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Israel's never-ending crimes: It's not just settlements

Israel has not just committed unspeakable acts of genocide but done so with absolute transparency.

Stanley L Cohen

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Last week, the world stood fixated at a largely symbolic gesture by the United Nations in which it found the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank of Palestine to be illegal. Or did it?

Although the UN Security Council, with rare uniformity, chastised Israel for flouting the law of occupation, the resolution, crafted with ambiguous lawyerly precision, left experienced thinkers on the subject debating just what it means.

In its most ambitious read, some would argue it appears that the decree concerned the occupation as a whole, and swept within its prohibitive reach all settlement activity since 1967 when Israel seized the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Arab-Palestinian control.

Others view its advisory language as helpful through its continued embrace of the time-tired two-state solution and its apparent call for a return to the status quo ante of some 15 years ago when illegal settlements had not as yet swallowed much more than 60 percent of the West Bank.

In its least appealing landscape painting, it would appear that the resolution seemingly bestows upon already completed settlements de facto legitimacy and addresses only that part of the building glut currently under way or planned for tomorrows yet to come.

To make matters worse, despite its gratuitous dicta, the resolution remains very much a toothless declaration without any enforcement mechanism whatsoever - essentially relying upon a sudden burst of Israeli conscience to reverse a steady march of indifference to international law that has led Israel's way since the very first day it was manufactured from stolen land in Palestine.

Defiant Netanyahu

Predictable in immediacy and urgency, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threw his weekly tantrum, accusing the world of a dark conspiracy organised by the soon to be ex-President of the United States, Barack Obama, who on his way out of the door after years of obsequious obedience to Israeli will, has suddenly discovered that it's OK to say no ... well ... maybe ... or perhaps, to its glaring intransigence.

But then again, it's kind of hard to take seriously "pressure" exerted by a country that has just enriched Israel's military coffers and occupation to the tune of \$38bn.

Not satisfied with the echo of his own vitriol, Netanyahu was just beginning. Next, he singled out Senegal - one of the most impoverished countries in the world and a mover of the resolution - for economic reprisal. Its offence is having the temerity to believe in the rule of law and being housed in the international building with flags of 193 nations and the State of Palestine that sits overlooking the East River of New York City.

Netanyahu told the world just what he thinks of the UN and its resolution when he announced plans to proceed with the building of thousands of new housing units in Jerusalem in particular.

"Israel will not turn its other cheek," Netanyahu proclaimed as he went on to prophesy a "plan of action" against the UN directly. Not long thereafter he suspended working ties with the UK, France, Russia, China, Japan, Ukraine, Angola, Egypt, Uruguay, Spain, Senegal and New Zealand, those countries that supported the resolution.

Like a dark lord

Netanyahu should quit while he's ahead, but he just can't. There is no incentive. Like the hundreds of earlier resolutions critical of Israeli policies, as worded, the most recent condemnation by the UN can do little more than cry out for justice in the night from a state built from the marrow of genocide.

I get "bombast", "brash" and, at times, even "bully". However, it's the two-legged beasts that feed on the innocent I do not. Netanyahu is very much that kind of beast - an ogre who lives in a world surrounded by dark, deadly thoughts. With delusion his ally, dishonesty his friend and

death his messenger, he thumbs his nose at the world as his reign of state terror consumes more and more civilian victims guilty of no offence other than breathing the air that surrounds them and seeking a free life.

When the history of our times is written, an honest accounting will no doubt add Netanyahu's wicked shadow - and that of his predecessors - to the list of fiends that have seen the world as little more than a playground within which to use their toys of death and despair - always, of course, for the right reasons and always, of course, against the meek and defenceless among us.

In the world of Joseph Stalin, induced famine was the prime weapon of choice, though mass execution and exile helped him dispose of tens of millions he viewed as "enemies of the people".

To Henry Kissinger, the world, particularly Indochina, was very much a small chess game. Civilians were mere pawns ripe for sacrifice through hi-tech weaponry, including biological and chemical warfare, to enforce his worldview at any cost. Millions lost their lives to his cerebral game board.

To Pol Pot, struggle was little more than purification, erasing through starvation, overwork and execution a quarter of his people whose sole crime was to see life through a prism that collided with his own - no matter how soft their view or backward his sight.

In Rwanda up to half a million women were sexually assaulted, mutilated or murdered, along with an equal number of male Tutsis, as enemy agents of the Hutu state - machetes and rape induced Aids to the plentiful weapons of preference.

Slow-motion genocide

These are but a few of the extremes of genocide, those rare cases we are told noted mostly for mass murder, systemic rape or group starvation - the worst of the worst. Yet, genocide does not demand of us an immediate mountain of bodies or an explosive rage of terror for international law to take hold.

As it turns out, in what increasingly seems to be more than mere passing coincidence, the legal definition of "genocide" enacted by the UN General Assembly was born in 1948, the very same year as Israel - which has since gone on to become both expert at its application and legendary in its denial.

In relevant part, under the applicable Convention, genocide means "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; or (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part". Each and every one of these types of genocide has been perpetrated by Israel, seemingly with almost proud boast, and no accountability, for almost 70 unbroken years.

One need not rest upon obtuse historical footnotes to find abundant, indeed systemic, acts of extermination carried out by Israel since 1948 against Palestinians - very much a cognizable "national, ethnical, racial or religious group" as those terms are contemplated and commonly understood and applied under international law.

OPINION: Barack Obama, John Kerry, and the Palestine saga

Beginning with its mass expulsion, rape and murder at the onset of the Nakba (the Catastrophe) Israel has devoted itself to 68 years of non-stop genocide coming up for air only periodically to retool or to change the nature of its weaponry of choice.

What started out with the expulsion, at gunpoint, of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their ancestral homeland set in motion a refugee stampede that has grown to more than seven million displaced and stateless people, providing the world more than a disturbing glimpse of what was to come decades later in Syria.

Never-ending violence

Over the years, Israel has found diverse ways to kill more than 400,000 Palestinian civilians and injure or cripple two to three times as many, including tens of thousands of women and children. Whether by tank fire, rockets, or cluster or phosphorus bombs, it has given new meaning to the evil of willful group slaughter.

In its thirst to ethnically cleanse all of Palestine of its remaining inhabitants, it has made use of starvation, in violation of Additional Protocol I to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, as a method of war targeting foodstuffs, crops and livestock throughout the occupied territories.

In particular, it has destroyed more than a million olive trees which not only serve as an essential mainstay of Palestinian culture but, along with hundreds of thousands of razed fruit trees, constitute key products of a Palestinian national economy largely in various states of ruin.

In Gaza, Israel has targeted hospitals, schools, daycare centres, multi-storey apartment complexes, UN Relief and Works Agency shelters and mental health clinics with a deadly proficiency that would make historic war criminals blush with envy.

It has laid waste to thousands of its hardscrabble built homes and left upwards of a hundred thousand Palestinians internally displaced, indeed homeless - leaving many families at a breaking point.

INTERACTIVE: Palestine Remix

For the survivors of the Gaza killing fields, Israel has made life unbearable over the past decade through a criminal embargo that not only guarantees insufficient caloric intake, fresh water and medicine, but denies to its 1.8 million survivors building materials essential for the reconstruction of its beleaguered, and largely levelled, infrastructure.

Not satisfied with physical pain alone, with cruel, wanton abandon, it is no stretch to find that its master plan has consciously induced levels of post-traumatic stress disorder unmatched anywhere else in the world.

Given all these palpable elements of ethnic cleansing, it is reasonably projected that Gaza will be uninhabitable by 2020 thereby once again driving several million traumatised refugees out on to the road of an uncertain and dangerous diaspora.

To describe Israel's Gaza strategy as anything but one intended to cause "serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group" is to deny a very public and systematic orgy of punishment meted out to Palestinian civilians on the basis of group identity and dynamic - and nothing more.

In the West Bank, Israel's calculus of pain and punishment is largely a difference without a distinction: one that varies in form but not intent or ultimate goal.

Not satisfied with the 531 villages and localities it depopulated and completely eradicated during the early days of the Nakba, since 1967 Israel has stolen, resettled and annexed almost all of the West Bank, including much of East Jerusalem, in clear violation of Article 4 of the Geneva Conventions which prohibit an occupation force from doing little more than erecting limited bases for its own security needs in occupied land.

During this criminal land grab, it has approved, indeed subsidized, the building of illegal housing for some 800,000 - largely immigrant - settlers at the same time it has destroyed almost 50,000 Palestinian structures, largely homes, many of them ages-old, rendering tens of thousands of its indigenous population homeless, often destitute or dependent upon the largesse of already overcrowded housing of family or friends.