

US-Israel Alliance: Obama's "Green Light" to Israel Attack on Gaza

Four Guilty Parties behind Attack

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A short interview broadcast by CNN late last week featuring two participants – a Palestinian in Gaza and an Israeli within range of the rocket attacks – did not follow the usual script.

For once, a media outlet dropped its role as gatekeeper, there to mediate and therefore impair our understanding of what is taking place between Israel and the Palestinians, and inadvertently became a simple window on real events.

The usual aim of such "balance" interviews relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is twofold: to reassure the audience that both sides of the story are being presented fairly; and to dissipate potential outrage at the deaths of Palestinian civilians by giving equal time to the suffering of Israelis.

But the deeper function of such coverage in relation to Gaza, given the media's assumption that Israeli bombs are simply a reaction to Hamas terror, is to redirect the audience's anger exclusively towards Hamas. In this way, Hamas is made implicitly responsible for the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians.

The dramatic conclusion to CNN's interview appears, however, to have otherwise trumped normal journalistic considerations.

The pre-recorded interview via Skype opened with Mohammed Sulaiman in Gaza. From what looked like a cramped room, presumably serving as a bomb shelter, he spoke of how he was too afraid to step outside his home. Throughout the interview, we could hear the muffled sound of bombs exploding in the near-distance. Mohammed occasionally glanced nervously to his side.

The other interviewee, Nissim Nahoom, an Israeli official in Ashkelon, also spoke of his family's terror, arguing that it was no different from that of Gazans. Except in one respect, he hastened to add: things were worse for Israelis because they had to live with the knowledge that Hamas rockets were intended to harm civilians, unlike the precision missiles and bombs Israel dropped on Gaza.

The interview returned to Mohammed. As he started to speak, the bombing grew much louder. He pressed on, saying he would not be silenced by what was taking place outside. The interviewer, Isha Sesay, interrupted – seemingly unsure of what she was hearing – to inquire about the noise.

Then, with an irony that Mohammed could not have appreciated as he spoke, he began to say he refused to be drawn into a comparison about whose suffering was worse when an enormous explosion threw him from his chair and severed the internet connection. Switching back to the studio, Sesay reassured viewers that Mohammed had not been hurt.

The bombs, however, spoke more eloquently than either Mohammed or Nissim.

If Mohammed had had more time, he might have been able to challenge Nissim's point about Israelis' greater fears as well as pointing to another important difference between his and his Israeli interlocutor's respective plights.

The far greater accuracy of Israel's weaponry in no way confers peace of mind. The fact is that a Palestinian civilian in Gaza is in far more danger of being killed or injured by one of Israel's precision armaments than an Israeli is by one of the more primitive rockets being launched out of Gaza.

In Operation Cast Lead, Israel's attack on Gaza in winter 2008-09, three Israelis were killed by rocket attacks, and six soldiers died in fighting. In Gaza, meanwhile, nearly 1,400 Palestinians were killed, of whom at least 1,000 were not involved in hostilities, according to the Israeli group B'Tselem. Many, if not most, of those civilians were killed by so-called precision bombs and missiles.

If Israelis like Nissim really believe they have to endure greater suffering because the Palestinians lack accurate weapons, then maybe they should start lobbying Washington to distribute its military hardware more equitably, so that the Palestinians can receive the same allocations of military aid and armaments as Israel.

Or alternatively, they could lobby their own government to allow Iran and Hizbullah to bring into Gaza more sophisticated technology than can currently be smuggled in via the tunnels.

The other difference is that, unlike Nissim and his family, most people in Gaza have nowhere else to flee. And the reason that they must live under the rain of bombs in one of the most densely populated areas on earth is because Israel - and to a lesser extent Egypt - has sealed the borders to create a prison for them.

Israel has denied Gaza a port, control of its airspace and the right of its inhabitants to move to the other Palestinian territory recognised by the Oslo accords, the West Bank. It is not, as Israel's supporters allege, that Hamas is hiding among Palestinian civilians; rather, Israel has forced Palestinian civilians to live in a tiny strip of land that Israel turned into a war zone.

So who is chiefly to blame for the escalation that currently threatens the nearly two million inhabitants of Gaza? Though Hamas' hands are not entirely clean, there are culprits far more responsible than the Palestinian militants.

First culprit: The state of Israel

The inciting cause of the latest confrontation between Israel and Hamas has little to do with the firing of rockets, whether by Hamas or the other Palestinian factions.

The conflict predates the rockets - and even the creation of Hamas - by decades. It is the legacy of Israel's dispossession of Palestinians in 1948, forcing many of them from their homes in what is now Israel into the tiny Gaza Strip. That original injustice has been

compounded by the occupation Israel has not only failed to end but has actually intensified in recent years with its relentless siege of the small strip of territory.

Israel has been progressively choking the life out of Gaza, destroying its economy, periodically wrecking its infrastructure, denying its inhabitants freedom of movement and leaving its population immiserated.

One only needs to look at the restrictions on Gazans' access to their own sea. Here we are not considering their right to use their own coast to leave and enter their territory, simply their right to use their own waters to feed themselves. According to one provision of the Oslo accords, Gaza was given fishing rights up to 20 miles off its shore. Israel has slowly whittled that down to just three miles, with Israeli navy vessels firing on fishing boats even inside that paltry limit.

Palestinians in Gaza are entitled to struggle for their right to live and prosper. That struggle is a form of self-defence – not aggression – against occupation, oppression, colonialism and imperialism.

Second culprit: Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak

The Israeli prime minister and defence minister have taken a direct and personal hand, above and beyond Israel's wider role in enforcing the occupation, in escalating the violence.

Israel and its supporters always make it their first priority when Israel launches a new war of aggression to obscure the timeline of events as a way to cloud responsibility. The media willingly regurgitates such efforts at misdirection.

In reality, Israel engineered a confrontation to provide the pretext for a “retaliatory” attack, just as it did four years earlier in Operation Cast Lead. Then Israel broke a six-month ceasefire agreed with Hamas by staging a raid into Gaza that killed six Hamas members.

This time, on 8 November, Israel achieved the same end by invading Gaza again, on this occasion following a two-week lull in tensions. A 13-year-old boy out playing football was killed by an Israeli bullet.

Tit-for-tat violence over the following days resulted in the injury of eight Israelis, including four soldiers, and the deaths of five Palestinian civilians, and the wounding of dozens more in Gaza.

On November 12, as part of efforts to calm things down, the Palestinian militant factions agreed a truce that held two days – until Israel broke it by assassinating Hamas military leader Ahmed Jabari. The rockets out of Gaza that followed these various Israeli provocations have been misrepresented as the casus belli.

But if Netanyahu and Barak are responsible for creating the immediate pretext for an attack on Gaza, they are also criminally negligent for failing to pursue an opportunity to secure a much longer truce with Hamas.

We now know, thanks to Israeli peace activist Gershon Baskin, that in the period leading up to Jabari's execution Egypt had been working to secure a long-term truce between Israel and Hamas. Jabari was apparently eager to agree to it.

Baskin, who was intimately involved in the talks, was a credible conduit between Israel and Hamas because he had played a key role last year in getting Jabari to sign off on a prisoner exchange that led to the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Baskin noted in the Haaretz newspaper that Jabari's assassination "killed the possibility of achieving a truce and also the Egyptian mediators' ability to function."

The peace activist had already met Barak to alert him to the truce, but it seems the defence minister and Netanyahu had more pressing concerns than ending the tensions between Israel and Hamas.

What could have been more important than finding a mechanism for saving lives, on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides. Baskin offers a clue: "Those who made the decision must be judged by the voters, but to my regret they will get more votes because of this."

It seems Israel's general election, due in January, was uppermost in the minds of Netanyahu and Barak.

A lesson learnt by Israeli leaders over recent years, as Baskin notes, is that wars are vote-winners solely for the right wing. That should be clear to no one more than Netanyahu. He has twice before become prime minister on the back of wars waged by his more "moderate" political opponents as they faced elections.

Shimon Peres, a dove by no standard except a peculiar Israeli one, launched an attack on Lebanon, Operation Grapes of Wrath, that cost him the election in 1996. And centrists Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni again helped Netanyahu to victory by attacking Gaza in late 2008.

Israelis, it seems, prefer a leader who does not bother to wrap a velvet glove around his iron fist.

Netanyahu was already forging ahead in the polls before he minted Operation Pillar of Defence. But the electoral fortunes of Ehud Barak, sometimes described as Netanyahu's political Siamese twin and a military mentor to Netanyahu from their commando days together, have been looking grim indeed.

Barak desperately needed a military rather than a political campaign to boost his standing and get his renegade Independence party across the electoral threshold and into the Israeli parliament. It seems Netanyahu, thinking he had little to lose himself from an operation in Gaza, may have been willing to oblige.

Third culprit: The Israeli army

Israel's army has become addicted to two doctrines it calls the "deterrence principle" and its "qualitative military edge". Both are fancy ways of saying that, like some mafia heavy, the Israeli army wants to be sure it alone can "whack" its enemies. Deterrence, in Israeli parlance, does not refer to a balance of fear but Israel's exclusive right to use terror.

The amassing of rockets by Hamas, therefore, violates the Israeli army's own sense of propriety, just as Hizbullah's stockpiling does further north. Israel wants its neighbouring enemies to have no ability to resist its dictates.

Doubtless the army was only too ready to back Netanyahu and Barak's electioneering if it also provided an opportunity to clean out some of Hamas' rocket arsenal.

But there is another strategic reason why the Israeli army has been chomping at the bit to crack down on Hamas again.

Haaretz's two chief military correspondents explained the logic of the army's position last week, shortly after Israel killed Jabari. They reported: "For a long time now Israel has been pursuing a policy of containment in the Gaza Strip, limiting its response to the prolonged effort on the part of Hamas to dictate new rules of the game surrounding the fence, mainly in its attempt to prevent the entry of the IDF into the 'perimeter,' the strip of a few hundred meters wide to the west of the fence."

In short, Hamas has angered Israeli commanders by refusing to sit quietly while the army treats large areas of Gaza as its playground and enters at will.

Israel has created what it terms a "buffer zone" inside the fence around Gaza, often up to a kilometre wide, that Palestinians cannot enter but the Israeli army can use as a gateway for launching its "incursions". Remote-controlled guns mounted on Israeli watch-towers around Gaza can open fire on any Palestinian who is considered to have approached too close.

Three incidents shortly before Jabari's extra-judicial execution illustrate the struggle for control over Gaza's interior.

On November 4, the Israeli army shot dead a young Palestinian man inside Gaza as he was reported to have approached the fence. Palestinians say he was mentally unfit and that he could have been saved by medics had ambulances not been prevented from reaching him for several hours.

On November 8, as already noted, the Israeli army made an incursion into Gaza to attack Palestinian militants and in the process shot dead a boy playing football.

And on November 10, two days later, Palestinian fighters fired an anti-tank missile that destroyed a Jeep patrolling the perimeter fence around Gaza, wounding four soldiers.

As the Haaretz reporters note, Hamas appears to be trying to demonstrate that it has as much right to defend its side of the "border fence" as Israel does on the other side.

The army's response to this display of native impertinence has been to inflict a savage form of collective punishment on Gaza to remind Hamas who is boss.

Fourth culprit: the White House

It is near-impossible to believe that Netanyahu decided to revive Israel's policy of extra-judicial executions of Hamas leaders - and bystanders - without at least consulting the White House. Israel clearly also held off from beginning its escalation until after the US elections, restricting itself, as it did in Cast Lead, to the "downtime" in US politics between the elections and the presidential inauguration.

That was designed to avoid overly embarrassing the US president. A fair assumption must be that Barack Obama approved Israel's operation in advance. Certainly he has provided unstinting backing since, despite the wildly optimistic scenarios painted by some analysts that he was likely to seek revenge on Netanyahu in his second term.

Also, it should be remembered that Israel's belligerence towards Gaza, and the easing of

domestic pressure on Israel to negotiate with Hamas or reach a ceasefire, has largely been made possible because Obama forced US taxpayers to massively subsidise Israel's rocket interception system, Iron Dome, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Iron Dome is being used to shoot down rockets out of Gaza that might otherwise have landed in built-up areas of Israel. Israel and the White House have therefore been able to sell US munificence on the interception of rockets as a humanitarian gesture.

But the reality is that Iron Dome has swung Israel's cost-benefit calculus sharply in favour of greater aggression because it has increased Israel's sense of impunity. Whatever Hamas' ability to smuggle into Gaza more sophisticated weaponry, Israel believes it can neutralise that threat using interception systems.

Far from being a humanitarian measure, Iron Dome has simply served to ensure that Gaza will continue to suffer a far larger burden of deaths and injuries in confrontations with Israel and that such confrontations will continue to occur regularly.

Here are the four main culprits. They should be held responsible for the deaths of Palestinians and Israelis in the days and, if Israel expands its operation, weeks ahead.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. 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 new website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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