

Why Israel Did Not Win its Latest War on Gaza

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The killing of entire families and the destruction of government buildings and police stations, far from encouraging Palestinians to submit, will only fortify their resistance.

The ceasefire agreed by Israel and Hamas in Cairo after eight days of fighting is merely a pause in the Israel-Palestine conflict. It promises to ease movement at all border crossings with the Gaza Strip, but will not lift the blockade. It requires Israel to end its assault on the Strip, and Palestinian militants to stop firing rockets at southern Israel, but it leaves Gaza as miserable as ever: according to a recent UN report, the Strip will be 'uninhabitable' by 2020. And this is to speak only of Gaza. How easily one is made to forget that Gaza is only a part – a very brutalised part – of the 'future Palestinian state' that once seemed inevitable, and which now seems to exist mainly in the lullabies of Western peace processors. None of the core issues of the Israel-Palestine conflict – the Occupation, borders, water rights, repatriation and compensation of refugees – is addressed by this agreement.

The fighting will erupt again, because Hamas will come under continued pressure from its members and from other militant factions, and because Israel has never needed much pretext to go to war. In 1982, it broke its ceasefire with Arafat's PLO and invaded Lebanon, citing the attempted assassination of its ambassador to London, even though the attack was the work of Arafat's sworn enemy, the Iraqi agent Abu Nidal. In 1996, during a period of relative calm, it assassinated Hamas's bomb-maker Yahya Ayyash, the 'Engineer', leading Hamas to strike back with a wave of suicide attacks in Israeli cities. When, a year later, Hamas proposed a thirty-year *hudna*, or truce, Binyamin Netanyahu dispatched a team of Mossad agents to poison the Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in Amman; under pressure from Jordan and the US, Israel was forced to provide the antidote, and Meshaal is now the head of Hamas's political bureau – and an ally of Egypt's new president, Mohamed Morsi.

Operation Pillar of Defence, Israel's latest war, began just as Hamas was cobbling together an agreement for a long-term ceasefire. Its military commander, Ahmed al-Jabari, was assassinated only hours after he reviewed the draft proposal. Netanyahu and his defence minister, Ehud Barak, could have had a ceasefire – probably on more favourable terms – without the deaths of more than 160 Palestinians and five Israelis, but then they would have missed a chance to test their new missile defence shield, Iron Dome, whose performance was Israel's main success in the war. They would also have missed a chance to remind the people of Gaza of their weakness in the face of Israeli military might. The destruction in Gaza was less extensive than it had been in Operation Cast Lead, but on this occasion too the aim, as Gilad Sharon, Ariel's son, put it in the *Jerusalem Post*, was to send out 'a Tarzan-like cry that lets the entire jungle know in no uncertain terms just who won, and just who was defeated'.

Victory in war is not measured solely in terms of body counts, however. And the 'jungle' – the Israeli word not just for the Palestinians but for the Arabs as a whole – may have the last laugh. Not only did Hamas put up a better fight than it had in the last war, it averted an Israeli ground offensive, won implicit recognition as a legitimate actor from the United States (which helped to broker the talks in Cairo), and achieved concrete gains, above all an end to targeted assassinations and the easing of restrictions on the movement of people and the transfer of goods at the crossings. There was no talk in Cairo, either, of the Quartet Principles requiring Hamas to renounce violence, recognise Israel and adhere to past agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority: a symbolic victory for Hamas, but not a small one. And the Palestinians were not the only Arabs who could claim victory in Cairo. In diplomatic terms, the end of fighting under Egyptian mediation marked the dawn of a new Egypt, keen to reclaim the role that it lost when Sadat signed a separate peace with Israel. 'Egypt is different from yesterday,' Morsi warned Israel on the first day of the war. 'We assure them that the price will be high for continued aggression.' He underscored this point by sending his prime minister, Hesham Kandil, to Gaza the following day. While refraining from incendiary rhetoric, Morsi made it plain that Israel could not depend on Egyptian support for its attack on Gaza, as it had when Mubarak was in power, and would only have itself to blame if the peace treaty were jeopardised. After all, he has to answer to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's parent organisation, and to the Egyptian people, who are overwhelmingly hostile to Israel. The Obama administration, keen to preserve relations with Egypt, got the message, and so apparently did Israel. Morsi proved that he could negotiate with Israel without 'selling out the resistance', in Meshaal's words. Internationally, it was his finest hour, though Egyptians may remember it as the prelude to his move a day after the ceasefire to award himself far-reaching executive powers that place him above any law.

That Netanyahu stopped short of a ground war, and gave in to key demands at the Cairo talks, is an indication not only of Egypt's growing stature, but of Israel's weakened position. Its relations with Turkey, once its closest ally in the region and the pillar of its 'doctrine of the periphery' (a strategy based on alliances with non-Arab states) have deteriorated with the rise of Erdogan and the AKP. The Jordanian monarchy, the second Arab government to sign a peace treaty with Israel, is facing increasingly radical protests. And though Israel may welcome the fall of Assad, an ally of Hizbullah and Iran, it is worried that a post-Assad government, dominated by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers, may be no less hostile to the occupying power in the Golan: the occasional rocket fire from inside Syria in recent days has been a reminder for Israel of how quiet that border was under the Assad family. Israeli leaders lamented for years that theirs was the only democracy in the region. What this season of revolts has revealed is that Israel had a very deep investment in Arab authoritarianism. The unravelling of the old Arab order, when Israel could count on the quiet complicity of Arab big men who satisfied their subjects with flamboyant denunciations of Israeli misdeeds but did little to block them, has been painful for Israel, leaving it feeling lonelier than ever. It is this acute sense of vulnerability, even more than Netanyahu's desire to bolster his martial credentials before the January elections, that led Israel into war.

Hamas, meanwhile, has been buoyed by the same regional shifts, particularly the triumph of Islamist movements in Tunisia and Egypt: Hamas, not Israel, has been 'normalised' by the Arab uprisings. Since the flotilla affair, it has developed a close relationship with Turkey, which is keen to use the Palestinian question to project its influence in the Arab world. It also took the risk of breaking with its patrons in Syria: earlier this year, Khaled Meshaal left Damascus for Doha, while his number two, Mousa Abu Marzook, set himself up in Cairo. Since then, Hamas has thrown in its lot with the Syrian uprising, distanced itself from Iran,

and found new sources of financial and political support in Qatar, Egypt and Tunisia. It has circumvented the difficulties of the blockade by turning the tunnels into a lucrative source of revenue and worked, with erratic success, to impose discipline on Islamic Jihad and other militant factions in the Strip. The result has been growing regional prestige, and a procession of high-profile visitors, including the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who came to Gaza three weeks before the war and promised \$400 million dollars to build housing and repair roads. The emir did not make a similar trip to Ramallah.

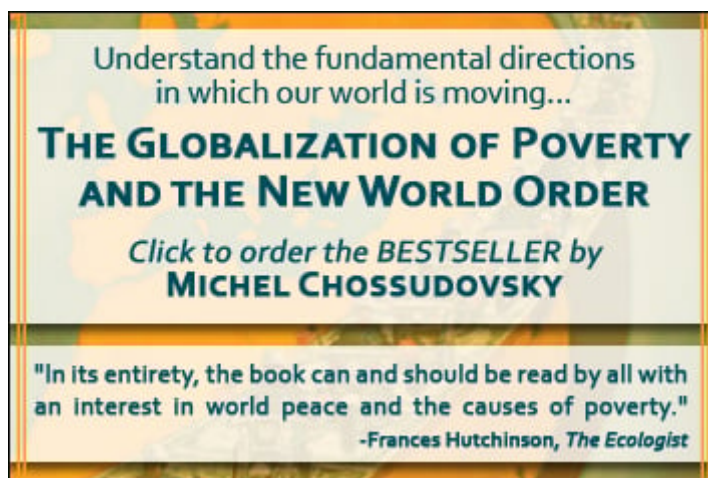
Hamas's growing clout has not gone unnoticed in Tel Aviv: cutting Hamas down to size was surely one of its war aims. If Israel were truly interested in achieving a peaceful settlement on the basis of the 1967 borders – parameters which Hamas has accepted – it might have tried to strengthen Abbas by ending settlement activity, and by supporting, or at least not opposing, his bid for non-member observer status for Palestine at the UN. Instead it has done its utmost to sabotage his UN initiative (with the robust collaboration of the Obama administration), threatening to build more settlements if he persists: such, Hamas has been only too happy to point out, are the rewards for non-violent Palestinian resistance. Operation Pillar of Defence will further undermine Abbas's already fragile standing in the West Bank, where support for Hamas has never been higher.

Hardly had the ceasefire come into effect than Israel raided the West Bank to round up more than fifty Hamas supporters, while Netanyahu warned that Israel 'might be compelled to embark' on 'a much harsher military operation'. (Avigdor Lieberman, his foreign minister, is said to have pushed for a ground war.) After all, Israel has a right to defend itself. This is what the Israelis say and what the Israel lobby says, along with much of the Western press, including the *New York Times*. In an editorial headed 'Hamas's Illegitimacy' – a curious phrase, since Hamas only seized power in Gaza after winning a majority in the 2006 parliamentary elections – the *Times* accused Hamas of attacking Israel because it is 'consumed with hatred for Israel'. The *Times* didn't mention that Hamas's hatred might have been stoked by a punishing economic blockade. It didn't mention that between the start of the year and the outbreak of this war, 78 Palestinians in Gaza had been killed by Israeli fire, as against a single Israeli in all of Hamas's notorious rocket fire. Or – until the war started – that this had been a relatively peaceful year for the miserable Strip, where nearly three thousand Palestinians have been killed by Israel since 2006, as against 47 Israelis by Palestinian fire.

Those who invoke Israel's right to defend itself are not troubled by this disparity in casualties, because the unspoken corollary is that Palestinians do not have the same right. If they dare to exercise this non-right, they must be taught a lesson. 'We need to flatten entire neighbourhoods in Gaza,' Gilad Sharon wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*. 'Flatten all of Gaza. The Americans didn't stop with Hiroshima – the Japanese weren't surrendering fast enough, so they hit Nagasaki too.' Israel shouldn't worry about innocent civilians in Gaza, he said, because there are no innocent civilians in Gaza: 'They elected Hamas ... they chose this freely, and must live with the consequences.' Such language would be shocking were it not so familiar: in Israel the rhetoric of righteous victimhood has merged with the belligerent rhetoric – and the racism – of the conqueror. Sharon's Tarzan allusion is merely a variation on Barak's description of Israel as a villa in the jungle; his invocation of nuclear war reminds us that in 2008, the deputy defence minister Matan Vilnai proposed 'a bigger holocaust' if Gaza continued to resist.

But the price of war is higher for Israel than it was during Cast Lead, and its room for manoeuvre more limited, because the Jewish state's only real ally, the American

government, has to maintain good relations with Egypt and other democratically elected Islamist governments. During the eight days of Pillar of Defence, Israel put on an impressive and deadly fireworks show, as it always does, lighting up the skies of Gaza and putting out menacing tweets straight from *The Sopranos*. But the killing of entire families and the destruction of government buildings and police stations, far from encouraging Palestinians to submit, will only fortify their resistance, something Israel might have learned by consulting the pages of recent Jewish history. The Palestinians understand that they are no longer facing Israel on their own: Israel, not Hamas, is the region's pariah. The Arab world is changing, but Israel is not. Instead, it has retreated further behind Jabotinsky's 'iron wall', deepening its hold on the Occupied Territories, thumbing its nose at a region that is at last acquiring a taste of its own power, exploding in spasms of high-tech violence that fail to conceal its lack of a political strategy to end the conflict. Iron Dome may shield Israel from Qassam rockets, but it won't shield it from the future.



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