfire totally. Not only will Iran not be drawn into the trap, but the continued genocidal campaign against the Palestinians may utterly discredit Israel politically and morally, and contribute to a shift in attitudes even in Europe and, most importantly, in the U.S. That, in turn, may open the way to redefining the conflict and therefore opening the way for real solutions.

The Clean Break Doctrine

What we have witnessed in Gaza since December 27 is the implementation of one crucial part of an Anglo-American strategic doctrine for redrawing the map of the Middle East (within a broader context), known as the "Clean Break." This doctrine had been cooked up by Dick Cheney's neocon task force in 1996 and served to then-aspiring PM Benjamin Netanyahu, on a silver platter. The policy had been fashioned by Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser and his wife Meyrav, among others, under the auspices of the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies in Jerusalem. The paper, which was one in a series of strategic policy papers from 1992 on, outlining how the Anglo-Americans could establish world hegemony in the post-Cold War world, derived its name from the idea that Israel must make a "clean break" with the historic 1993 Oslo Accords between it and the Palestinian Authority, and revert to "a peace process and strategy based on an entirely {new intellectual foundation} one that restores strategic initiative and provides the nation

the room to engage every possible energy on rebuilding Zionism, the starting point of which must be economic reform". (<http://www.iasps.org/strat1.htm>).

This new approach involved Israeli initiatives to secure its northern borders: "Syria challenges Israel on Lebanese soil. An effective approach, and one with which America can sympathize, would be if Israel seized the strategic initiative along its northern borders by engaging Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran, as the principal agents in Lebanon..." This did not exclude attacks by proxy Israeli forces on Syria from Lebanon, targetting Syrian sites in Lebanon as well as in Syria proper.

The doctrine went on to develop the idea that Israel, "in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan" could shape the strategic environment "by weakening, containing and even rolling back Syria." "This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq," the paper specified. As for the Palestinian question, "Clean Break" was equally explicit: "Israel has a chance to forge a new relationship between itself and the Palestinians. First and foremost, Israel's efforts to secure its streets may require hot pursuit into Palestinian controlled areas, a justifiable practice with which Americans can sympathize..."

This 1996 policy paper was enthusiastically endorsed by Benjamin Netanyahu, who presented its basic tenets in a speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress days later, as "his" policy. However, before it could move accordingly, Israel would have to wait until the neocon establishment which had prepared the doctrine, regained power in Washington. This occurred promptly, in the wake of the dubious results of the 2000 U.S. presidential elections, and the events of September 11, 2001. It was 9-11 which made it possible for the "Clean Break" strategic doctrine to become U.S. military policy.

After the neocons had succeeded in their 2003 war against Iraq to actually depose Saddam Hussein, they followed up with "regime change by other means" in Lebanon (with the Hariri murder laid at Damascus's door). The Israeli 2008 bombing of a site in Syria alleged to be a nuclear installation, was the ultimate humiliation to Damascus. What remained on the Clean Break agenda were Iran and those militant Islamist Arab forces said to be allied to Tehran, to wit, Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It was widely acknowledged in the press and political realm that, were the Cheney faction to endorse an Israeli bid to attack Iran — whether by bombing its presumed nuclear installations, and/or fomenting subversive processes within the country, — then those elements which could engage in an effective asymmetric response against forces allied to the aggressors, must be taken out first. That was the rationale behind the 2006 Israeli war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, a war which, however, did not proceed according to Tel Aviv's script. Hezbollah prevailed militarily and politically, much to the chagrin of the Cheneyacs in the US/UK and Israel.

The Target is Iran

Throughout 2007 and 2008, the debate raged among concerned parties, including on the www.globalresearch.ca website, as to whether the war party would or could mount a military attack against Iran, using the pretext that questions regarding its nuclear program remained open, etc. Statements attributed to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatening the existence of Israel, were hyped up, to justify a preemptive strike against Tehran. But certain military realities had to be taken into consideration, at least by those who knew something about warfare.

The concern raised by competent military professionals, including those inside the U.S., was

that, were Iran to be attacked (by the U.S. and/or Israel), the asymmetric response on the part of pro-Iranian factors in the region would unleash regional conflict with an immediate potential to become global. This was the thinking which led U.S. officials to tell Israel point blank that they would not endorse a military attack on Iran. Now, further confirming this report, the New York Times has released a timely article detailing Israel's bid and Washington rejection of permission to bomb Iran's plant at Natanz.

(http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/washington/11iran.html?_r=1&th=&emc=th&pagew)

In the article by David E. Sanger, it is reported that it was following the late 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which said Iran had no nuclear weapons program, that Israel asked the U.S. for bunker busters, permission to fly over Iraqi air space, and refueling equipment. President Bush, according to the article, "was convinced by top administration officials, led by Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, that any overt attack on Iran would probably prove ineffective, lead to the expulsion of international inspectors and drive Iran's nuclear effort further out of view." Bush et al reportedly also "discussed the possibility that an airstrike could ignite a broad Middle East war" which would draw in U.S. forces in Iraq. The article further quotes a spokesman of Gates, saying the Defense Secretary stated a week earlier that he believed "a potential strike on the Iranian facilities is not something that we or anyone else should be pursuing at this time."

Among those factors catalogued as pro-Iran, which might be activated in the event of an attack against Iran, were Shi'ite communities as well as armed militias in Bahrein, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait etc., and of course Iraq. Hezbollah remained the leading danger in Lebanon. In addition, the Palestinian Hamas movement, though not Shi'ite, was considered a serious threat. Thus, if any serious Israeli move against Iran were to be considered, one would have to figure out how to deal with Hamas first; not because it were such a powerful military force, comparable, say to Hezbollah, but because its self-conceived role as leading opposition to belligerent Israeli intentions would ensure its immediate mobilization in case of an Israeli move, a mobilization which would not be generically political, but pointedly military, and aimed at any Israeli vulnerabilities.

Thus the move against Hamas. Contrary to Israeli and other propaganda, the onslaught against Hamas in late 2008 had {nothing} to do with that Palestinian faction's alleged violation of the ceasefire, since it was Israel's continuing blockade of Gaza which was in violation. Rather, the Israeli military assault constituted a repetition of the strategy tried in 2006 against Hezbollah: to wipe out a potential nuisance, while proceeding to target Iran. The outgoing U.S. administration's military had signalled its rejection of a new war against Iran, but would obviously not object to Israeli aggression against Hamas, if presented as a thing-in-itself.

The neocon faction, led by outgoing Vice President Cheney, is viewing the Gaza war as a preparation for aggression against Iran, and the spark that ignites regional conflict. John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the U.N., and one of the most outspoken among the neocon war party, announced on December 31, that the Gaza war was the first step towards an attack against Iran, which he deemed necessary. "I don't think there's anything at this point standing between Iran and nuclear weapons other than the possibility of the use of military force possibly by the United States, possibly by Israel," he was quoted by Fox News. "So while our focus obviously is on Gaza now," he went on, "this could turn out to be a much larger conflict. We're looking at potentially a multi-front war." And, as Daniel Luban

summarized in a January 10 piece for <http://www.antiwar.com>, the general consensus among the neocons was that the Gaza war was a proxy war against Iran.

Israel chose the timing of its Gaza war most carefully, with these considerations in mind: the lame duck, lame-brained U.S. President could be counted on to assert publicly that Israel had every right to defend itself from Hamas's deadly rocket attacks. President-elect Barack Obama would not venture to denounce the Bush administration's policy as long as it were still officially in power. Any initiatives launched by the European Union would be rebuffed by Israel. Israeli Foreign Minister Livni and Prime Minister Olmert, in fact, ignored any and all calls for a cease-fire on grounds that Israel alone would decide if and when any such a cease-fire could be organized. Israel's demands have been that the international community (in whatever form — UN peacekeeping troops or whatever) would have one and only one task: to ensure that Hamas could no longer fire rockets on Israel, and that no weapons could be delivered to Gaza through the Egyptian border. The power of the Israeli establishment to blackmail any European or other attempts at mediation, — on utterly unspoken, totally implicit, but universally understood grounds that any criticism of Israeli policy can be misconstrued as anti-semitic, — has been demonstrated. The attempt of the EU troika to plea for a ceasefire, like the moves by the Russians too, have been ineffective.

Israel may be seriously miscalculating the total situation. It is to be mooted that the Israelis thought, — and perhaps still think — that, if they continue with their inhumane aggression in Gaza, killing women and children and obliterating anything that has to do with civil life in Gaza, then the other side will give up. This will not occur. Anyone who knows how the militant Hamas leaders think, realizes that their resistance even with their relatively modest missiles, will continue to be launched, up to the last man. For militant Hamas members, there is no fear of dying in struggle; on the contrary, a fighter killed in the battle for liberation is a martyr.

By the same token, if the Israelis believe that their escalation of the war will provoke Hezbollah, but more importantly, Iran, to enter the fray, they may be as badly mistaken. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered a major speech on December 30, denouncing the Israeli aggression and calling for the defense of Palestinians. Significantly, he explicitly compared the Gaza war to the Israeli war on Hezbollah (Lebanon) in 2006. "What is happening today in Gaza is not similar but identical to what happened in July of 2006" (<http://www.presstv.ir/pop/print.aspx?id=79953>). He charged that the same international forces, and certain Arab states, "are asking Israel to eliminate Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and the rest of the resistance factions...." The marching orders that Nasrallah issued were {not} that others should join the armed struggle. Rather, he called on Arabs to "take to the streets by the thousands, by the tens and hundreds of thousands, and demand from these [Arab] governments to act responsibly." This included emphatically the demand that Egypt open the Rafah border to Gaza, but, he added, "I am not calling for a coup in Egypt....". Days later, on January 7, Nasrallah warned Israel against expanding the hostilities to Lebanon, but that was it. The rocket reportedly fired from southern Lebanon against Israel, was not the work of Hezbollah, the group declared.

As for Iran, its leadership's response has been most cautious. Immediately after the aggression, demonstrations took place in Iran unhindered, but the leadership explicitly warned demonstrators not to attack or occupy diplomatic missions of foreign nations, for example, the British Embassy, which some protestors had targetted. When, on January 5, it was reported that 70,000 Iranian students had declared their readiness to go to Israel as suicide bombers, the regime responded unequivocally that that was {not} the answer.

Supreme Leader of the Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was quoted on January 10, saying, "I thank the pious and devoted youth who have asked to go to Gaza ... but it must be noted that our hands are tied in this arena." Iran criticized the inaction of Arab governments, but that was it. Iranian Speaker of the Parliament Ali Larijani had met in Damascus with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on January 7 to discuss the crisis.

Although some commentators have tried to cast these events in Iran as part of a domestic political faction fight between Ahmadinejad, seen as the militant, and Khamenei, seen as the elder statesman, the issue transcends any such internal political controversy. The issue is strategic, and the Iranians know it.

In short, it appears that both Hezbollah and the Iranian leadership have realized what kind of a trap was being laid for them, and have wisely refrained from taking any irrational step that might entrap them. It is to be expected that they will continue to lie low, and bide their time, in hopes that the Palestinians can hold out until the regime change in Washington is completed.

The Change in Washington

The leading political power which could effect a major shift in the crisis, force Israel to pull back from its genocidal war, and impose serious negotiations aimed at an end to the bloodletting and a just peace, is the United States. History has shown, from Eisenhower's intervention in the Suez crisis, to later U.S. moves for Middle East peace, by Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, et al, that, if the power of the U.S. presidency is brought to bear on the issue, something can be done. The hope is that incoming President Barack Obama will make good on his campaign promises to introduce a fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy, engage in dialogue with perceived adversaries (Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, Syria), in the pursuit of viable solutions to the regional crises involved.

Although nothing will be certain until Obama delivers his inaugural speech on January 20, there are signs that he may make good on his campaign pledges. First, he has announced a number of encouraging appointments. His naming Leon Panetta as head of the CIA, was a courageous step; although Panetta has no intelligence experience, he has gone on record as principally opposed to any kind of torture, and can be expected to help implement Obama's pledge to shut down the infamous Guantanamo prison, and to reverse the Bush administration's anti-constitutional policy and practices. Obama's Vice President Joe Biden has been a relatively rational voice in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Several other appointees, from the economic policy team, to those in the justice area, like Dawn Johnsen, Elena Kagan and Tom Perelli, come from the Bill Clinton administration.

As for his foreign policy team involved in the Middle East directly, Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State is obviously central. Many in the region will recall that Mrs. Clinton made an unfortunate reverse conversion on the road to Damascus, some years back. Although she had made headlines, and friends, after having engaged politically and personally with Suha Arafat, the wife of Palestinian Authority president Yassir Arafat in 1999, she soon thereafter made a U-turn, in the course of her first campaign for a seat in the Senate from the state of New York, where the pro-Zionist vote is significant. That said, Mrs. Clinton is the wife of former President Bill Clinton, who strove to forge a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, at Camp David, until his bid was sabotaged by Ehud Barak. During the presidential campaign, Mrs. Clinton uttered carelessly formulated statements on Iran, —

which she later rectified — and of course stood by Israel and its “right to self-defense,” etc., as is expected of any U.S. political figure. It is to be hoped that what she will represent in her new position, will more depend on what the general policy of the Obama presidency will be, than her personal views.

As for Obama, he repeatedly asserted in the campaign that he would meet with perceived adversaries, including the leaderships of Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, etc., on grounds that diplomatic progress can be made with enemies, not just with friends. He recently repeated this, saying he thought Iran constituted a threat, but should be dealt with through diplomacy. Since the outbreak of the Gaza war, reports have been leaked, and then perfunctorily denied, that the Obama team would be willing to establish contacts with Hamas. The London Guardian reported on January 9 that three people close to the Obama camp had said, on conditions of confidentiality, that Obama would be open to low-level contacts with Hamas

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/08/barack-obama-gaza-hamas>).

Although this was denied, it sounds plausible.

Considerable attention has been given to the policy orientation of several of Obama’s advisors and other appointees. It has been mooted that Richard Haas will be an important Mideast envoy. Haas was the co-author of a recent CFR study, “Restoring the Balance,” (<http://www.cfr.org/publication/17791/>), with other individuals who might be Obama advisors, which argues that a “new U.S. strategy” in the Mideast is required, that “a comprehensive diplomatic initiative” towards Iran is on the agenda, that “Arab-Israeli peacemaking needs to become a priority” and so forth. Other members of the Obama team have been involved in the Iraq Study Group, which called for talks with Iraq’s neighbors, including Iran, to solve the Iraq mess. Among them is Defense Secretary Gates, who is to stay on.

The intervention of former President Jimmy Carter, has also been most useful. Carter, who oversaw the Camp David peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, is the author of an insightful book, *Peace not Apartheid*. In the context of the raging Gaza war, Carter presented an OpEd in the Washington Post on January 8, entitled “An Unnecessary War,” in which he argued, from the standpoint of his experience in the region, that “the devastating invasion of Gaza by Israel could easily have been avoided.”

The Boomerang

As the war continues and Israel threatens a further escalation of the conflict, reports of atrocities multiply, and the response of international public opinion is affected. Thus far, we have been informed that a UN school, designated as a refuge for civilians, was bombed; that a UN convoy of humanitarian aid was attacked, killing a driver and injuring others; that a house in which Israeli military had told 110 Palestinians to seek safety, was shortly thereafter bombed, and 30 killed; that a UN building outfitted for refugees, was bombed.

Although the Israelis have systematically either denied the facts or pleaded ignorance, there are enough eyewitnesses, especially among Red Cross and UN personnel, to set the record straight. What emerges from the overall picture, is that the Israelis are doing in Gaza what the Anglo-Americans did in Iraq, only in a much shorter time frame and with more devastating consequences. Compare events in Gaza to the drama of Iraq: between 1990,

after the invasion of Kuwait, and 2003, when the U.S. declared victory in its war against Saddam Hussein, Iraq had been subjected to a genocidal embargo, which deprived its 18 million citizens of food, medicines and other vital goods. The embargo continued even after Desert Storm had totally destroyed the country's infrastructure (energy, water, transportation, health, etc.), and in the interim period, the U.S. and U.K. air forces systematically bombarded Iraq's anti-aircraft defenses, under the rubric of the "no-fly-zones."

What the Israelis have done in Gaza, is remarkably similar: through their closure of Gaza, sealing the borders from Israel and Egypt, they put the Palestinian people in the situation of a "concentration camp," as Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino of the Vatican *Justitia et Pax* recently stated. The population has been cut off from normal imports of food, medicine and energy, and then subjected to aerial bombardments and artillery attacks by a vastly superior force. The only result can be genocidal.

After the Israeli war against Hezbollah in summer 2006, Israeli senior analyst Dr. Martin van Krefeld told a seminar in Germany, that in that event, the response of the Israelis had been that of "a mad dog!" He described the utterly disproportionate Israeli response as showing that the Israelis were "mad dogs." Certainly, his characterization would apply today to the Gaza war in spades. But instead of producing awe, such mad dog violence is provoking justified outrage.

Statements by Israeli leaders, featured in news reports in Europe, have contributed to the outrage. Foreign Minister Livni, for example, stated early on in the war, that the great disparity in casualties between Palestinians and Israelis, was inconsequential. If hundreds of Palestinians were killed by the air bombardments, as compared to less than ten, from Hamas-fired rockets, no matter; it's not the numbers, she said, but that fact that Hamas was targeting civilians. Israeli President Shimon Peres made an even more offensive statement. When asked about the high number of Palestinian children killed, he said, yes, that's true, there are many Palestinian children and very few Israeli children casualties, but that is because "we take care of our children."

The psychological control exerted on large parts of the population in Western countries, in Europe and the U.S., as a result of the horrendous crimes perpetrated by the Nazis in World War II against the Jews, has been massive. But, now, in light of the atrocities committed against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, that control is being broken. Tens of thousands of Germans have taken to the streets since the New Year, to protest the war in Gaza, political figures have spoken out, and letters to the editors of leading German dailies have documented the fact that the psychological blackmail no longer works.

The most eloquent response in Germany to the ongoing Gaza catastrophe has been provided by musician and director Daniel Barenboim, who, prevented by the hostilities from performing as scheduled in Qatar, quickly reorganized his concert program, to bring his historic Arab-Israeli orchestra to Berlin on January 12, and then to Moscow, Milan and Vienna. Barenboim's commitment has been to define a completely new, higher level, from which standpoint this insane conflict, manipulated over decades by geopolitical forces, can be overcome. The fact that his concert was sold out in 24 hours, and a second concert in Berlin had to be added to accommodate the demand, testifies to the desire among many Germans, to seek solutions to conflict through the medium of the universal ideas of great music.

The author can be reached at mirak.weissbach@gmail.com

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