

Watered-Down UN Security Council Resolution Stands on the Backs of the People of Gaza

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There is no safe place in Gaza. A statement by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reads: "This war is unique in the way that the civilians have no place to go and no place to hide." On Saturday evening, one week after the launch of Operation Cast Lead, Israel's ground operation began and civilian casualties increased rapidly. The UN grimly reports that one-third of the over 850 dead and 3300 injured were children. Entire families were buried under the rubble of houses that were hit, and starving children were later found sitting next to their dead parents and other corpses.

Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the UN Agency in Gaza are just a few voices in the chorus of condemnation against Israel's blatant disregard for human life, with accusations ranging from denying food and aid to injured children, to deliberately targeting and using civilians as human shields. The global community is realizing what voices on the ground asserted 14 days ago: there is no such thing as surgical operations in Gaza. Civilians cannot be separated from so-called military targets in an area as congested and densely populated as Gaza.

Diplomatic Squabbles

Recognizing that the ground assault "complicated" efforts to broker a cease-fire, regional and international figureheads, from the Middle East Peace Envoy Tony Blair to Turkey's Foreign Minister Ali Babajan, began a series of diplomatic muscle-flexing. Keen on rejecting what they deemed an "unbalanced" and "one-sided" draft resolution circulated by Libya on behalf of the 22-member Arab League on January 1 — before the ground invasion — that demands a halt in the military attacks on Gaza, the United States and its allies initiated a series of marathon meetings to issue an alternative resolution.

To their delight, French President Nicholas Sarkozy drew a plan for a truce on humanitarian grounds between Israel and Hamas with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. What is essentially Israeli terms with an Arab face, the much touted Franco-Egyptian resolution conditions Israel's military pullout both on the permanent cessation of rocket attacks and closure of underground tunnels, a relatively new invention used by Hamas to smuggle in arms, but also basic goods and supplies denied to the Gazan population after the Israeli imposed siege in June 2007. However, this plan was rejected by Defense Minister Ehud Barak who feared that admitting a humanitarian crisis existed in Gaza "would undermine Israel's offensive in the Strip."

Egypt, who suffered widespread criticism on the Arab street for its closure of the Rafah

crossing throughout the Israeli imposed siege and current military invasion, is seen as a defunct player to many. Its role as mediator has been shaken by accusations of complicity in Israel's military campaign, given a shared interest in "toppling the Hamas government." In addition to placing political demands on Hamas, the Cairo-sponsored resolution is a favorite of the United States given its call for an international presence on the Egyptian side of the Gaza border, and a potential naval presence to monitor the shore of the Strip.

Knowing that Hamas is unlikely to accept international presence along the Gaza Strip — particularly if it is ostracized from the entire diplomatic process — and facing mounting pressure at home through coordinated grassroots campaigns and massive demonstrations, the Arab League continuously voiced its intention to get a resolution passed.

On January 6, virtually every Arab speaker denounced the failure of the Security Council to adopt a legally binding resolution to halt the Israeli offensive. Even voices from staunch U.S.-allies such as Saudi Arabia were disapproving, asserting a "deafening silence" by the council which placed "a big question mark over its credibility." To bypass the procrastination of the Security Council, Libya even circulated a modified draft resolution calling for an "immediate and permanent ceasefire in the Gaza Strip" and adding an "end to rocket firing into Israel by Palestinian militants" as part of its demands. But this had little chance of survival as it failed to meet U.S. and Israeli terms for border monitors to destroy Hamas's underground tunnels. Indeed, throughout the diplomatic squabbles, the U.S. was steadfast on ensuring a resolution gets passed that "does not allow the rearmament of Hamas."

Desperate for an international response and weary of returning empty-handed to an outraged population, Arab nations decided to put aside their proposed Security Council resolution, instead negotiating on a rival document proposed by Britain, the United States and France. This was prompted by the realization on part of Arab nations that these veto-holding powers would block any resolution imposing strict measures on Israel to end its brutal attacks.

In the end, the diplomatic showdown on January 8 resulted in the Arab League's week-long request for a legally binding and enforceable U.N. resolution that condemns Israel and calls for an immediate halt to the Gaza blitzkrieg failed, miserably.

Resolution Lacks Form

The resolution passed by the Security Council is a political farce for two main reasons:

Hamas was not included in the diplomatic process.

Paradoxically, Hamas is expected to abide by a document whose authors deny it a chair at the diplomatic roundtable. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's insistence that Hamas is "not to be given the opportunity to gain any sort of legitimacy within a renewal of a truce" fails to recognize the popularity of this group in the West Bank, and its control of Gaza. Contrary to common belief, Hamas has time and time again requested inclusion in the international political process; even if it means talking to Israel. But this is old news. Hamas adopted this position almost 2.5 years ago by recognizing the Prisoners Document whereby it agreed to surrender control of the Palestinian government in favor of a power sharing administration committed to a negotiated two-state settlement on the territories Israel occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem. This document fell on the deaf ears of the international community and was dismissed by Israel as "advocating continued resistance."

The UN resolution is perhaps most favorable to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who, while his 4-year term officially ran out on January 9, has been trying to use the diplomatic process to secure his rule at home. Warnings by the Chief of the Shin Bet in late August of the need to come up with a political solution prior to the end of Abbas' term prompted the PLO to declare him "the president of the future state of Palestine." But the PLO is not an elected body and cannot legitimately elect others to power. Thus, to win more time in office Abbas has used the current negotiations to extend his term, hoping to bypass the Palestinian elections for another year.

Indeed, Abbas' statement that an Israeli rejection of the Gaza ceasefire makes it responsible for "perpetuating a waterfall of blood" is also true in that it would severely weaken his own rule; further destabilizing an already tense political atmosphere in the West Bank.

Resolution Lacks Substance

The resolution is not legally binding and issues no time restrictions.

Granted, it "stresses the urgency of and calls for an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire leading to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza." However, when words like "durable" and "leading to" are translated into military terminology, it means that Israel now has free reign to end Gaza blitzkrieg when it wants.

The resolution also dilutes important issues by addressing everyone's concerns without imposing protocols for their engagement. Violence against civilians is condemned. Humanitarian assistance is to be distributed. Initiatives aimed at creating and opening humanitarian corridors are welcomed. Tangible steps toward intra-Palestinian reconciliation are encouraged. Intensified discussions will occur. And finally, member states are instructed to increase efforts for peace.

Vague language with various mechanisms attached. In fact, Hamas is not even mentioned in the resolution. Even the reopening of the crossing points in Gaza are to be conducted through a document signed by the Palestinian Authority in 2005 and dealt with through Cairo. Further, it was just announced on January 10, that EU diplomats seek to bypass Hamas by restoring control over the crossings to Fatah-led PA security personnel.

As evident from the attacks of the past few days, the resolution allows Israel to announce its own ceasefire and not be bound by an international document. In effect, it serves as yet another diplomatic cushion between Israel's ongoing war crimes in Gaza and the region, and international law.

Thus far, it is becoming evident that both Mahmoud Abbas and the Arab states jumped on the U.S.-led diplomatic train to quell widespread public dissent at home, the effect of which is the encouragement of Israeli unilateralism. And while recent movement by Abbas and the Egyptian-led initiative seeks to broker agreement from Israel and Hamas on the UN document, both have yet to adopt its recommendations.

Until the adoption of a resolution with vigor or the severe insertion of a world power both with the political prudence of sitting down with Hamas and the ability of cornering Israel into a ceasefire, the unbearable status quo persists. In the meantime, Israeli bombs rain on the Strip and people of conscience around the world are glued to their televisions, continuing to witness an organized genocide against an oppressed peoples. •

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